

Imagined interiors – imagined collections

Non Peer-reviewed author version

PLEVOETS, Bie & VAN CLEEMPOEL, Koenraad (2021) Imagined interiors – imagined collections. In: Interiors (Oxford. Print), 11 (1), p. 17-29.

DOI: 10.1080/20419112.2020.1857979

Handle: <http://hdl.handle.net/1942/33082>

Imagined interiors – imagined collections

Bie Plevoets* and Koenraad Van Cleempoel

Faculty of Architecture and Arts, Hasselt University, Hasselt, Belgium

Agoralaan Building E, 3590 Diepenbeek, Belgium

* bie.plevoets@uhasselt.be

Bie Plevoets studied Interior Architecture and Conservation, and obtained a PhD on adaptive reuse, approached from an interior perspective. Currently, she is a post-doctoral researcher in the research group Trace. Her research focuses on adaptive reuse theory and preservation of spirit of place. She is the author of the book entitled 'Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage: Concepts and Cases of an Emerging Discipline', co-authored by Koenraad Van Cleempoel (Routledge, 2019). She teaches the Theory Module of the International Master Adaptive Reuse, and other theory courses on adaptive reuse and heritage at Hasselt University.

Koenraad Van Cleempoel studied art history in Leuven, Madrid and Oxford. He obtained a PhD at the Warburg Institute in London. Since 2004 he lectures in art history at Hasselt University. He is the coordinator of the research unit Trace, with a special interest in the history and theory of adaptive reuse of heritage. He teaches a research seminar 'Genius Loci' in the International Master in Adaptive Reuse at Hasselt University. In 2017 he held the PP Rubens Chair in UC Berkeley.

Imagined interiors – imagined collections

Cabinet paintings showing an (art) collection in an interior, developed as a genre in early 17th century in Antwerp. The depicted collection could be the actual art collection in an imagined, idealized interior, or more metaphorically it could also be an imagined, fictional collection of paintings, sculptures, scientific instruments, silverwork, textiles, and naturalia such as flowers or shells. Jan Bruegel the Elder (1568 – 1625) and Pieter Paul Rubens (1577 – 1640), for example, used this genre for a series illustrating the five senses. These imagined interiors also influenced the vedutas by Panini and Piranesi, a cityscape which is a collage of buildings, ruins and archeological fragments.

In this essay we relate these fictional representation of collections - objects as well as architectural and archeological fragments – with the collections and scenography of (house) museums. We look at two house museums in particular: the house of the architect and collector Sir John Soane in London and the Museum of Innocence by the writer Orhan Pamuk in Istanbul. House museums traditionally expose collections aside from a museological scenography but in their historical, domestic setting – ‘frozen’ in another context and epoch. The two selected cases, however, have initially been conceived as a museum and contain an eclectic collection, presented as a pastiche, and its domestic setting is strongly theatrical, or even artificial.

Keywords: cabinet painting, picture of collection, house museum, Museum of Innocence, Sir John Soane Museum

The Time has passed when Times doesn't count (Valéry 1989, 1045)

An attractive ensemble of five 17th century paintings at the Prado Museum in Madrid represent the Five Senses. Designed by PP Rubens and J Bruegel the Elder in 1617, each Sense is personified by a sensual allegorical female figure. As the Latin for all Five Senses is masculine, there was a medieval tradition to have them personified by men (Nordenfalk 1985). But Rubens transformation show a sensual goddess like personification. She is accompanied by Cupido in the paintings for *Sight*, *Smell*, *Hearing* and *Touch*, and a Sater for *Taste* generously serving her wine from a gilded jug. Typically, all five compositions show us collections of luxury goods such as paintings, musical instrument, clocks, art objects and scenographic settings with the central personification referring to the respective Sense.

