

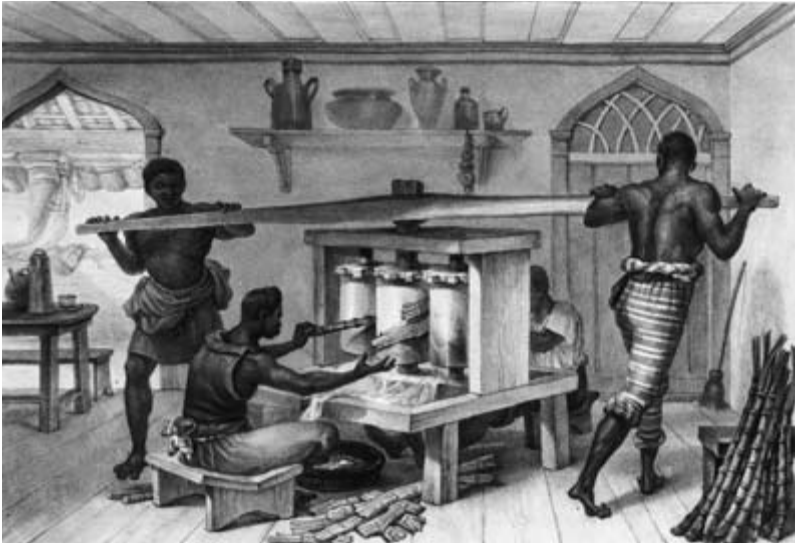
5 Material Culture through Images

‘I can never bring you to realise the importance of sleeves ...
or the great issues that may hang from a bootlace.’

HOLMES TO WATSON IN ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE’S
A CASE OF IDENTITY

The last two chapters concentrated on what images reveal or imply about ideas, attitudes and mentalities in different periods. Here, in contrast, the emphasis will fall on evidence in a more literal sense of that term, in other words on the uses of images in the process of the reconstruction of the material culture of the past, in museums as well as in history books. Images are particularly valuable in the reconstruction of the everyday culture of ordinary people – their housing for example, sometimes built of materials which were not intended to last. For this purpose John White’s painting of an Indian village in Virginia in the 1580s (illus. 3), for example, is indispensable.

The value of images as evidence for the history of clothes is obvious enough. Some items of clothing have survived for millennia, but to move from the isolated item to the ensemble, to see what went with what, it is necessary to turn to paintings and prints, together with some surviving fashion dolls, mainly from the eighteenth century or later. So the French historian Fernand Braudel (1902–1985) drew on paintings as evidence for the spread of Spanish and French fashions in England, Italy and Poland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Another French historian, Daniel Roche, has used not only inventories but also paintings such as the famous *Peasant Supper* of 1642 (illus. 61) for the history of clothes in France. The rich series of surviving ex-votos from Provence, discussed in an earlier chapter (3), which represent scenes from everyday life, allow the historian to study continuity and change in the clothes of different social groups in that region. One from Hyères in 1853, for instance, shows how butchers dressed for work (illus. 16).¹



33 Jean-Baptiste Debret, 'Petit Moulin à Sucre portatif' (machine for squeezing juice from sugar-cane), aquatint from *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil* (Paris, 1836–9).

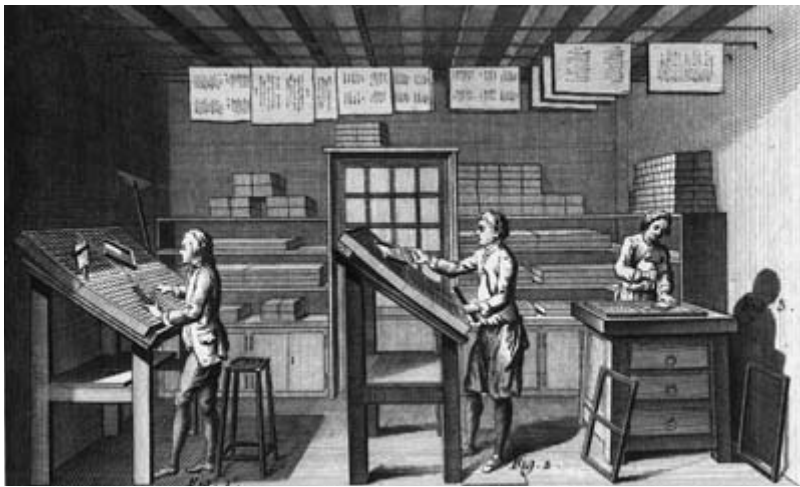
Again, the history of technology would be much impoverished if historians were obliged to rely on texts alone. For example, the chariots used thousands of years before Christ in China, Egypt and Greece can be reconstructed from surviving models and tomb-paintings. The apparatus for viewing the stars constructed for the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe (1546–1601) in his observatory of Uraniborg was captured in an engraving that has been reproduced many times in histories of science precisely because other sources are lacking. The apparatus used to squeeze juice from a sugar cane on the plantations of Brazil, on the same principle as the mangles which used to be found in sculleries, is clearly illustrated in an aquatint by the French artist Jean-Baptiste Debret, in which two seated men feed the machine while two more supply the energy which keeps the 'engine' turning (illus. 33).

