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## Exhibition and Display

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## CHAPTER SIX

### **Exhibition and Display**

LEAH R. CLARK AND CAROLINE CAMPBELL

The modern relationship between function and display makes it hard to comprehend the concept – so key to the medieval and Renaissance periods - that part of an item of furniture's function existed in its ability (or potential) to perform. Today the word functional is used to describe objects or actions which do no more than they need to do. A chair that serves its function, for example, enables someone to sit on it and nothing more. During the period under discussion here furniture was of course purposeful, but that purpose might be multifaceted, and more strongly related to display and show than is often the case in the early twenty-first century. In the medieval period, this was partly because the ownership of furniture or moveable objects, including beds, chairs, tables and chests, was restricted very largely to the church and the nobility. The very possession of furniture in the secular sphere, to a surprisingly late date, was reserved to the relative elite, the higher middling and upper orders of society. Very little moveable furniture was made, except for noblemen, royalty and senior clerics. Even in 1418, the Medici family of Florence possessed only six chairs in their principal residence in the Tuscan city (Goldthwaite 1993: 225-9). They were not yet the city's rulers, but they were already renowned throughout Europe for their extraordinary wealth. These six precious seats – objects of desire and status far more than of necessity - were only the beginning of the great expansion in disposable wealth and of conspicuous consumption that played such a part in the development of European furniture. The exhibition and presentation of furniture both to members of the family and household, and to specially invited guests, became central to these objects adequately performing their function.

The rise of moveable furniture as a vehicle for display and exhibition in social situations beyond the worlds of the highest-ranking clerics and secular courts is closely related to the culture around luxury, magnificence, and consumption. The fifteenth century witnessed a building boom in large urban family palaces, which influenced and was influenced by theories regarding magnificence and righteous living. The

display of a family's wealth and power was thus expressed through their material surroundings, including furniture. These theories are often linked to Italian humanism, but furniture was certainly a social marker in other countries. Indeed, the Burgundian court, for example, was renowned for the display of lavish textiles and gold and silver displayed on *dressoirs*, which certainly impressed and influenced Italian visitors (Belozerskaya 2002). Members of the English royalty and nobility possessed a similar range of opulent moveable goods. For instance, the inventories made for the Countess of Suffolk (Geoffrey Chaucer's granddaughter) at Ewelme in Oxfordshire in 1466 record the great chamber with its ceremonial bed, as well as tapestries, hangings, other beds, heirlooms and even children's clothes (Goodall 2001: 281-5). Across Europe, changes to the layout of rooms and consequently their functions also affected the use, variety, and purpose of furniture. Since homes and palaces were built both for the family who lived there and for visitors, their layout, decoration, and furniture could serve family members and guests alike. As a result these spaces and the possessions that adorned them had a more public function than domestic spaces today and could play a performative role in social rituals (Preyer 1998). Rather than being merely background adornments or practical objects, items of furniture were active performers in conveying the owner's wealth, status and even knowledge.

This chapter is particularly attentive to the social roles that furniture played in exhibition and display from domestic contexts and courtly entertaining spaces to shops and even ecclesiastical settings. That is, chests, beds, daybeds, dressers, cabinets, cradles, and *credenze* (roughly translated as sideboards or buffets) are examined as social agents within and outside the home. Most of these items were moveable, serving varied functions in different locations, and were often integral to displaying or conveying symbolic meaning at particular events. This chapter begins with an examination of cultural approaches to furniture and its changing display functions in the medieval period and the Renaissance, drawing upon primary sources that discuss furniture as well as the layout and function of rooms. It then turns to specific examples of types of display in differing contexts. These vary from the cabinets and rooms built to exhibit worldly goods to cradles, seats, or beds designed to display the body. Categories of types of furniture— chests, beds, cradles, cabinets and *credenze*—are examined as fluid; many pieces of furniture could serve multiple purposes, as objects of display, as functional pieces, as symbolic actors, or as a combination of all three.

## CONCEPTS OF DISPLAY

The concept of display was central to medieval society and culture both in religious and secular spheres. In the religious context, the performance of the Mass was a key part of Christian devotion. Churches were constructed as settings for the most important of Christian objects, such as altarpieces that acted as the central focus and backdrop of the Mass, or reliquaries that housed holy objects and became sites of pilgrimage. Perhaps the most striking is the church of Sainte Chapelle in Paris, commissioned by King Louis XI of France to house what he believed was Christ's Crown of Thorns, purchased for the jaw-dropping sum of 135,000 livres (half the annual expenditure of France) in 1239 in Constantinople. In the early medieval period, the overwhelming majority of furniture was made in an ecclesiastic context, for divine glory, and this expenditure and earthly splendor were fundamentally related to the devotional purpose of furniture. Most church furnishing was performative, from the Bishop's throne to the stalls for clerics to the altars and their accouterments. Central to this display was the adornment of altars and of sacred shrines. This was a continual and additive process. For instance, at the heart of Canterbury Cathedral, rebuilt following the fire of 1174, was one of the great sites of medieval pilgrimage: the tomb of St Thomas à Becket, the Archbishop murdered in his cathedral church four years earlier. Becket's tomb continued as a site for pilgrimage, and for further enrichment, throughout the Middle Ages. Around 1500, an Italian visitor stated that 'the magnificence of the tomb of St Thomas the Martyr...is that which surpasses all belief' (Sneyd 1847: 83-4). Some decades later, the humanist Erasmus (1466-1536), recounting a visit to Canterbury which took place before 1519, describes:

'A coffin of wood (covered) a coffin of gold which, being drawn up by ropes and pullies, an invaluable treasure was discovered. Gold was the meanest thing to be seen there. All shone and glittered with the rarest and most precious jewels of an extraordinary bigness [...] When this sight was shown, the prior with a white wand touched every jewel one by one, telling the name, the value, and the donor of it' (Erasmus, 1849: 55-6).

When, less than twenty years later, Canterbury Cathedral was stripped of its most valuable possessions by King Henry VIII's commissioners, much of the 26 cartloads of silver and gold that were removed from Canterbury must have been plundered from this shrine (Campbell 1987: 162). This example – and there are many, although not perhaps so opulent, from all over medieval Europe – serves to remind us that ecclesiastical furniture and furnishings was of exceptionally high monetary, as well as devotional value.

The earliest recorded medieval furniture has been found in churches, such as the seventh-century peace stools still surviving in the English churches of Hexham Abbey and Beverley Minster (Blair 2005: 223). Ecclesiastical furnishings did honor primarily to God, but also to their patrons. They could also on occasion serve a wider social purpose, as in the case of the benches and choir stalls recorded in the Florentine Benedictine convent of San Pier Maggiore. These items of furniture, installed in the fourteenth century, and recorded in inventories prior to their removal in the early sixteenth century, were commissioned by elite laymen living in the neighborhood surrounding the church. They were not employed solely for devotional purposes, as it seems that they were the site for local community gatherings of these male citizens.<sup>1</sup>

The expansion of a middle class, largely due to trade and mercantile growth between the late fourteenth century and the middle of the seventeenth century ensured that furniture moved from the almost exclusive possession of the lay and clerical elite into the hands of the middling sort. It seems that most members of the middle ranks of European society from the later fifteenth century onwards possessed items of furniture. And, although the documentary record is much richer and more informative about the possessions of royalty, noblemen and the richest of merchants – and most surviving items of furniture were made for those at the top of the social scale - it is also evident from inventories, court records and other sources that furniture was also owned, and certainly used, by many of those far below them in the social hierarchy. The extent of furnishings and the layout of rooms in a dwelling varied largely depending on economic level and the needs of the occupants, but throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, there was an increase in the types of furniture to serve specific needs, used across a widening social spectrum (Ariès and Duby 1998: 172-84). Furniture varied according to status: peasants and the urban poor slept on straw mats, while the urban middle classes and aristocrats were likely to own different varieties of beds,

from simple beds used solely for sleeping in to ‘day beds’ and even grand ceremonial structures in which they might receive family members or specifically invited guests.