The compositions heralded a new genre that would become fashionable in early-17th century Flanders: the collector's cabinets or 'pictures of collections' (Marr 2010). Depicting elegant interiors full of luxury goods, natural curiosities, antique sculptures, globes, *objects-d'arts* and paintings. Usually representing the proud amateur art collector amidst his art objects, discussing informally his collection with visitors. But the painted interiors were usually larger and more *antique* than in reality and some of the represented objects were also invented by the artist. The iconographic rendering of associating a person with one or more attributes seems to have antique origins: Aristotel's *De sensu et sensato*¹. In the Sense of Hearing, for example, Jan Bruegel includes in his fictious interior cabinet, paintings depicting the

¹ Part of his *Parva naturalia*. The tekst required that each Sense could be depicted as a human figure holding significant objects

(Nordenfalk 1985)

concert of the gods and Orpheus taming the wild animals with his music. Near central tables is a fabulous collection of musical instruments: harpsichord, drum, trumpet, trombone, cornetto, lute, several flutes, various sizes of violas and gambas, a lute, and a shawm. On a table to the right are a small horn, a trumpet, a bell and a reed pipe. At the same table is also a luxurious mechanical globe with clockwork inside and a series of smaller, but equally refined table clocks. Against the wall in the right background is another collection of five monumental – and very precious – clocks. Iconographically they operate in this allegory of the Sense of Hearing as musical clocks and producers of mechanical melodies on a timely basis.

We are interested in how this particular relationship between objects and a person – or personification – create a unique and timeless situation: it *captures* time in its representation of stylistic conventions of that time, but it equally *escapes* from it as the personal experience of holding, touching, smelling, tasting and admiring objects is untimely. Fictions and objects and places are all intricately and beautifully held together by a single concept or idea.

Objects become carriers of meaning and a canvas of memories and associations that navigate through time.

The musical clocks in Brueghel's representation of the Sense of Hearing can act as a corridor between 1617 Antwerp and 1980ies Istanbul as described in Öhran Pamuk's novel 'The Museum of Innocence' of 2008. A brief but passionate love affair between narrator Kemal and his distant cousin Füsun, starts his obsession with collecting everyday objects associated with Füsun. The novel is set between 1974 and early 2000s, telling the lives of two families in Istanbul through memories and flashbacks. After Füsun marries someone else, Kemal spends eight years visiting her in a corner house in Istanbul, now converted into an actual museum. With each visit he takes an object with him, that now form the entire collection of the Museum of Innocence. The imagined collection in an imagined interior has become a physical – and much visited – museum in a cobbled backstreet of Istanbul.

Similarly to the iconographic associations of Bruegel, Pamuk's narrative is based on the assumption that objects used for different purposes and evocative of the most disparate memories can, when placed side by side, bring forth unprecedented thoughts and emotions. But differently from Bruegel, is how Pamuk creates a very personal and intimate iconography. A central concept in the book is therefore a dynamic and subjective notion of time: 'In *Physics* Aristotle makes a distinction between Time and the single moments he describes as the "present".' Pamuk explains:

Single moments are – like Aristotle's atoms – indivisible, unbreakable units. But Time is the line that links them.

My life has taught me that remembering Time – that line connecting all the moments that Aristotle called the present – is for most of us rather painful. However, if we can learn to stop thinking of life as a line corresponding to Aristotle's Time, treasuring our time instead for its deepest moments, ten lingering eight years at our beloved's dinner table no longer seems strange and laughable. Instead, this courtship signifies 1,593 happy nights by Füsun's side.

It was to preserve these happy moments for posterity that I collected this multitude of objects large and small that once felt Füsun's touch, dating each one to hold it in my memory (quote printed on one the walls of Museum of Innocence, Istanbul)

In one of the last chapters of the novel, Pamuk describes a series of museums which formed the inspiration for the museum of innocence: the Musée Edith Piaf in Paris, the Musée Maurice Ravel in