Historians of agriculture, weaving, printing, warfare, mining, sailing and other practical activities – the list is virtually infinite – have long drawn heavily on the testimony of images to reconstruct the ways in which ploughs, looms, presses, bows, guns and so on were used, as well as to chart the gradual or sudden changes in their design. Thus a small detail in the painting of *The Battle of San Romano* by Paolo Uccello (1397–1475) is one testimony among others to the way in which a crossbowman held his instrument while he was reloading it. Eighteenth-century Japanese scroll paintings not only provide the

precise measurements of different kinds of Chinese junk but allow historians to observe their equipment in detail, from anchors to cannon and from lanterns to cooking-stoves.² When the National Photographic Record Association was founded in Britain in 1897, to make photographs and lodge them in the British Museum, it was especially of records of buildings and other forms of traditional material culture that the founders were thinking.³

A particular advantage of the testimony of images is that they communicate quickly and clearly the details of a complex process, printing for example, which a text takes much longer to describe more vaguely. Hence the many volumes of plates in the famous French *Encyclopédie* (1751–65), a reference book which deliberately placed the knowledge of artisans on a par with that of scholars. One of these plates showed readers how books were printed by picturing a printer's workshop during four different stages of the process (illus. 34).

It is of course dangerous to treat illustrations of this kind as an unproblematic reflection of the state of technology in a particular place and time without engaging in source criticism, identifying the artists (in this case L.-J. Goussier) and, still more important, the artist's sources. In this case it turns out that a number of plates in the *Encyclopédie* were not based on direct observation. They are revised versions of earlier illustrations, from Chambers' *Cyclopaedia*, for instance, or from the illustrated *Description des Arts* published by the French Academy of Sciences.⁴ As always, source criticism is necessary, but the juxtaposition and comparison of engravings of print-



34 Engraving of the composing room of a printing shop ('Imprimerie'), from the 'Receuil des planches' (1762) of the *Encyclopédie* (Paris, 1751–2).

shops between 1500 and 1800 gives the viewer a vivid impression of technological change.

Two kinds of image, townscapes and views of interiors, will illustrate these points in more detail.

Townscapes

Urban historians have long been concerned with what they sometimes call ‘the city as artifact’.⁵ Visual evidence is particularly important for this approach to urban history. For example, there are valuable clues to the appearance of Venice in the fifteenth century in the background of paintings in the ‘eyewitness style’ (see Introduction) such as the *Miracle at the Rialto* by Carpaccio (illus. 35), which shows not only the wooden bridge which preceded the present stone one (erected at the end of the sixteenth century) but also details, such as an unusual form of funnel-shaped chimney, which has disappeared even from surviving palaces of the period but once dominated the Venetian skyline.

In the middle of the seventeenth century, townscapes, like landscapes, became an independent pictorial genre, beginning in the Netherlands with views of Amsterdam, Delft and Haarlem and spreading widely in the eighteenth century.⁶ Giovanni Antonio Canaletto (1697–1768), one of the best-known exponents of this genre, known in Italian as ‘views’ (*vedute*), worked in Venice and for a few years in London. His nephew Bernardo Bellotto (1721–1780) worked in Venice, Dresden, Vienna and Warsaw. Prints of city life were also popular at this time, and so were engravings or aquatints of particular buildings or kinds of building, like the views of Oxford and Cambridge colleges published by the artist David Loggan in 1675 and 1690 and by Rudolph Ackermann (like Loggan, an immigrant from central Europe), in 1816. The rise of these genres at this particular time has itself something to tell us about urban attitudes, civic pride for example.