Well into the sixteenth century, the regular travel of monarchs, senior clerics and noblemen between a series of residences meant that their most valuable possessions were generally of a size and flexibility that they could be packed up and transported without the danger of extensive damage. The fact that private devotional paintings – which could also be classified as quasi-liturgical furniture – were often hinged until the sixteenth century so that the central, most significant elements could be protected from chance damage is also significant (Dunkerton et al. 1991: 68). Triptychs or diptychs, assemblies of three or two sacred stories, usually painted on wood, or carved in ivory, were distinctly portable. While small scale folding paintings, such as the ‘(i)cone’ or panel painting commissioned by Queen Sancia of Naples in 1331, seem to have been the preserve of the clergy and the most elevated levels of the laity, the large quantity of surviving diptychs and single panels of Christian devotional subjects in ivory suggest that these had a much wider clientele (Gordon 2011: 379, n. 33). Indeed, the Parisian workshops that dominated the market and fashion for ivory diptychs were operating a mass-production market by the fourteenth century, producing objects of greatly varying quality.

The interior spaces of the home were often transformed through the use of furniture and accompanying textiles, and were thus fluid and transitional entities, becoming sites of display at important points in one’s life, while also acting as the backdrop against which day-to-day household life took place—from birthing children to daily meals. The growth of urban centers in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries meant a burgeoning market for household furnishings, which both gave rise and was influenced by a new attitude to the home and the objects that filled it, resulting in a culture of display (Goldthwaite 1987; Goldthwaite 1993: 153-75; Musacchio 2008: 52-4). Novel textiles, glass, and metalwork coming into Europe from the silk roads as well as new tastes for antique and *all’antica* objects, meant that homes were becoming increasingly places where moveable wealth could be put on display. Such new habits were remarked upon by preachers of the time who condemned the “luxuries” no longer only found in the “palaces of the great, but in the houses of common citizens” including the “size and softness of the beds” painted and gilded with “precious coverlets” (Musacchio 2008: 58). In discussing money, the fifteenth-century

Florentine apothecary and humanist Matteo Palmieri (1406-75) singled out "magnificent dwellings" and the "luxury of living splendidly" as things that were sought not because they were useful in themselves but for comfort and dignity and because they could enhance and ennoble life (Rubin 2007: 38). Palmieri's own life, as recorded in his writings and from documents, shows that he lived out such ideals in his purchasing of domestic furnishings (Sliwka 2015: ch.1)

This accumulation of new furnishings was largely related to a shift that took place within the organization of the home and the changing functions of rooms. In the early medieval house, there was typically one main room equipped with a fire, which could serve as living room, dining room, bedroom and even kitchen. In wealthier households this room, usually referred to as a hall, would still serve as the main space for most activities, from eating and entertaining guests and even work, but the owners might have their own quarters for sleeping often on another storey, with servants using the hall as a place to sleep (or they were given their own quarters depending on the size of the house) (Mercer 1969: 18-21; Ariès and Duby 1988: 60-1). For example, the house of the lord of Ardres in northern France had, in 1129, cellars and granaries on the ground floor, while the first floor was made up of a hall where meetings were held and meals were eaten, flanked by small rooms for the servants, with the "great chamber" reserved for the lord and his lady, with an adjoining room used as a dormitory for the children and servants. Few medieval halls survive, however, to flesh out the documentary record. One of the best preserved is Penshurst Place in Kent, built by the successful London merchant Sir John de Pulteney as his country residence, in the years after 1341, when he received his license to crenellate (to fortify his property). The central hearth, which lit and heated the room, survives in the center of the floor. The screen, which separates the offices from the main body of the hall, is of sixteenth-century manufacture, but it probably replicates an original, earlier structure. Yet even in this grand house we have no evidence of the furnishings – probably because they were far less valuable than the carved wood and stone that made up the structural elements of the hall.

Peasants' homes were far simpler, usually consisting of only one room where a range of activities would take place throughout the day. It has been argued, however, particularly in the case of England, that differences between urban middling households and rural peasants' houses in the medieval period was not simply a case of more rooms and more furniture, but rather was linked to different value systems

(Kowaleski and Goldberg 2008). For example, studies of English inventories from the late medieval period have revealed that choice of investment in types of goods varied depending on social status and thus reveals different priorities, whereby peasant households in the countryside placed emphasis on kitchen tools, for instance, whereas bourgeois homes in urban centers spent more money on a wide range of material culture dedicated to display, from furnishings such as beds to more elaborate dining ware such as silver spoons (the ability to own a variety of cutlery was a sign of wealth) (Goldberg 2008: 124-44). The make-up of the household, that is the people who lived there, also varied depending on profession and social class. In middle-class houses where merchants and artisans lived, a new style of domestic living emerged in the fourteenth century, which combined working and trading with domestic life. This type of household thus comprised parents, children, apprentices and servants, as well as day-laborers who might not actually live there. This in turn required new spatial differentiations within the home that also gave rise to, and influenced, new conceptions of privacy. The one-room house of the poor became ideologically different from the multi-room house, where working, eating and sleeping could take place, if chosen, in different rooms (Riddy 2008: 17).

By the fourteenth century, a marked shift is clearly evident in elite homes. Eating began to take place in the more private chamber, which also served as the main bedroom, while the hall was reserved for larger gatherings. In England, this is reflected in the emergence of withdrawing rooms, such as the "privé parlour" appearing in inventories in London from the 1370s, while the re-location of storerooms—from the cellar connected to the lord's chamber to a room off the main hall—reveal increasingly elaborate and hierarchical rituals around dining that worked to display the lord's generosity and largesse to guests (Kowaleski and Goldberg 2008: 5). In Dijon the 1412 inventory of Jean Suivard demonstrates his chamber served as a place to sleep, eat, cook and receive visitors, rather than the *salle* or hall (Wilson 2016). At the top end of the scale, by the early fourteenth century the chamber at Westminster Palace had achieved a prominence it had not had before, as the King now began to use the chamber as a place to dine, as a refuge from the more public hall (Vale 2001: 60).