Montfort-l'Amaury, and Sir John Soane Museum in London, among many others.² These 'sentimental museums' as he calls them, display the intimate life of an individual through objects, and show these collections as frozen in time, dwelling in a past epoch. Most of them were created by admirers or loved once but some museums were carefully planned by individuals in order to conserve their own legacy and memories after they were gone. Sir John Soane for instance, who was an architect and collector, continuously worked on the museological quality of his house. While some rooms still represented functional living spaces, such as the dining room or reading room, others as the Model room, Picture room, and Central Dome room were mere theatrical sceneries for the repository of his collection of paintings, books, antiques, casts and archeological fragments. Although the collection included many pieces with significant artistic and historic value, it was not ordered chronologically or thematically. Instead the pieces were exposed in an intuitive manner, to evoke an emotional response through unique combinations and settings. By exposing different historic layers alongside, the museum seems to abstract time and place. Orhan Pamuk describes in his novel Kemal's visit to the Soane House:

Every time I went to London I visited Sir John Soane's Museum; after walking through its gorgeously cluttered, crowded rooms and admiring his arrangements of the paintings, I would sit alone in a corner, listening for many hours to the noise of the city, thinking that one day I would exhibit Füsün's things in just this way, and that when I did, she would smile down on me from the realm of the angels (Pamuk 2009, 688)

As Pamuk creates confusion between the imaginary and factual narratives and meanings, Soane also introduced fictional elements to his museum. One of the most remarkable rooms in the house is the Monks Parloir, or the Parloir of Padre Giovanni as described by Soane in the catalogue he made about his house. The small, basement room and connected courtyard represents the retreat of the pious monk an alter ego of the architect himself.³ The room, or cell, with its oratory, niche for holy water and collection of religious objects, is strongly characterized by models and fragments of ecclesiastical buildings that decorate the walls and ceiling. The adjacent courtyard, also referred to by Soane as The Monument Court or The Monk's Cemetery, is to represent the ruins of the Medieval monastery of Padre Giovanni – in fact the fragments originally belonged to the Old Palace of Westminster; a tomb, erected from archeological fragments of various styles and periods, the *Pasticcio*, bears the inscription of the monk and his 'faithful companion Fanny', in fact being the grave for the dog of his decided wife.⁴ In his description of these spaces, Soane points to their divine atmosphere:

From Padre Giovanni's room, the Ruins of a Monastery arrest the attention. The interest created in the mind of the spectator, on visiting the abode of the monk, will not be weakened by wandering among the ruins of his once noble monastery. The rich Canopy, and other decorations of this venerable spot, are objects which cannot fail to produce the most powerful sensations in the minds of the admirers of the

² Chapter 81 'The Museum of Innocence' in Pamuk, Orhan. 2009. *The Museum of Innocence*. London: Faber and Faber Limited.

³ Coincidental or not, Giovanni is also the first name of the artist Piranesi who Soane befriended in Rome in 1778 when Soane undertook a Grand Tour.

⁴ The *Pasticcio* was dismantled in 1896 but re-erected in 2004. The totem-pole-like assemblage of stylistically diverse architectural fragments some reclaimed, some test-pieces designed by Soane aimed to showcase the progressive nature of architectural styles (Knox 2009).

piety of our forefathers, who raised such structures for the workshop of the Almighty Disposer of events.

The Tomb of the monk adds to the gloomy scenery of this hallowed place, wherein attentions has been given to every minute circumstance (Soane 1835, 26).

The Museum of Innocence and the Sir John Soane Museum both parallel representations of collections in renaissance paintings in their iconographic use of objects. Both museums, however, also seem to rely on visual arts as a source for the scenographic arrangements their collection. In the Museum of Innocence, the collection of everyday objects is exposed in cabinets in which the objects are brought together in a sort of 3D still life composition. Each cabinet represents particular narratives from the novel. In the museum catalogue, Orhan Pamuk describes his intention, method and feelings about the design of the compositions of the objects in the cabinets and frequently refers to paintings as a source (Pamuk 2012). Several compositions, such as the cabinet n° 40 'The Consolidations of Life in a *Yalı*', were inspired by Dutch still life paintings, while in others as n° 16 'Jalousy' and n° 27 'Don't Lean Back That Way, You Might Fall' an aquarelle or drawing was as part of the composition. Moreover, Pamuk who in his adolescent years wished to become a painter, asserts how the making of the museum and the different cabinets wakened the '*dormant painter*' inside him:

... as I began to arrange the boxes, I came to feel that the objects that I'd been collecting for so many years and that were portrayed in the book could take on new meanings when displayed in the museum. As they gradually found their places in the museum, the objects became to talk among themselves, singing a different tune and moving beyond what was described in the novel. None of my ambitious preliminary drawings, my plans for perforated boxes, nor any of the possible arrangements seemed to be true to the spirit and soul of this box; I was trying to make a sort of painting with the objects, but they were trying to tell me something different (83).