The fact that the painters of the Dutch Republic were among the first to paint townscapes and domestic interiors – not to mention the still-life – is a valuable clue to the nature of Dutch culture at this period. This culture, dominated by cities and merchants, was one in which the observation of ‘microscopic’ detail was highly valued. Indeed, it was a Dutchman, Cornelis Drebbel (c. 1572–1633), who invented the microscope and another Dutchman, Jan Swammerdam (1637–1680), who first used it to discover and describe a new world of insects. As the American art historian Svetlana Alpers has suggested, seventeenth-century Dutch culture was one which encouraged an ‘art of describing’.⁷



35 Vittore Carpaccio, *Miracle at the Rialto*, c. 1496, oil on canvas. Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice.

In the case of townscapes, the details of particular images sometimes have particular value as evidence. The Old Town of Warsaw, virtually levelled to the ground in 1944, was physically reconstructed after the Second World War on the basis of the testimony of prints and also of the paintings of Bernardo Bellotto. Architectural historians make regular use of images in order to reconstruct the appearance of buildings before their demolition, enlargement or restoration: old St Paul's Cathedral in London (before 1665), the old town hall in Amsterdam (before 1648) and so on.

For their part, urban historians not infrequently use paintings, prints and photographs so as to imagine and to enable their readers to imagine the former appearance of cities – not only the buildings but also the pigs, dogs, and horses in the streets, or the trees which lined one side of one of the grandest canals in seventeenth-century Amsterdam (illus. 36), the Herengracht, as drawn by Gerrit Berckheyde (1638–1698). Old photographs are particularly valuable for the historical reconstruction of slums that have been swept away, revealing the importance of alley life in a city such as Washington as well as specific details such as the location of kitchens.⁸

As one might have expected, the employment of images as evidence in this way is not without its dangers. Painters and printmakers were not working with future historians in mind and what interested them, or their clients, may not have been an exact representation of a city street. Artists such as Canaletto sometimes painted architectural



36 Gerrit Adriaensz. Berckheyde, *A Bend in the Herengracht, Amsterdam*, before 1685(?), wash and india ink. Gemeentearchief, Amsterdam.

fantasies or *capricci*, magnificent constructions that never went beyond the drawing-board; or they allowed themselves to rearrange a particular city in their imagination, as in the case of a number of composite images bringing together the main sights of Venice.

Even if the buildings are presented with apparent realism, as in the works of Berckheyde, for instance, the cities may have been cleaned up by the artists, the equivalent of the portrait painters who tried to show their sitters at their best. These problems of interpreting the evidence extend to photography. Early photographs of cities often show implausibly deserted streets, to avoid the blurring of the images caused by rapid movement, or they represent people in stock poses, as if the photographers had been inspired by earlier paintings (Chapter 1). According to their political attitudes, the photographers chose to represent the most run-down houses, in order to support the argument for slum clearance, or the best-looking ones, in order to oppose it.

For a vivid example of the importance of replacing images in their original contexts in order not to misinterpret their messages, we may turn to the painting of the port of La Rochelle (illus. 37) by Claude-Joseph Vernet (1714–1789), part of a series of fifteen works devoted to the ports of France, a series which attracted considerable interest, as the high sales of the engraved reproductions testify. This harbour scene with its forest of masts across the river and the men working in the foreground has something of the immediacy of a snapshot. However, the artist has shown the harbour as busy at a time, the mid eighteenth century, when other sources suggest that La Rochelle's trade was actually in decline. What is going on?



37 Claude-Joseph Vernet, *The Port of La Rochelle*, 1763, oil on canvas. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

The question can be answered by replacing the painting in its political context. Like other works in the series, it was painted by Vernet on commission from the marquis de Marigny on behalf of King Louis XV. Even the painter's itinerary was officially planned. Marigny wrote to Vernet criticizing one of the views, that of the port of Cette, because it had achieved beauty at the expense of 'verisimilitude' (*ressemblance*), and reminding the painter that the king's intention was 'to see the ports of the kingdom represented in a realistic manner' (*au naturel*). On the other hand, Vernet could not afford to be too realistic. His paintings were to be exhibited as a form of propaganda for French seapower.⁹ If the letters and other documents which illuminate the situation had not survived, economic historians might well have used this painting as a basis for over-optimistic conclusions about the state of French trade.

Interiors and Their Furnishings

In the case of images of the interiors of houses, the 'reality effect' is even stronger than in that of townscapes. I vividly remember my own reaction, as a small boy visiting the National Gallery in London, to paintings by Pieter de Hooch (1629–1684), who specialized in interiors of Dutch houses and courtyards, complete with mothers, servants, children, men drinking and smoking pipes, buckets, barrels, linen chests and so on (illus. 38). In the presence of such paintings the three centuries separat-

ing the viewer from the painter seemed to evaporate for a moment, and the past could almost be felt and touched as well as seen.