Increasingly, the structure of the elite home was becoming even more complex, resulting in new approaches to living, where activities took place in more distinct places, and an increasing need for different

types of furniture to fulfill specific functions, which also reflected new approaches to dining. For instance, the Florentine Jacopo di Rosso's inventory from 1390 reveals that his house had a grand entryway, a wine cellar, two halls (one recorded as "grand"), two bedrooms off each hall, a kitchen, and servants' quarters (Ariès and Duby 1988: 2, 174). Thomas Mocking, a fishmonger in London who died in 1373 had a house with eight rooms, including two chambers, a hall with a fireplace, a storeroom, a parlor, a servant's room, another room with two tables, and a kitchen (Riddy 2008: 24). In the fishmonger's case furniture was designed to be adaptable for the changing function of the rooms depending on the time of day: a trestle table and a folding bed allowed for flexibility. Inventories of elite households from Dijon demonstrate that by the early fifteenth century, living quarters had become more elaborate and the furnishings could vary depending on who was using the spaces (Wilson 2015: 335-59). Jean Aubert, who worked for the Burgundian dukes, for example, had a house in Dijon that spread over three floors with the basement comprising a stable and a cellar. The first floor was subdivided into eight rooms, which served a variety of functions, from eating and sleeping to accounting. The top floor had three rooms, comprised of two chambers, one of which had its own *garde robe* (a more private room used to store valuables). These numerous rooms resulted in numerous and varied furnishings: the rooms on the lower floors were less richly decorated than those on the top floor, which reflects their uses: simpler beds and chests were reserved for Aubert's staff, while the galleries were decorated with tapestries and elaborate chests as a way to display the wealth of the family to those who visited. The chamber attached to the *garde robe* contained a large bed with elaborate tapestry hangings and ornaments, a stool, a chest, a donor portrait, chests of oak and walnut, and a bench. The *garde robe* contained numerous chests as well as a small bed. In the other chamber, there was a bed, a couch with bedcover, a bench with backing, a chest, a small table and two stools, and a variety of books (Wilson 2015: 342). The furnishings were thus much more elaborate on the top floor, the spaces which were specifically used by the family, underlining in some ways a paradox: as rooms became more 'private' their furnishings became more elaborate to display the wealth of the family to those who were fortunate enough to be invited into these spaces.

By the early fifteenth century in cities such as Florence, the building of large family *palazzi* or palaces gave rise to an unprecedented number of rooms, such as the Da Uzzano brothers' palace that

contained thirty rooms across three floors (Ariès and Duby 1988: 2, 174). This expansion of rooms and thus of display furniture was connected to an essential component of building, buying, or furnishing the Renaissance house - the concept of magnificence. In the Italian courts, magnificence was a virtue not only becoming, but expected of a ruler, while in the republics wealthy merchant-banking families such as the Medici (or indeed the less wealthy Matteo Palmieri), used the term to justify outward displays of wealth as contributing to the glory of their city and to the common good (Fraser Jenkins 1970: 162-70; Shepherd 2007: 47-70). The Italian humanists, drawing on classical sources but reinterpreting them for Renaissance society, developed the concept of magnificence further by introducing the notion of splendor, which divided forms of spending and display into public and private. The Neapolitan humanist Giovanni Pontano (1426-1503) described this distinction in the late fifteenth century. He remarked that magnificence is related to "grandeur and concerns buildings, spectacle and gifts, while splendour is primarily concerned with the ornament of the household, the care of the person and with furnishings" (Welch 2002: 214). Pontano dedicated a whole treatise to *On Splendor* (1498), looking closely at a new range of objects that had hitherto been ignored by those writing about magnificence, from knives and goblets to furniture.

By doing so, Pontano praised a virtue (splendor) that was more obtainable for the middling sorts of society than magnificence, thus providing varying ways to display wealth according to one's status. Indeed, display is an underlining theme of Pontano's whole treatise and it provides us with a rich account of the attention given to furniture and the other furnishings of the home. As Pontano points out these could range from the more utilitarian to the ornamental, writing that: "seals, paintings, tapestries, divans, ivory seats, cloth woven with gems, cases and caskets variously painted in the Arabic manner, little vases of crystal and other things of this type with which the house is adorned [...] bring prestige to the owner of the house, when they are seen by the many who frequent his house" (Pontano 1999; translated in Welch 2002: 215). Pontano thus underlines the more "public" roles such "private" furnishings could perform. As was often the case in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Pontano discusses furnishings and furniture together, which demonstrates how these societies did not always see a distinction between the ornaments of the home and pieces of furniture.

Display and the reception of visitors were crucial components in the choice, look, types, and decoration of household furnishings, which could convey symbolic messages to those who visited, used, and experienced the furniture in a home. The tailoring of furniture with coats of arms or portraits further personalized these pieces. But furniture, like furnishings in general, were often moveable objects and therefore multi-purpose. Elite furniture was an integral part of display, whether it was a piece designated specifically for the display of goods which reflected the owner's material wealth, such as a *credenza* (sideboard/buffet), or one meant for the display of a particular body (an heir or a person of standing) such as a state cradle or a *lettuccio* (daybed). For Mimi Hellman, furniture is a social actor, which when used sets up a mutual relationship between itself and the body that uses it, resulting in a "joint performance" by both the person and the thing. For example, the particular nature of a daybed could further the sociability of the object, as one gave audience from it or received visitors, thus as Hellman argues, furniture "shape[s] the form and content of social exchange" rather than merely acting as a backdrop (Hellmann 1999: 416). Although Hellman writes primarily about eighteenth-century France, her model also has utility for the study of medieval and Renaissance furniture, which was also used for sociability and display.

Special occasions called for the display and performative roles of these objects to come to the fore, but many of the same items had a function in everyday life. It was this social interaction between inanimate objects and subjects that brought these articles of furniture to life, endowing both the user and the thing itself with higher status and importance. A chair is just a chair, until placed at the head of a table—the user gains status and recognition by its placement while the chair takes on new meaning as being occupied by a person of standing. Similarly, a bed might just be a bed that one sleeps in, until it is used in ritual and becomes the site of festivity, for instance when a mother lies in it to receive friends, family, and business associates at the birth of her child. At this point it takes on new meaning and becomes a site of display, functioning as a mediator and a source of assembly, association, and conversation (Appadurai 1986; Campbell 2013, 2014).<sup>2</sup> This social performance alludes to the ways that one piece of furniture could often serve different functions and underscores how approaching furniture in terms of typologies often sidesteps the multifaceted ways in which furniture was used, adapted, and transformed.

## PRIMARY SOURCES AND DISPLAY

A closer look at contemporary accounts of the use of furniture reveals its performative nature. For example, there is a group of primary sources detailing the suites of furniture provided for the Neapolitan princess Eleanora d'Aragona on her visit to Rome in 1473. In these documents, some objects are singled out as being special or noteworthy as individual items while others are listed as part of a larger ensemble. This example is useful in understanding the variety of furniture—from *credenze* to beds—that were ornamented with textiles, pillows, and other decorations, in a number of separate yet interconnecting spaces.

In June 1473 Eleonora, the daughter of King Ferrante of Naples, was hosted in Rome for several days by Pope Sixtus IV and his nephews (the cardinals Pietro Riario and Giuliano della Rovere), as part of her bridal procession from Naples to the court of her new husband Ercole d'Este in Ferrara. Numerous festivities and banquets were arranged for Eleonora's retinue and the Ferrarese contingent accompanying her who were all lavishly housed by the pope. In the two letters and a diary recording the event, attention is given to describing the furniture, which adorned both the temporary structure and the permanent palace. A temporary wooden building erected in the piazza flanking the Roman church of SS. Apostoli connected the palaces of the Riario and della Rovere families, and was the site of banquets and festivities, while Eleonora's accommodation amounted to over 14 rooms in the nearby Riario palace.<sup>2</sup> These documents are scrupulous in their detail, revealing the importance attached to the display of furniture and the social function of the decorative arts. On the Monday, as a Ferrarese courtier tells us, a feast was served in one of the large rooms temporarily erected outside in the piazza, which displayed "an enormous credenza with twelve shelves full of, even overloaded with, great vessels of silver and gold with so many precious stones that it was miraculous to look at; but what was even more stupendous was that even with so many dishes served and so many varieties of those ... there was always enough silver and nothing was ever moved from the credenza" (Licht 1996: 20). As discussed below, the *credenza* was a piece of furniture dedicated to display and the number of stages or shelves was indicative of one's status, as were the things displayed upon it. Pope Sixtus IV not only wanted to reflect his own power and status, but also that of Eleonora d'Aragona and by extension, that of her father and her husband, the King of Naples and the Duke of Ferrara respectively—both of whom were imbricated in political ties with the pope.