After many years of collecting objects, of visualizing and sketching cabinet lay-outs as if I were writing theatrical stage directions, we arranged cups of tea, Kütahya porcelain ashtrays, and Füsun's hairclips inside the boxes through trial and error. Looking at the photographs we took during this process, I realized that I was doing what the Istanbul landscape painters I so admire also did: looking for an accidental beauty in the convergence of trees, electrical cables and pylons, ships, clouds, objects, and people. The greatest happiness is when the eye discovers beauty where neither the mind conceived of nor the hand intended any (103).

Although Soane was less explicit about his sources for the scenography of his house museum, he was an art lover and collector and several arrangements for his collection also seem influenced by visual arts. This is probably most explicit in the Picture room which atmosphere mirrors the interiors seen in early 17th century 'pictures of collections'. To be able to presents Soane's extensive collection of paintings and drawings, one of the walls of the double high space is covered with movable planes with sufficient space between to hang pictures. The planes open and close like shutters and allow to observe the pictures under different angles, with daylight entering the space through a canopied skylight and longitudinal windows just below the ceiling at three sides of the room. When all planes are opened, a niche becomes visible with a statue of a Nymph and two models of buildings designed by Soane himself in front of a stained glass window. Looking down in this niche, one can see into the Monks Parloir. Just as Soane's collection, also the interior design is a pastiche of different styles; the picture room for example joins classical and gothic features, for which Soane refers to landscape paintings by Claude and Poussin that combine Grecian and Gothic architecture in the same picture (Hill 2014, 181).

An important part of Soane's collection are the engravings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi. Five of which, depicting ancient ruins of Rome, were presented to Soane by the artist himself when they met in 1778 while other works were obtained by Soane later in his career. The work of Piranesi is generally seen as very influential for Soane's work, both for his design as in the way he depicts his projects (e.g. Hill 2014; Wilton-Ely 2013) but we want to point to its apparent influence on the interior design and scenography of his house museum. Piranesi's oeuvre includes images that show in one image existing and imagined (ruins of) buildings, archeological fragments and art works from various historic periods. The walls and ceiling of the Parloir of Padre Giovanni, the *Pasticchio*, and most prominently the double high Central Dome room evoke a similar dramatic atmosphere as seen in some of Piranesi's work through a dense composition of art objects, archeological fragments and casts from very different styles and origins.

In 1812, Soane writes a remarkable, somewhat strange essay, entitled 'Crude Hints towards an history of my house' in which he describes his house as a future ruin (Soane and Dorey 2015). The text, written in the first person and present tense, reveals Soane's sources and motives for the setting up of his museum, formulated as conjectures on the origin and function of the building by the Antiquary - the fictional author of the manuscript. Speculations move from a Roman temple, a burial site, a monastery or chapel, to the house of a magician.

Soane and Pamuk are constructing one narrative through two different media: the novel or manuscript and the (house) museum. The manuscript and museum are both instruments that allow to create an imaginary space, in which the observer – the visitor or reader – is invited to escape the notion of time. Although, the collections of the Museum of Innocence and the Sir John Soane Museum consist of real objects, most of them have been selected mainly for the emotions and associations which they evoke from the spectator and the personal, inner narratives they bring alive in their mind and soul; the origin of the objects is of secondary importance. Hence, Pamuk states that museum should be like novels, telling ordinary, everyday stories of individuals which, he believes, are richer, more humane, and much more joyful (Pamuk 2012).