The doorway, the frontier between public and private zones, is the centre of interest in a number of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings. One artist, Jacob Ochtervelt (1634–1682), specialized in such scenes: street musicians at the door, or people selling cherries, grapes, fish or poultry (illus. 81). Looking at pictures such as these, it is once again difficult to repress the sense of viewing a snapshot, or even of entering a seventeenth-century house.¹⁰ In similar fashion, well-preserved houses, such as Ham House in Surrey, or the cottages preserved and displayed in open-air museums such as Skansen near Stockholm, filled with furniture from the period in which they were built, give the visitor a sense of direct contact with life in the past.

It takes an effort to remind ourselves that this immediacy is an illusion. We cannot enter a seventeenth-century house. What we see when we visit such a building, whether it is a peasant's cottage or the palace of Versailles, is inevitably a reconstruction in which a team of museum workers have acted like historians. They draw on the evidence of inventories, paintings and prints in order to discover what kind of furnishings might have been appropriate in a house of this kind and how they would have been arranged. When the building was modified in later centuries, as in the case of Versailles, the restorers have to decide whether to sacrifice the seventeenth century to the eighteenth or vice versa. In any case, what we see today is largely a reconstruction. The difference between a fake and an 'authentic' seventeenth-century building in which a substantial part of the wood and stone has been replaced by modern carpenters and masons is surely a difference in degree rather than a difference in kind.¹¹

As for paintings of domestic interiors, they should be approached as an artistic genre with its own rules for what should or should not be shown. In fifteenth-century Italy, such interiors appear in the background of religious scenes, as in the case of townscapes. Thus Carlo Crivelli's *Annunciation* (1486), still to be seen in the National Gallery in London, shows the Virgin Mary reading at a wooden desk, with books, candlesticks and bottles on a shelf behind her, while in an upper story we see an oriental rug hung over a parapet.¹²

In the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, images of the interiors of houses turned into a distinct genre with its own conventions. Often taken to be simple celebrations of everyday life, a number of these interiors have been interpreted by a leading Dutch art historian, Eddy de Jongh (Chapter 2) as moral allegories in which what was being celebrated was the virtue of cleanliness or that of hard work.¹³



38 Pieter de Hooch, *Courtyard of a House in Delft*, 1658, oil on canvas. National Gallery, London.

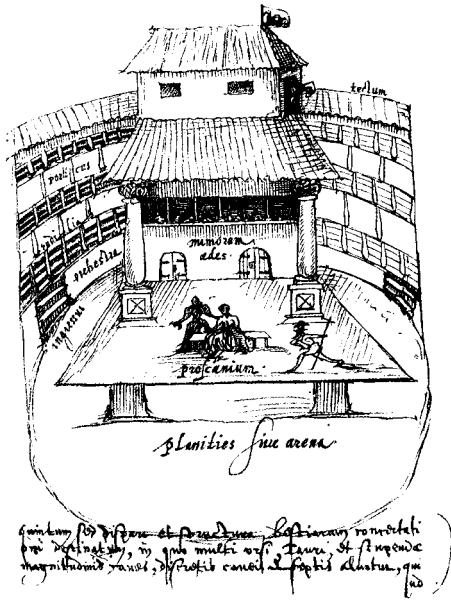
The Disorderly Household by Jan Steen (1626–1679) (illus. 39), for example, with playing cards, oyster-shells, loaves and even a hat artfully scattered on the floor, clearly carries a message about the links between order and virtue, disorder and sin. The painting may also serve to warn twenty-first-century viewers that an artist is not a camera but a communicator with his or her own agenda. Even in the culture of description, people – or at any rate some people – continued to be concerned with what lay beneath the surface, both the surface of images and that of the material world which they represented.¹⁴

Bearing these problems in mind, however, much can still be learned from the careful study of small details in images of interiors – houses, taverns, cafés, classrooms, shops, churches, libraries, theatres and so on. The rapid sketch of the interior spaces of *The Swan Theatre* in Southwark during the performance of a play, made by a foreign visitor to London around 1596 (illus. 40), showing a two-storey house set at the back of an open stage and the audience surrounding the performers, is a precious piece of evidence on which historians of the drama in the age of Shakespeare have drawn again and again. They



39 Jan Steen, *The Disorderly Household*, 1668, oil on canvas. Apsley House (The Wellington Museum), London.

40 Johannes De Witt, Sketch of the interior of The Swan Theatre, London, c. 1596. Utrecht University Library.



are surely right to do so, since a knowledge of the layout of the theatre is essential to the reconstruction of early performances, which is necessary in turn to an understanding of the text. To view the arrangement of objects, scientists and assistants in a laboratory (illus. 41) is to learn something about the organization of science about which texts are silent. Representing gentlemen as wearing top hats in the laboratory challenges assumptions of a ‘hands-on’ attitude to research.