The suite of apartments was also key in displaying the host's (in this case Pietro Riario's and by proxy the pope's) as well as Eleonora d'Aragona and her family's wealth and power. Eleonora's accommodation was arranged on the *piano nobile* of Riario's palazzo and the accounts provide us with a detailed description of the layout of the rooms and their contents, including furniture and textiles. As exemplified by these accounts, contemporaries often focused on describing the textiles that decorated pieces of furniture rather than the furniture itself, and did not often make a distinction between the two. For example, one bedroom off the chapel contained a bed, which one visitor described as having:

a mattress of blue Venetian silk, two covers of white damask, and another cover of crimson cut-velvet that covered the whole bed clear down to the ground. Above there was a canopy and curtains of white damask with golden fringe, a blue headboard, four cushions of gold and four of violet velvet, then two others of violet velvet and two of green velvet ... Also in this room, folded above the chest, was a cover of violet velvet lined with green velvet.

(quoted in Licht 1996: 15-6)

In addition, there were two chairs covered in green velvet, that were repeatedly singled out as individual items worth describing, estimated by those who viewed them to be worth 600 ducats each, an enormous sum for the time (Bryant 2012: 365). In a letter, Eleonora d'Aragona noted that all the rooms were covered with tapestries on the walls and carpets on the floor. She also made sure to note that on the evening before they departed, Cardinal Riario sent one of his servants with the keys to the chests in the rooms, and showed the guests all of their contents, which revealed curtains and long robes in fine materials. The viewing of these textiles apparently lasted close to six hours, which caused Eleonora to claim that by the end they were so bored they "begged those servants not to show [them] any more" even though the "silk brocades were really perfect and very worthy" (Licht 1996: 20). Such a description demonstrates how furniture—chests in this case—were used to house precious furnishings such as textiles and became part of the display process. Opening the lid would reveal hidden treasures within, underlining not only a bodily engagement with the piece of furniture as the lid was lifted, but a performative act within social rituals of display as well as secrecy.

Descriptions of furniture, their contents, and the decoration of rooms—from *credenze* to beds to chairs to chests to textiles—demonstrate the ways early modern viewers paid close attention to their material surroundings. On such occasions, display was paramount and furniture did not play a background role, but indeed a central one in displaying magnificence and denoting status. This was not only apparent for those present, but became a crucial element in the reports that would be sent to family, rulers, friends, and allies, which could either ruin or bolster reputations. For example, ambassadors' reports and letters from guests who visited a palace provide us with crucial information on what visitors were supposed to pick up on and often describe both the display of furniture and the display of objects on (and in) furniture. *Ricordanze* (diaries) and account books indicate how much these pieces and their decorations cost (either new or second hand), and also often provide us with the motive behind these purchases, such as pride, honor, and status, which were then materially translated into the furnishings purchased and used.

### **FUNCTIONS AND TYPES OF DISPLAY**

Extremely lavish displays of textiles and *credenze* such as those described in Rome were usually restricted to special events—coronations, marriages, and births, for instance—and were generally limited to the upper echelons of society, although less lavish displays were also increasingly becoming common among the middling sort. In Renaissance Italy, the time of greatest financial outlay in terms of furnishing one's home was at marriage when a groom would furnish his apartment with important pieces of furniture—the most luxurious suites comprised a bed, a *lettuccio* (daybed), and marriage chests to welcome his new wife, although this custom was not restricted to Italy (French and German prints and poems suggest this also took place in other countries) (Lydecker 1987: 112-24; Campbell 2009; Musacchio 2008: 51). The wedding feast itself would require the use of particular types of furniture from tables and chairs (or stools) to a *credenza* to display the wealth of the family. The lifecycle also called for different uses and displays of furniture—from the nuptial bed where the marriage would be consummated to the use of the same bed (or an additional daybed) for a new mother to lie in and receive visitors when celebrating the birth of an heir, who would often be displayed in a cradle. Furniture could serve differing forms of display—from the display of bodies to the display of things.

*Displaying worldly goods*

New trade routes, voyages of exploration, and diplomatic negotiations throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries meant that European interiors soon had a proliferation of objects that required new types of furniture to accommodate them. The furniture and the spaces used to exhibit such objects was also linked to new ways of approaching the material world. Marvellous objects that represented the miraculous works of God, from relics of saints and precious stones to elephant tusks, ostrich eggs, and unicorn horns, were commonly housed in church treasuries in the medieval period. In the Renaissance, due to increased trade, these items also made their way into patrician and aristocratic homes, becoming part of a secular collecting culture (North 2010; Shelton 1994). This relocation of precious and rare things from the church to the home was not simply a change of setting, but a reflection of shifting attitudes to the world of goods and the world at large.

The increased complexity of interior spaces also gave rise to new functions for rooms, such as the emergence of the study. In Europe, collectors built dedicated spaces in their homes to display a variety of objects. In Italy, this room or study was usually referred to as a *studiolo* and emerged in the fifteenth century, while in German-speaking countries such a room became popular in the sixteenth century and was called a *Kunstammer* (chamber of art) or *Wunderkammer* (chamber of wonders) (Kauffman 1994; Thornton 1997). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these spaces were also called cabinets of curiosities—a reference to the furniture which displayed ‘curiosities’ as well as the inquisitive impetus behind collecting (Impey and Macgregor 1997).

European collecting spaces and the furniture that filled them took many forms. Aristocratic families who ruled courts acquired goods to reflect their magnificence and power, as well as to demonstrate taste and knowledge, dedicating whole rooms to collecting where the walls were decorated with complex painting programmes and cabinets filled with precious objects. Increasingly, collecting became a pastime that merchants, humanists and others increasingly undertook, where goods were collected and displayed to show sophistication, worldly knowledge and a successful business. In homes of the middling sorts, a closet or a small room could serve as a study and a collecting space, similar to a monastic cell. But many middle-class

homes simply housed their collectibles in one part of the bedchamber or throughout their home, placed on shelves, above doorframes and in cabinets.