Bibliography

- Hill, Jonathan. 2014. *The Architecture of Ruins*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Knox, Tim. 2009. *Sir John Soane's Museum London*. London & New York: Merrell.
- Marr, A. 2010. "The Flemish 'Pictures of Collections' Genre: An Overview." *Intellectual History Review* 20 (1):5-25.
- Nordenfalk, C. 1985. "The Five Senes in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 45 (1985):1-22.
- Pamuk, Orhan. 2009. *The Museum of Innocence*. London: Faber and Faber Limited.
- . 2012. *The Innocence of Objects*. New York: Abrams.
- Soane, J., and H. Dorey. 2015. *Crude Hints Towards an History of My House in Lincoln's Inn Fields*: Archaeopress Publishing Limited.
- Soane, Sir John. 1835. *Description of The House Museum of Sir John Soane Architect*. London: unpublished.
- Valéry, Paul 1989. *The Collected Works*. Edited by J. Matthews. Vol. 7: Princeton University Press.
- Wilton-Ely, John. 2013. *Piranesi, Paestum & Soane*. Munchen: Prestel.



Sense of Hearing, 1617-18, Jan Brueghel the Elder and Pieter Paul Rubens, Museo del Prado, Madrid

An attractive ensemble of five 17th century paintings at the Prado Museum in Madrid represent the Five Senses. Designed by PP Rubens and J Bruegel the Elder in 1617, each Sense is personified by a sensual allegorical female figure. The Sense of Hearing, shows a fictitious interior cabinet with paintings depicting the concert of the gods and Orpheus taming the wild animals with his music. Near the central table is a fabulous collection of musical instruments: harpsichord, drum, trumpet, trombone, cornetto, lysard, several flutes, various sizes of violas and gambas, a lute, and a shawm. On a table to the right are a small horn, a trumpet, a bell and a reed pipe. At the same table is also a luxurious mechanical globes with clockwork inside and a series of smaller, but equally refined table clocks. Against the wall in the right background is another collection of five monumental – and very precious – clocks. Iconographically they operate in this allegory of the Sense of Hearing as musical clocks and producers of mechanical melodies on a timely basis.

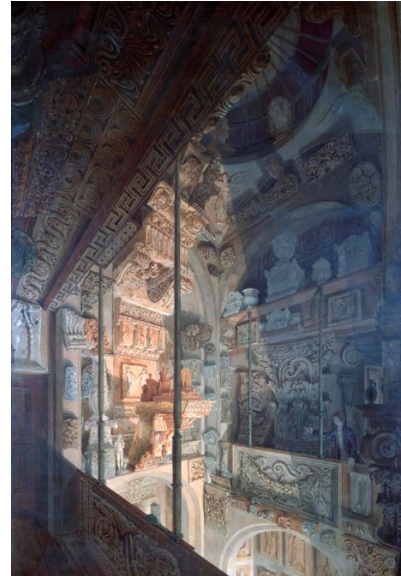


Left: Apelles painting Campaspe, circa 1630, Willem van Haecht, Mauritshuis, The Hague