Again, the Bayeux Tapestry has been described as ‘a splendid source for an understanding of the material culture of the eleventh



41 I. P. Hofmann, Engraving showing Justus von Liebig’s chemistry laboratory at Giessen, from *Das Chemische Laboratorium der Ludwigs-Universität zu Giessen* (Heidelberg, 1842).



42 Vittore Carpaccio, *St Augustine in his Study*, 1502–8, oil and tempera on canvas. Scuola di S. Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice.

century'. The bed with hangings shown in the scene of the death of King Edward the Confessor offers testimony that cannot be matched in any other contemporary document.¹⁵ Even in the case of the better-documented nineteenth century, images capture aspects of material culture which would otherwise be extremely difficult to reconstruct. The heaps of straw and the turf-beds on which some of the inhabitants of Irish cottages slept at this time have long disappeared but they may still be visualized thanks to the watercolours painted by artists of the period, mainly foreign visitors who were impressed – unfavourably for the most part – by conditions which local artists probably took for granted.¹⁶

Renaissance paintings, sketches and woodcuts of scholars in their studies, especially the scholarly saints or saintly scholars Jerome and Augustine, have been used as evidence for the equipment of the studies of the humanists, their desks, bookshelves and lecterns. In the case of Carpaccio's *St Augustine in his Study* (illus. 42), for instance, the so-called 'revolving chair' has attracted particular attention, though the presence of statuettes, a shell, an astrolabe and a bell (to summon servants) deserve to be noted, as well as the books and writing equipment. Other Italian representations of studies, from Antonello da Messina's *St Jerome* to Lorenzo Lotto's sketch of a young cardinal, confirm the accuracy of some of Carpaccio's details as well as adding new ones.¹⁷

43 Albrecht Dürer,
St Jerome in his Study,
1514, engraving.



It might also be revealing to compare Carpaccio's *Augustine* with images of studies in other cultures or periods. For a distant comparison and contrast we might turn to the studies of Chinese scholars, for example, which are often represented in paintings and woodcuts in a standardized form that presumably represents the cultural ideal. The typical study looked out on a garden. The furnishings included a couch, bookshelves, a desk on which stood the scholar's 'four friends' (his writing brush, brush stand, inkstone and water dropper), and perhaps some ancient bronzes or examples of fine calligraphy as well. The study was more of a status symbol in China than it was in Europe, since it was from the ranks of the so-called 'scholar-gentry' that the rulers of the country were recruited.

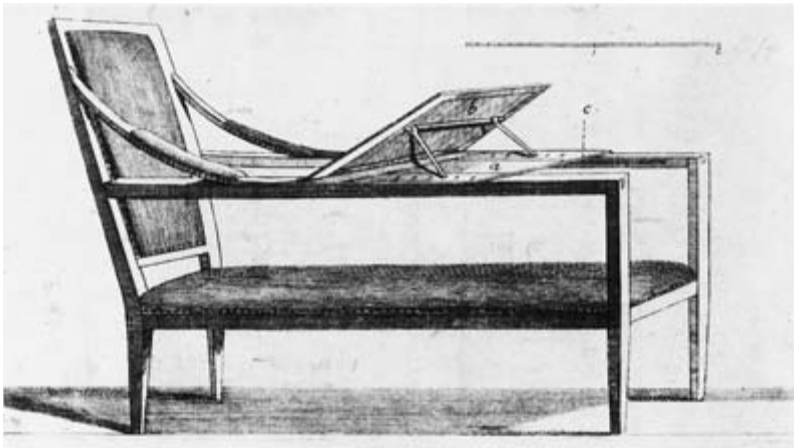
For a more neighbourly comparison, we might juxtapose the Carpaccio image to the equally famous woodcut of *St Jerome in his Study* (1514) by Albrecht Dürer (illus. 43), whether what is revealed is a difference between individual painters or a more general contrast between studies in Italy and Germany. Dürer shows a room that may seem rather empty to us but was in some ways luxurious for its period, with soft cushions on the chair and benches, despite Jerome's well-

known asceticism. On the other hand, as Panofsky pointed out, the table is bare and ‘holds nothing but an inkpot and a crucifix’, besides the sloping board on which the saint is writing.¹⁸ Books are few and in the case of a well-known scholar, this absence is surely eloquent. One wonders whether a painter who lived at a time when the printing press was a new and exciting invention was not making a historical point about the poverty of manuscript culture in the age of Jerome. By contrast, a woodcut of Erasmus and his secretary Gilbert Cousin at work together shows a bookcase full of books behind the secretary.