The types of furniture built to showcase collections are often described in inventories. Small collectibles such as gems, coins, and plaquettes were displayed in a wide range of forms—some dangling on strings and attached to shelves, while others were kept in caskets, boxes, and bags, which in turn were then placed in chests, desks, and cabinets. Indeed, furniture was sometimes used to hide objects rather than display them, which added to the allure of the objects and the process of viewership and handling when they were finally taken out of their compartments and exhibited for the viewer. A Ferrarese collector described his cabinet (referring here to a piece of furniture rather than a room) in the sixteenth century as ‘very beautiful, made of walnut, with many secret compartments and little drawers, some of which are made in cypress wood’ (Thornton 1997: 70). The 1494 inventory of the Este in Ferrara listed 437 coins (or medals?) of various sizes displayed on ‘nineteen wooden panels’ (Archivio di Stato di Modena, Guardaroba 117 55R; Syson 2002b: 241). The 1559 inventory of the Este possessions in the *camerini*, the rooms that Duke Alfonso d’Este famously renovated in Ferrara, indicate that Titian’s *Christ with the Coin*, located in the *camerino adorato* served as the cover to the coins and medals cabinet, indicating how paintings might be integral to the furniture and serve an iconographic purpose (Nygren 2016: 455). Throughout the other rooms, furniture was used as a means to display the collections such as the wood table on which various silver and gold vases ‘for drinking water’ were placed, in addition to the inkwell, wooden boxes with portraits on them, and four metal portraits of the King and Queen of Poland that were also placed on the table (Marchesi 2012). From the middle of the sixteenth century, cabinets had become rather complex pieces of furniture, and their drawings were circulated amongst the elite. Gerolamo Garimberto, the archaeological adviser to Cesare Gonzaga describes in detail the design of a cabinet from 1564, which was

‘very beautiful and rich in fine stones and accompanied by those [alabaster] columns [...] which [...] have turned out to be very lovely and beautiful [...] Put together with the ornament of many ancient figurines, the cabinet has proved a great success’ (Thornton 1997: 70).

Dedicated built-in cabinets within a *studiolo* could be extremely elaborate, such as the intarsia cabinets in the *studioli* of the Montefeltro at Urbino and Gubbio from the end of the fifteenth century (Figure 6.1).

Here, the intricate intarsia (inlaid wood) decorations, a craft first developed in church interiors, depict the types of objects held within the cabinets—from musical to scientific instruments. These representations are indeed extremely complex, operating as cerebral games, while also playing on the viewer's perception of space (Kirkbride 2008). While some of these were indeed doors that could be opened, the walls are largely *trompe l'oeil*—doors that pretend to be open and benches that appear functional, but are entirely fictitious. The intarsia here could be said to *perform* furniture, making the viewer aware of the functions of furniture in such spaces.

Representations of saints in their studies often depict an ideal *studiolo*, a quiet place for contemplation and devotion, well-furnished with a desk, shelves, and cabinets that house books, writing utensils, and collectibles. A woodcut by Albrecht Dürer for example (Figure 6.2), shows Saint Jerome in a study, possibly located in a bedroom, where shelves display candlesticks, glass vessels, and books, while the desk provides a place to read and write as well as additional storage where scissors and writing implements are attached. In front of the desk is a chest with a pillow on it, serving the dual function of seating as well as storage. The walls are also used to display paternoster beads, an hourglass, letters and brushes.

Goods of course were also displayed in shops, spaces that served as semi-public rooms, sometimes on the ground floor of a residence. A painting by Petrus Christus (Figure 6.3) of a goldsmith in his shop displays many similar objects that might be found in a study, arranged on shelves to showcase the merchandise to the viewer. Vases on the top shelf are similar to those that would be found on *credenze*. Indeed, it has been suggested that this painting is a portrait of Willem van Vleuten, a Bruges goldsmith who worked for Philip the Good, duke of Burgundy who was known for his lavish services. On the shelf below are a range of goods from the natural world (coral and a nut set into a mount) as well as jewellery and a reliquary. The presence of a curtain suggests it could be drawn to protect the goods. The counter provides a means to distinguish between the outside world and the interior of the shop, while also serving as a place to weigh wares. This threshold is further underlined by the mirror, which reflects the outside world of the public square.

One particularly instructive example of the public and sociable dimension of mercantile spaces is the apothecary shop or pharmacy, which in the sixteenth century became was a comfortable place to gather,

converse and even exchange news (de Vivo 2007). These shops might even be seen as the precursors to the coffee houses or salons of the eighteenth century, whereby individuals did not just purchase objects from a counter, but indeed lingered, discussed and even gambled and played chess, suggesting there was furniture in place to do so (De Vivo 2007: 508-9). Indeed, benches and stools in descriptions of pharmacies suggest they encouraged lingering, although such furniture could also serve the activities associated with the apothecary, such as seats and writing desks, which were used by doctors who saw their patients in the shop. In barbers' shops, where activities associated with medicine could take place, such as blood-letting alongside the cutting of hair, rooms were lavishly furnished and decorated with pictures and antiquities, suggesting it was a comfortable, even homely space, and would have reflected the successful business of the owner.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, apothecaries also served as cabinets of curiosities, furnished with shelves to display rare specimens and objects, from 'unicorn horns' (narharawal tusks) to stuffed crocodiles, operating as a proto-museum, where cases were specifically tailored for this sort of display. In the fifteenth century, textual and visual evidence suggests that shelves in apothecary shops were specifically built to display the colourful *albarelli* which housed spices, while built-in counters facilitated the weighing of ingredients and attendance to customers. In contrast, the furniture of itinerant apothecaries and other street sellers appear in numerous literary references as promoting a chaotic form of mobility, where individuals might stand up on their bench and shout to, or even grab, passers-by. The bench, however was a piece of furniture that authorities hoped could also control chaos, such as the decree from 1507 in Venice which stated that bread sellers were not to 'shout and thrust bread at clients, they must stand with composure behind their *bancone*' (Welch 200: 132). In some instances, furniture could be made from the merchandise itself, such as a grocer who used parmesan cheese rounds as seats for some customers who wanted to play cards. Such furniture—temporary or sedentary—which encouraged customers to linger might have also served as a form of display for the merchant. By flaunting their clientele, it could indicate to potential customers that it was a successful business where clients were happy to return and linger.

Furniture such as chests, which were used to store and transport goods, became moveable display pieces in themselves and are recorded in all types of spaces—from bedrooms to studies to ecclesiastical settings.

The chest is a broad term with which to describe a wide variety of individual types of object. They could be immensely simple, or highly decorated, such as with delicate intarsia work, pastiglia (objects decorated with lead-based paste), carving (whether metal, wood, or ivory) or painting (Paolini 2006: 120-1). Chests were commissioned by secular or ecclesiastical magnates, for cathedrals and for churches; for colleges and other collective bodies, and by more modest individuals; for instance an Anglo-French manuscript of the mid-thirteenth-century shows a chest in use as a merchant's trading counter (Tracy 1987: 119, 278, cat. 204). A late medieval inventory at Château Cornillon in Burgundy records a total of seventy-four chests in forty-two chambers or offices (Eames 1977: 108, n. 280). Chests often marked the change in status associated with the removal of women from their father's care to their new, marital family (even if they were not commissioned by the bride's family). A nun, leaving her father to be the "bride of Christ" would also be furnished with a chest, decorated appropriately for her particular circumstances. Those women entering a secular marriage might use bundles or baskets to move their possessions, but on entering their husband's houses, chests would be provided to store these (and other) items (Rubin 2007: 362-4, with a summary of the preceding literature).