Right: Picture Room, Sir John Soane Museum, London © History Ireland

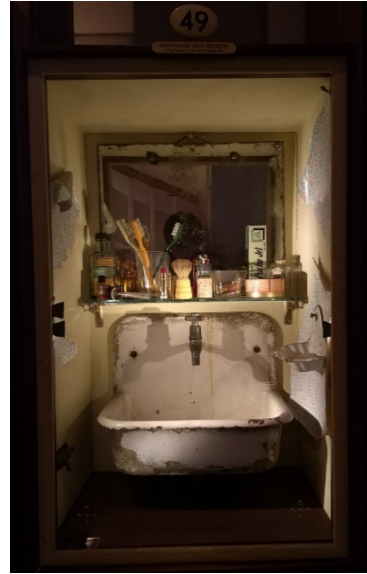
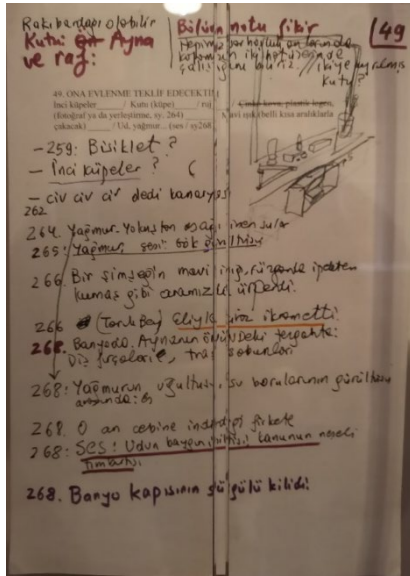
The interior of the Picture Room simulates interiors depicted in early 17th century 'pictures of collections'. To be able to presents Soane's extensive collection of paintings and drawings, one of the walls of the double high space is covered with movable planes with sufficient space between to hang pictures. As Soane explains in his catalogue: 'By this arrangement, the small space of thirteen feet eight inches in length, twelve feet four inches in breadth, and nineteen feet six inches in height, which are the actual dimensions of this room, is rendered capable of containing as many pictures as a gallery of the same height, twenty feet broad and forty-five feet long.' (Soane 1835, 15). Daylight enters the space through a canopied skylight and longitudinal windows just below the ceiling at three sides of the room. When all movable pannels are opened, a niche appears which gives a view into the Monk's Parloir and the adjacent court yard.



Left: Le Antichità romane, tomo III (segundo frontispicio), 1750-53, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, National Library of Brazil

Right: perspective view of the dome area within the home and museum of John Soane at 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, c.1813., Joseph Michael Gandy

The work of Piranesi is very influential for Soane's work, not only for his designs and the way he depicts his projects, but Piranesi's way of depicting a 'collection' of existing and imagined (ruins of) buildings, archeological fragments and art works from various historic periods also seem to have influenced the interior design and scenography of his house museum. The walls and ceiling of the double high Central Dome room evoke a similar dramatic atmosphere as seen in some of Piranesi's work through a dense composition of art objects, archeological fragments and casts from very different styles and origins.



Left: Notes and sketch of Orhan Pamuk on the composition of cabinet 49 'I was going to ask her to marry me', presented in the Museum of Innocence, Istanbul. Picture by the authors.

Centre: I was going to ask her to marry me, cabinet 49 from the Museum of Innocence, Istanbul. Picture by the authors.

Right: Lavabo y espejo, 1967, Antonio Lopez, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

In the Museum of Innocence, the collection of everyday objects is exposed in cabinets in which the objects are brought together in a sort of 3D still life composition. Each cabinet represents particular narratives from the novel. On the top floor of the museum, several notes and sketches are exposed which show the writer's ideas and preparations for the compositions of the cabinets. Cabinet 49, depicts the chapter 'I was going to ask her to marry me'.

After a separation of 339 days, Kemal goes to see Fusun and her family in their house in Cukurcuma to ask her to marry him. He finds out that in the meantime, Fusun married someone else. He drinks too much and get unwell. He retreats in the family's bad room. 'On the little tray before the mirror bearing Fusun's, Aunt Nessibe's, and Uncle Tarik's toothbrushes, as well as shaving soap, brush, and razor, I saw Fusun's Lipstick. I picked it up and sniffed it, then put it into my pocket.' (Pamuk 2009, 333)



Left: The Monks Parloir. Sir John Soane Museum, London © Sir John Soane Museum

Centre: the Monks Cemetery with the Pasticcio, depicted as part of 'The Plan and Interior of the Ground Floor of a Town House', 1822, Joseph Michael Gandy

Right: View in the Monks Parloir. Plate XVII from Soane's catalogue (Soane 1835)

From Padre Giovanni's room, the Ruins of a Monastery arrest the attention. The interest created in the mind of the spectator, on visiting the abode of the monk, will not be weakened by wandering among the ruins of his once noble monastery. The rich Canopy, and other decorations of this venerable spot, are objects which cannot fail to produce the most powerful sensations in the minds of the admirers of the piety of our forefathers, who raised such structures for the workshop of the Almighty Disposer of events.

The Tomb of the monk adds to the gloomy scenery of this hallowed place, wherein attentions has been given to every minute circumstance. (Soane 1835, 26)