Advertising

The images used in advertising may help historians of the future to reconstruct lost elements of twentieth-century material culture, from motor cars to perfume bottles, but at present, at any rate, they are more useful as sources for the study of past attitudes to commodities. Japan was, appropriately enough, one of the pioneers in this respect, witness the references to branded products, such as sake, in some of the prints of Utamaro (1753–1806). In Europe, the later eighteenth century witnessed the rise of advertising through images such as the new kind of chaise longue illustrated in a German journal specifically devoted to innovations in the world of consumption, the *Journal des Luxus und des Moden* (illus. 44).

A second stage in the history of advertising was reached in the later nineteenth century with the rise of the poster, a large coloured lithograph displayed in the street. Jules Chéret (1836–1932) and Alphonse



44 G. M. Kraus(?), Engraving of a chaise-longue with reading-desk attachment, from *Journal des Luxus und des Moden* (1799).

Mucha (1860–1939), both working in Paris during the *belle époque*, produced a series of posters advertising plays, dance halls, bicycles, soap, perfume, toothpaste, beer, cigarettes, Singer sewing-machines, Moët et Chandon champagne, ‘Saxoleine’ kerosene for lamps and so on. Beautiful women were shown together with all these products in order to seduce the viewers into buying.

It was in the twentieth century, however, that advertisers turned to ‘depth’ psychology in order to appeal to the unconscious minds of consumers, making use of so-called ‘subliminal’ techniques of persuasion by association. In the 1950s, for example, split-second flashes of advertisements for ice cream were shown during the screening of feature films in the USA. The audience did not know that they had seen these images, but the consumption of ice cream increased all the same.

It may be useful to employ the term ‘subliminal’ in a broader sense to refer to the way in which the mental image of a given product is built up by associating various objects with its visual image. The process is one of conscious manipulation on the part of the advertising agencies, their photographers and their ‘motivational analysts’, but it is largely unconscious to the viewers. In this manner the sports car, for instance, has long been associated with power, aggression and virility, its qualities symbolized by names such as ‘Jaguar’. Cigarette advertisements used to show images of cowboys in order to exploit a similar range of masculine associations. These images testify to the values that are projected on to inanimate objects in our culture of consumption, the equivalent, perhaps, of the values projected on to the landscape in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Chapter 2).

Take the case of advertisements for perfume from the 1960s and 1970s respectively, decades that are perhaps sufficiently distant by now to be regarded with some degree of detachment. The Camay advertisement (illus. 45), for instance, represents the interior of a fashionable auction-room (the name ‘Sotheby’s’ is visible on the catalogue) in which a good-looking and well-dressed man is distracted from the works of art he is viewing by the vision – or is it the perfume? – of the girl who uses the product (Chapter 10).¹⁹ The Camay girl is beautiful but anonymous. In contrast, some advertisements of Chanel No. 5 juxtaposed the perfume to the actress Catherine Deneuve. Her glamour rubs off on the product, encouraging female viewers to identify with her and follow her example. Or perhaps, in a more ambitious formulation, ‘What Catherine Deneuve’s face means to us in the world of magazines and films, Chanel No. 5

45 An Italian soap advertisement from the 1950s.



seeks to mean and comes to mean in the world of consumer goods.’ As in the case of some advertisements analysed by Roland Barthes, the interpretation of the Camay image by Umberto Eco and of the Chanel image by Judith Williamson follows the lines of a structuralist or semi-otic approach (to be discussed in more detail below, Chapter 10), rather than an iconographical one, concentrating on the relation between different elements in the picture and viewing it in terms of binary oppositions.²⁰