Chests were decorated according to wealth or status, and depending to the fashions and customs of each region or nation of Europe. In England and France, for instance, chests were most usually made of oak, and carved, the decoration following pattern books or prints, or even architectural tracery (Tracy 1988: 172-9; Neuschel 1998: 595-622; Thirion 1998: 76). In Italy, there was a greater variety of decoration. Chests could be carved, but they were also (particularly during the fifteenth century) decorated with painted elements. In Italian, these highly worked and fine-quality chests were known as *forzieri* - regardless of their decoration. This word, which has sometimes been translated into English as 'great chests', refers to the fact that they were supplied with a lock, often placed in the center of the front panel of the chest (Paolini 2006: 120). Although painted chests were a rarity in France, Germany and the British Isles, their production flourished in much of Italy from the late fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries. Chests decorated with fine painting are documented all over the peninsula, but few have survived (either in totality, or simply their painted sections) outside Tuscany, Venice and the Veneto (Baskins 2008; Campbell 2009; Rutherglen 2012).

The mixed function of chests was closely connected to their location. Inventories of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries show that chests could be found in most household rooms, but painted chests were intended for spaces which had designated public and private purposes (Lindow 2007: 119-52). In fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Florence we know that pairs of painted chests were often destined for the *camera*, or chamber, a room which was often the focus of substantial redecoration by a male patrician around the time of his first marriage, a moment when he was often emancipated from his father's control. From surviving inventories, it is clear that these pairs of objects (such as Figure 6.4) were among the most costly moveable items commissioned at this moment in a young man's life (Lydecker 1987; Preyer 2006: 40-1).

The subjects narrated on the fronts and sides of these chests were drawn from a repertoire of storytelling which drew both on popular and oral as well as intellectual and written culture (Campbell 2009: 31-47; Bayer 2008: 230-8). The central Italian artist and historian, Giorgio Vasari, writing in the late 1560s, and the first person to accord any intellectual status or merit to painted chests, commented in the "Life of Dello Delli" (who he describes as a specialist in painted furniture) that "for the most part they told tales from Ovid and other stories" (Vasari 1966: 38). The range was in fact somewhat greater, encompassing Greek and Roman mythology, ancient and modern history (Lucretia's suicide was particularly popular, see (Figure 6.5)), the Old Testament, and more contemporary poetry, including the works of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. The thread linking those subjects which were deemed acceptable for inclusion on chests was that they could, in some sense or other, be linked to marriage (Bayer 2008: 230-8; Campbell 2009: 1-19; Bayer 2008: 303-6). These pictures, like the chests they adorned, were also intended to be noticed, and commented on. There is some evidence to suggest that they were utilised, on occasion, to instruct their users - children, as well as adults - in ways of thinking and behaviour which were appropriate to their familial status, gender and their role within the household (Campbell 2009: 45, 73; Baskins 2008). And one of their most important performative functions was to cast honour upon the families who were participating in the marriage alliances that occasioned their production. Chests were often decorated with heraldry, and *imprese* (intellectual symbols and visual conceits associated with a particular individual) (Paolini 2006: 120). Indeed, the way in which these chests could stand as physical memories of a particular alliance probably explains the reluctance

of many Italian families to sell or dispose of painted chests, even after they had long ceased to be items of furniture in general use (Campbell 2009: 41).

### *Displaying the Body*

Furniture which was used specifically to serve the body, such as beds, also became symbolic objects as they functioned within rituals. Beds varied in their decoration, but monumental beds and daybeds were a sign of prestige and were often an imposing presence in a room, and like chests were often adorned with family arms, painted decoration or intarsia, which could convey symbolic meaning (Figure 6.6) (Ariés and Duby 1988: 106-14). Types of beds of course varied depending on social status. Owning a bed in itself was seen as a sign of particular standing, as large portions of society in the medieval and Renaissance periods simply slept on straw mats. A variety of types of beds could thus be found in the same household—simple beds on the ground floor for servants and household staff, while more elaborated beds with coverings and tapestries could be found in the upper rooms, as is evidenced from some of the inventories already mentioned.

In royal circles, there was a distinction between display (state) furniture and furniture that was meant to be functionally used. In England by the Tudor period, the three pieces of state furniture comprised the bed, the seat of authority and the buffet, all of which were singled out especially in household regulations as items not to be touched by anyone except the King (Thurley 1993: 234). Beds of state were not always meant to be slept in, but simply to be displayed or used during ceremony. State beds across Europe, like other luxury pieces of furniture such as thrones, cradles, chairs and daybeds, were often marked by a large canopy indicating privilege, prestige, and status. These canopies were sometimes designed by court painters, such as the one designed by Cosmé Tura of Ferrara for Duke Ercole d'Este, and they could also feature in sumptuary legislation, underlining their ability to convey signs of wealth and display status (Thornton 1991: 129, 133; Morley 1999: 77). One of the earliest records of an English state bed dates to the 1240s made for Henry III for his bedchamber at Westminster Palace where he would give audience and hold meetings with council. Above the bed was a large wall painting from the 1260s, which depicted the coronation of the king's predecessor, Edward the Confessor, providing a clear symbolic message and a powerful visual

connection between the two rulers (Eames 1977: 75; Vale 2001: 64). By the time of Henry VIII, state beds had become so elaborate that they were merely used for the ritual of going to bed and rising in the morning, and the King would sleep in smaller, more comfortable beds elsewhere (Thurley 1993: 235-6). In 1380, when King Charles of France was dying, he was transported from his everyday bed into his state bed in his private bedchamber, where he could die with respect and honor (if less comfort) (Thornton 1991: 41).

Beds and *lettucci* could also be used to receive visitors when ill, as attested by a print from Savonarola's *The Art of Dying Well* (Figure 6.6), which shows a sick man reclining on his bed while visitors come to attend to him (Thornton 1991: 148). There was not always a clear distinction between beds and furniture for sitting, especially during the day, when beds were often used to receive visitors as chairs of state by elites. The large chests around beds also often provided seating for visitors. Throughout the centuries it was not uncommon for the pope to receive guests in his bedchamber, sometimes receiving them while he was in bed, such as in 1238 when a Franciscan from Germany, Jordon of Ciano visited the pope or in 1526 when Isabella d'Este was given audience by the pope in his bedchamber (Mercer 1969: 63; Thornton 1991: 294).

*Lettucci* had multiple functions, as they could be used to lie or sit down as a daybed. Visual imagery suggests that when used by royalty, they could serve as a piece of furniture from which to give audience, and displaying the authority of the ruling family. For example, a print from the late fifteenth century depicts (Figure 6.7) King Solomon giving audience from his *lettuccio* decorated with lavish textiles, using it as a quasi-throne, (Mercer 1969: 74; Trionfi Honorati 1981: 40; Thornton 1991: 148). *Lettucci* were certainly gifts worthy for a king, as Filippo Strozzi the Florentine merchant-banker commissioned a *lettuccio* depicting a view of Naples from Benedetto da Maiano in 1473 to give to King Ferrante d'Aragona of Naples, where it was highly admired and sparked a taste for *lettucci* in that city (Borsook 1970: 14; del Treppo 1994: 488-9; Clark 2009: 146-69). The following year, Filippo sent some additions to the *lettuccio*, including textiles, noting that these "adornments" will make the "beautiful *lettuccio* ... even more beautiful" demonstrating how important the accoutrements were for furniture (del Treppo 1994: 489; Santoro 2000: 45). Beds, too were conceived as prestigious gifts: John de Vere, thirteenth earl of Oxford was given one as

part of his fee for acting as Lord Great Chamberlain at Henry VII's coronation, while Henry VIII received a "rich bed" in 1529 from Francis I of France (Stratford 1993: 85; Thurley 1993: 234).

The throne-like quality of the *lettuccio* played upon the historic significance of the seat of honor, seen as a place of privilege on which the sovereign, judge, or bishop sat (Eames 1977: 181). Such symbolic seats usually had a religious significance alluding to the throne of Solomon, and in the medieval period frequently appeared in church space to mark earthly and heavenly authority. Some examples of these seats still exist such as the well-known Throne of Maximian in Ravenna from the middle of the sixth century; the tenth-century throne in the palace chapel at Aachen; or the later thirteenth-century Archbishop's throne in Canterbury Cathedral (Reeve 2003: 131-42). It is these sorts of wooden boarded seats with high backs that also appear in medieval manuscript illumination, occupied by religious figures from Mary to the evangelists, underlining their symbolic function.

The social nature and display function of beds and *lettucci* in the Renaissance are highlighted when one considers the reception of visitors coming to see a new mother in bed as commonly seen in depictions of biblical births, where furniture was used not only to display the mother and baby, but also the material culture of the family—from *deschi da parto* (painted birth trays) to maiolica bowls. As bedchambers were not intended only for sleeping but could be the focal point of special events such as marriages, births, funerals, and more casual receptions, the furniture and the decorations in those spaces were meant to be viewed by more than just the individuals who might sleep there (Preyer 1998: 357-74).

Cradles too were important markers of status and were integral to rituals associated with different stages of life for both the aristocracy and the middle classes. Cradles for show were used in houses of the elite in republics, as more than one cradle can be found in inventories in Venice, often one in a nurse's or servants room, while more lavishly decorated ones could be found in the greater *camera* (Fortini Brown 2004: 77, 81, 96). Cradles belonging to royal babies were elaborately decorated, intended to impress and dazzle, and to reflect the status of the heir as well as the family. These were almost always intended only for display and ceremonial purposes, while more practical cradles, usually lower to the ground were actually used for nursing and tending to the child. In 1403, Margaret of Flanders, Duchess of Burgundy purchased two cradles, "1 of state and the other for rocking and feeding the said infant." The accounts for the state

cradle record fine textiles including crimson and 1,2000 ermine skins, as well as the cost of burnished gold for the painting of the coat of arms as decoration (Eames 1977: 97). An English manuscript dating from the fifteenth century, *The Christening of a Prince or Princess* stresses the need for two cradles; the "cradell of Estate" was distinguished as larger and more richly decorated (Mercer 1969: 81).

Cradles were central to rituals around births and baptisms, often accompanied by feasting and other festivities in royal courts, and they could often be lavish gifts of state in themselves. Duke Borso d'Este of Ferrara paid his court painter to decorate a cradle with stars, a Madonna and Child, Saint Francis, an Annunciation, and Saint George along with foliage and the arms of Borso, which he gifted to his sister Isotta who was married and living in Croatia (Thornton 1991: 97). Such a gift would reflect the status of both giver and receiver, as well as the child. In 1493 Eleonora d'Aragona wrote home from Milan to her husband, Duke Ercole d'Este in Ferrara about the cradle they had given to the son of their daughter Beatrice d'Este and Ludovico Sforza, commenting that all the ambassadors and gentlemen had come to admire it, while it was displayed in the *camera del thesoro* (Archivio di Stato di Modena, C&S 131-2, 1683 x-34). Such an item was not only meant to display the child, but also to reflect the magnificence of his grandparents and his parents. Ludovico Sforza estimated the gift at 8,000-10,000 ducats an incredible sum, but this was surely an exaggeration. The cradle itself likely cost below 400, but the cloth furnishings and accoutrements would have cost more than 3,500, so lavish were they that they were later displayed on tables set up in the treasury (Tuohy 1996: 233). This was not the only state cradle the baby used, as another one of Milanese manufacture was also displayed nearby in a *camera del putino*, which was completely gilded with four columns and a large canopy (*spavero*) with gold cords and blue silk. It stood next to a great bed decorated with Sforza devices and a canopied *lettuccio*, from either of which the mother, Beatrice d'Este, likely received visitors. The Milanese cradle was described by a Ferrarese lady-in-waiting to Eleonora d'Aragona as "bellissima" but she made sure to note that the Ferrarese cradle was also on display and was "worthy of an emperor"—both were presumably state cradles, which reflected their respective courts (Thornton 1991: 253; Welch 1995: 226-7, 319, n 84). Birthing rituals also gave the family the opportunity to show off their material wealth, either through the display and use of the furniture in their home, or for the higher echelons

of society, through the display of treasury items and the practice of guided tours of the palace to visiting dignitaries.

### *Displaying honor and wealth*

*Credenze* in Italy (buffets in England and *dressoirs* in France) were a particular piece of furniture which emerged to coincide with the increasing emphasis on display, especially in dining rituals. *Credenze* were made specifically to display precious vessels, some of which were only collected to testify to their owner's wealth rather than to be used in dining. It was significant events that would require that the treasures of the household to be removed from lock and key and to be put on display to reflect the status and honour of the family. It is striking that few of these valuable objects have survived, perhaps due as much to their fragility as well as their material value if melted down, we have many accounts of and descriptions of the less costly items of furniture on which they were displayed. *Dressoirs* appear regularly in manuscript illumination depicting activities associated with the Burgundian court, which highlights their symbolic function and the status they hoped to convey (Figure 6.8). Like beds and thrones, they were often accompanied by lavish canopies made out of expensive textiles.

The close relationship between the display of the heir and the display of wealth is evident in the fact that the treasury also served as the "antechamber to the illustrious birthing chamber" during the 1493 Sforza birth festivities in Milan, where a *credenza* of silver vases was shown off to visitors (Welch 1995: 223-5). Ludovico Sforza presumably wanted to take advantage of showing off his wealth, his heir, and his wife to ambassadors and fellow princes, but such an arrangement was fairly common in Sforza and Visconti castles where the women's quarters were traditionally placed next to the treasury. This arrangement would have served both a symbolic and practical function, as a lady in waiting at the birth ceremony commented that "each room had its own doormen and its own seneschal and its own guards for each bed," underlining the need to safeguard the duchess's chastity and the duke's wealth (Welch 1995: 225-7). Similarly, at the court of Burgundy in 1457, the room in which the duchess gave birth to Mary of Burgundy also contained a *dressoir* with tiers "fully charged with rock crystal vessels set in gold and studded with gems, and there were vessels of pure gold... all the most precious vessels of duke Philip the Good were there, ...which were never

put on display except for such occasions" (Helfenstein 2013: 432-6). In middle-class Renaissance homes it was also common to store treasures in the bedchamber, as Alberti instructed "where they are safe from fire and other natural disaster, and where I can frequently, whether for my pleasure or to check them over, shut myself up alone or with whomever I choose while giving no cause for undue curiosity to those outside" (Alberti 1956: 207-20; Musacchio 2008: 105-6).