Problems and Solutions

The examples discussed in the previous two sections raise problems with which the reader will already be familiar, such as the problem of the visual formula. The representations of furniture in the Bayeux Tapestry, for instance, have been described as ‘formulaic’. Again, there is the problem of the artist’s intentions, whether to represent the visible world faithfully or to idealize or even to allegorize it. A third problem is that of the image which refers to or ‘quotes’ another

image, the visual equivalent of intertextuality. David Wilkie's *Penny Wedding* (1818), for example, which is full of details of material culture, is doubtless based to some extent on the observation of his native Fife, but it also borrows from or alludes to seventeenth-century Dutch paintings or prints. So to what extent and in what ways can the painting be used by social historians of nineteenth-century Scotland? Yet another problem concerns possible distortion. As was noted earlier, artists may tidy up the rooms and sanitize the streets in their paintings. Other images diverge still further from the everyday. Using the evidence of advertisements, from posters to TV commercials, historians from the year 2500 might be tempted to assume that the standard of living for ordinary people in England in the year 2000 was considerably higher than it actually was. To use the evidence safely, they would need to be familiar with the current televisual convention of representing people in better houses and surrounded by more expensive items than they could in practice have afforded.

On other occasions, the disorder and squalor of rooms may be exaggerated by the artists, whether consciously, like Jan Steen, in order to make a particular rhetorical or moral point, or unconsciously, because they are representing a culture the rules of which they do not know from inside. Cottage interiors in Sweden in the nineteenth century, as in Ireland, were generally sketched by outsiders, who might be foreign and in any case were middle class. A drawing representing a Swedish farmhouse at the beginning of the day, five o'clock in the morning (illus. 46), vividly illustrates the farmers' lack of privacy, with cubicles in the wall instead of bedrooms. More exactly, what it shows is the lack of privacy as perceived by middle-class eyes, including those of the artist, Fritz von Dardel.²¹

Then there is the problem of the *capriccio*, discussed above. View-painters sometimes liked to create architectural fantasies, as Carpaccio did in his famous paintings of the life of St Ursula. In the case of his *Augustine in his Study*, attention has been drawn to 'the strange chair with the reading-stand and the scarcely less curious writing-desk', of which no analogues have survived.²² Was this a case of fantasy furniture, or can we assume that these objects once existed?

A more complex example of the problems involved in reading images of interiors comes from the series of church interiors painted by the seventeenth-century Dutch artist, Pieter Saenredam (1597–1665). One might have thought that there was no point in representing these churches other than as they were, but careful scrutiny has raised some awkward questions. At the time, these churches were being used for Calvinist worship. However some Catholic images are visible in the



46 Fritz von Dardel, *Morning Reveille in Orsa*, 1893, wash drawing. Nordiska Museet, Stockholm.



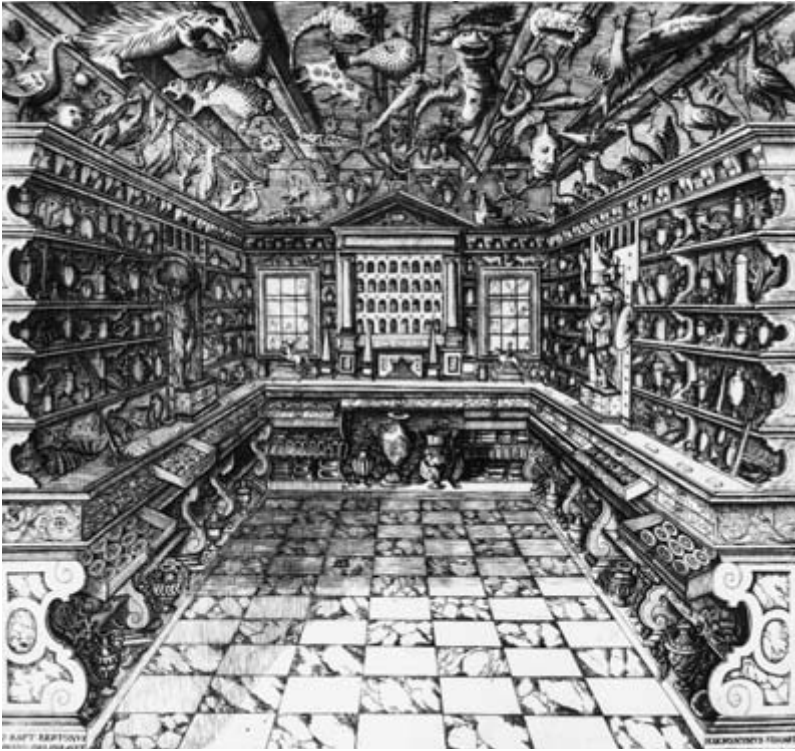
47 Pieter Jansz. Saenredam, *Interior of the Church of St Bavo in Haarlem*, 1648, oil on panel. National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.