*Credenze* were also used by the merchant classes, especially in Florence, where numerous *cassoni* and *spalliere* (painted backboards or wainscoting) depicting marriage feasts show the *credenza* on central display, alluding to the ways the *credenza* and the objects on it were part of the staging of identity within the theatrical performance of social life and its rituals, and it is not surprising that the number of stages and the vessels displayed figured in sumptuary legislation. One or two stages was fairly common amongst the wealthy, but special occasions called for more, such as in 1476 when the Florentines wanted to impress the sons of the King of Naples and the *credenza* was set with nine stages full of silver and gold vases. A similar display at Ferrara impressed Ludovico Sforza so much that he asked Duke Ercole d'Este in 1483 for drawings of his spectacular service (Thornton 1991: 207-9; Syson and Thornton 2001: 65-8; Syson 2002a: 45). In England, a variety of buffets were reported in different rooms from the king's bedchamber to the great hall—some functional while others dedicated to display in ceremonial. On occasions of state, Henry VIII had twelve stages while Cardinal Wolsey in 1527 was reported at Hampton Court to have half that number, which reflected Wolsey's high status while at the same time not daring to rival the king's (Thurley 1993: 242). Marital *credenza* also appear in wedding scenes, such as a well-known *spalliera* by Botticelli, which depicts the final wedding feast in Boccaccio's tale of Nastagio degli Onesti, providing a moral tale around conspicuous consumption (Olsen 1992).

In the courts, visits from foreign dignitaries could also be an excuse to show off a ruler's wealth. A typical tour of an elite palace would involve a visit to the treasury, *studiolo* or chamber where precious stones, gems, vases and jewels would be displayed on tables or cabinets (Thornton 1997; Clark 2013: 171-84). But *credenze*, treasuries, or specific rooms dedicated to collecting such as *studioli* were not the only places where collectibles were displayed; rather tables, shelves, beds, *lettucci* and chests were also used to exhibit or store collections. Inventories and images attest to the display of works of art and other objects on

the ledges of *lettucci*, or attached on the wall above them, while some even had hat pegs to hang things on (see Figure 6.5). Other items for display were incorporated into the structure of the room itself, such as on ledges above doors, constructed cornices running along the wall, or built-in shelves (as in Dürer's woodcut, Figure 6.2) (Smith 1975: 31-40; Braham 1979: 754-63, 65; Thornton 1991: 150-1; Warren 2006: 302; Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis 2006: 272). Among the many *lettucci* in the Medici inventory of 1492 one incorporated cupboards and "caskets" or small chests (*chasette*), which contained arms, armour, cuirasses, daggers, and damascened candlesticks. The same inventory describes a cupboard with seven shelves set into panelling which held a variety of ceramic dishes, including porcelain vases, all of which were evaluated at a considerable sum, suggesting these were precious objects both worthy of display and protection (Kemp 1997: 141). In the *camera d'oro* in the Da Lezze house in sixteenth-century Venice there were two *scrigenti* or cabinets filled with the family's treasures including jewellery, silver cutlery and other wares, while the room also contained a harpsichord, five chairs, a walnut stool for doing needlework, a walnut *cassone* (which contained dresses) and a bed on wheels, suggesting this space was likely used for multiple purposes (Fortini Brown 2004: 77). Caskets or small storage containers could also be purpose-built and valued items of furniture in their own right. The humanist Angelo Poliziano, Secretary to Lorenzo de' Medici, noted that his master's gems had been put in armoires opened for viewing when Cardinal Raffaele Riario visited, underlining the flexibility and use of furniture (Fusco and Corti 2006: 194-5).

#### *Conclusion: Exhibition and Display*

This chapter has outlined how the display function of furniture was closely linked to its performative nature in the medieval period and during the Renaissance. Many items of furniture - from chests to daybeds and cradles to *credenze* - had multi-faceted functions, which were malleable and altered according to context. The interior rooms of the home were likewise not static, but often changed depending on what rituals or activities were taking place in those spaces. Furthermore, some furniture, such as chests were moveable, and thus were used as portable storage items, stationary objects of display, as well as mnemonic and symbolic devices, marking a marriage and often reinstating gender expectations. Sometimes these objects were subjected to immense structural changes, being altered so that they conformed with new fashions, or even in

some cases completely changing form. For instance, a Florentine sale of household furniture in 1549 records two chests which were put together to make a *lettuccio*. Yet even in such radically altered states such objects retained considerable value: the *lettuccio* of this 1549 sale had an estimated price of twenty-eight lire, but it sold for forty (Matchette 2006: 711).

The adaptability and flexibility of Renaissance furniture may explain its durability over the centuries; although the predominance of family symbols and coats of arms on the external surfaces of many of these items must also have been an important factor. Only in recent years, thanks to the development of technical art history, has there been any appreciation of the extent to which most surviving pieces of what purports to be fifteenth- and sixteenth-century furniture were radically reshaped, remade out of existing fragments, or even made from scratch in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chests, which survived in larger numbers than any other category of furniture, have been subject to particularly heavy reconstruction. Many apparently fifteenth-century painted chests were remade in the nineteenth century, out of pieces of damaged yet more historically true objects (Callmann 1999: 338-48). A considerable number were reconstructed, in a small number of Florentine workshops, on the basis of one of the woodcuts made to illustrate Savonarola's *The Art of Dying Well* (Figure 6.6). This shows a chest, displayed as a sideboard, to which an ornately carved *spalliera* has been attached. On the basis of this contemporary print, and one apparently intact pair of chests with their *spalliera* panels (now in the Courtauld Gallery, London, Figure 6.4) it was believed that *cassoni* were always made in conjunction with these backboards. Curiously, the Morelli-Nerli chests and *spalliere* do always seem to have belonged to the same decorative ensemble. They were commissioned in 1472 to mark the marriage of the Florentine patrician Lorenzo Morelli to Vaggia Nerli, and they are recorded as such, although – significantly - with "una spalliera" running above them, in inventories of the Morelli family long into the sixteenth century (Campbell 2009: 73-4). However, in the late nineteenth century, and probably in Florence, the backboards were screwed onto the chests. This made it impossible for the chests to fulfill their original dual purpose as storage chests as well as objects of show and display, as they could no longer be opened without causing damage to the *spalliera* panels (Barraclough 2009: 78-9). This simple but important piece of evidence shows that these items of furniture were no longer configured as they would have been in the late fifteenth century. The alteration to their structure, however, made them

better able to perform their new function, as massive and impressive pieces of Renaissance Florentine furniture, destined for a private or public museum.

The Morelli-Nerli chests are therefore, in their way, a palimpsest of how issues of display and show have continued to impact on Renaissance furniture. Since the late 1940s these objects have been a constant feature of the permanent collection of a leading university art gallery and their prominent public presentation has arguably contributed to the revival of academic interest in Renaissance furniture (Campbell 2009: 69). In their altered state they not only bear witness to the display purpose of much Renaissance furniture, but they show how exhibition and display – in a very different context – remain a constant of these objects' identity, more than five centuries after they were made in late fifteenth-century Italy.

References:

1: The San Pier Maggiore inventories will shortly be published by Joanne Allen, in her forthcoming book on the transformation of Florentine churches in the sixteenth century. We are grateful for her for sharing this material, delivered at a meeting of the National Gallery Research Seminar devoted to San Pier Maggiore, 6 November 2015.

2: There are three authors that record the event: Eleonora d'Aragona in a letter to her former tutor and councilor to the king of Naples, Diomede Carafa (the Count of Maddaloni); Teofilo Calcagnini a Ferrarese courtier writing to Duke Ercole d'Este; and Bernardino Corio. All three share similar reports, noting the lavishness of the banquet and the suites of rooms, although details such as the number of stages on the credenza vary according to each account. For discussions, transcriptions and translations of these documents see Licht 1996: Appendix I & II; Bryant 2012: 365, document 5; Corvisieri 1878: 475-96; 1887: 629-87.