paintings and even, on occasion, people engaged in what appears to be a Catholic ritual, such as the baptism represented as taking place in the south aisle of the church of St Bavo in Haarlem (illus. 47). A careful scrutiny of small details shows that the officiant is no Protestant pastor but a Catholic priest dressed in a surplice and stole. It is known that Saenredam was friendly with Catholics in Haarlem (there were many Catholics in the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century). In the paintings the artist 'restored' the churches to their earlier Catholic state. Saenredam's images offer better evidence of the persistence of Dutch Catholicism than of the contemporary appearance of Dutch churches. They are not simple views but 'laden with historical and religious overtones'.²³

On the positive side, images often show details of material culture that people at the time would have taken for granted and so failed to mention in texts. The dogs in Dutch churches or libraries or in Loggan prints of Oxford and Cambridge colleges would hardly have been represented if they were not commonly to be found in these places, and so they have been used to support an argument about the omnipresence of animals in everyday life at this time.²⁴ The testimony of images is all the more valuable because they show not only past artefacts (which have sometimes survived and may be studied directly) but also their organization; the books on the shelves of libraries and bookshops (illus. 48), for instance, or the exotic objects



48 'Interior View of John P. Jewett & Co.'s New and Spacious bookstore, No. 117 Washington Street, Boston', engraving from *Gleason's Pictorial*, 2 December 1854.



49 Giovanni Battista Bertoni, Woodcut of the Museum of Francesco Calzolari, from Benedetto Cerutti and Andrea Chiocco, *Musaeum Francisci Calceolari Iunioris Veronensis* (Verona, 1622).

arranged in museums, or ‘cabinets of curiosities’ as they were described in the seventeenth century (illus. 49), the stuffed animals and fish hanging from the ceiling, the ancient vases on the ground, a statuette on a plinth, smaller objects arranged on the shelves and still smaller ones in drawers.²⁵

Images also reveal how objects were used, as in the case of the cross-bow in *The Battle of San Romano*, mentioned above, or the lances and spears represented in the Bayeux Tapestry (illus. 78). In this last case, the female embroiderers may have lacked the necessary military expertise, but men would presumably have told them how these weapons were held. An analogous example nearly a thousand years later comes from films of the First World War, which draw the viewer’s attention to the technical limitations of early tanks by showing them in motion.²⁶

For a case study in the uses of images as testimony for the uses of other objects, we may turn to the history of the book, or as it is now known, the history of reading. Ancient Roman images show us how to

hold a roll while reading it, an art which was lost after the invention of the codex. Seventeenth-century French engravings show men reading aloud at the fireside or to a group of men and women assembled for the *veillée*, turning evening work into a social activity. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century images prefer to show reading in the family circle, and the reader is sometimes a woman.

A German historian of literature, Erich Schön, has made considerable use of paintings and prints and even silhouettes to support as well as to illustrate his argument about changes in reading habits in Germany around the year 1800. His point about a 'reading revolution' in the period, the rise of a more 'sentimental' or 'empathetic' form of reading, is supported by the rise of images of people reading in the open air or in more informal poses, reclining on a chaise longue, lying on the ground or – as in Tischbein's sketch of Goethe – balancing on a chair with a book on his lap and his legs off the floor (illus. 50). Another famous image is that of Joseph Wright's painting of Sir



50 J. H. W. Tischbein, Sketch of J. W. von Goethe reading by the window of his Rome lodgings on his first Italian journey, c. 1787. Goethe-Nationalmuseum, Weimar.



51 Joseph Wright ('of Derby'), *Sir Brooke Boothby Reading Rousseau*, 1781, oil on canvas. Tate Britain, London.

Brooke Boothby, lying in a forest with a book labelled 'Rousseau', the ancestor of so many later images of readers sprawled on the ground (illus. 51).²⁷ Boothby is implausibly well dressed for his rural surroundings, which suggests that the image (unlike many of its descendants) should be read symbolically rather than literally. It is a translation into vivid visual terms of Rousseau's ideal of following nature.

So far as the history of material culture is concerned, the testimony of images seems to be most reliable in the small details. It is particularly valuable as evidence of the arrangement of objects and of the social uses of objects, not so much the spear or fork or book in itself but the way to hold it. In other words, images allow us to replace old artefacts in their original social context. This work of replacement also requires historians to study the people represented in these images, the main theme in the chapter that follows.