At Home in Renaissance Bruges

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THE MERCHANT IN THE CONTOOR

Introduction

‘Work in the house, or rather the house as a place of work, is a theme that is often evoked but rarely investigated by historians of the pre-industrial period’. The truth of such a statement was already proven in the previous chapter, which showed the growing importance of the late medieval shop at the expense of the market stall, a subject that has so far barely been touched upon. Furthermore, we have also seen that most artisans not only sold their products from their shops but also produced finished and semi-finished goods in a workshop or workhouse at home. So studying these traces of interaction between the functions of production and habitation has been shown to be worthwhile when studying the character of domestic space. And although we have found that these commercial spaces were more or less spatially and socially separated from the rest of the house (on the micro level of the house itself), most artisans and retailers still used their homes as what historians Franco Franceschi and Rafaela Sarti have labelled an ‘instrument of work’.

But houses were often involved in the world of commerce and trade in a different way. Even though taverns, inns and headquarters of companies remained important meeting places, as well as the stock market (‘Beurs’) in Bruges, for national and international merchants and traders, many Bruges merchants and artisans also managed their businesses from home. Even when business transactions were not always concluded on the spot, the business administration and management of the accounts still required a special space in the merchant’s house. Franceschi therefore supposed a strong organic link between the spaces of work and habitation, especially in the houses of merchants.

Many humanist-inspired Renaissance treatises on architecture, the consumption practices of acquisition and the management of the household, such as the Libro dell’arte di mercatura (1498) by Benedetto Cotrugli, ascribed a fundamental role to the home in the running of a company. Besides advice on the necessity of a central location and the representative powers of the exterior of the house, the increasing diffusion of a particular domestic space was discussed in this context as
well, in other words, the setting up of the studiolo, or study. Plenty of books and articles have been written about that specific type of room, which was by no means new in Italian *palazzi* but began to occupy an important place in the Italian merchant’s home during the Renaissance period. Some scholars have even labelled this room ‘the quintessential Renaissance space […] designed to accommodate the secular scholarly pursuits associated with the rise of humanism’, and with a renewed cult of *studiosus* *leisure*, a ‘signature space in an age increasingly obsessed with the fashioning and presentation of the self’ and with an increasing culture of consumption. In other words, according to this research, the study as a room became a personal environment used primarily for the display of especially inner virtue, erudition, intellectual capacities and taste, but also a room that played a role in trade: a room that fully meets the requirements of a humanist scholar-entrepreneur.

It soon became clear, however, that the actual use and character of this room could change according to the wealth and status of the owner and the owner’s daily pursuits. Moreover, although the visual imagery of the period tends to stress the contemplative, religious and private aspects of the room, treating it as a retreat from public (and even domestic) life, the study could also function, directly or indirectly, as a social space ‘in which intellectual ideas are engaged with and exchanged’, just like some of the objects that were on display. Some studies, like those of the members of the Medici family in Florence, were even open to public view and treated as a kind of tourist attraction because of the unique collection of objects they housed, whereas other study rooms were more humble and often had more practical uses. So in some cases, business activities were performed within the study as well, but in other cases, other rooms were used as offices and at least the Italian version of these were, according to Dora Thornton, often small in size and not well suited for any other purpose than ‘to settle correspondence, weigh coins and compile memoranda’.

Comparable to the Italian situation, the *Medieval Dutch Dictionary* makes a clear distinction between *contoor* (i.e. office, derived from the Latin *computare*) and *studoor* (i.e. study, derived from the Latin *studium* or *studere*). So strictly speaking, the *contoor* would match the meaning of the businesslike office, whereas the *studoor* would represent the humanist study. Intriguingly then, when scanning through the Bruges sources, it seems that the Middle Dutch word for ‘study’, *studoor*, was, like the Italian word for ‘office’, virtually non-existent. What we do find in these Bruges sources are references to rooms that were labelled solely as *contoor*. But the inventory of such a *contoor* shows a different type of room from the one Thornton described as the small, cramped offices in the Italian Renaissance merchant houses. So how then
should we interpret the Bruges contoren? If the functionalities of both a businesslike office and a scholarly study were combined in the contoor, then this space was, even more than other spaces, a threshold between ‘outside’-focused and ‘inside’-focused occupations; it would have been a place where the public life of business and commerce and the private world of reading, study and contemplation were deliberately combined. So it is important to study this type of room precisely because we have to question the functionality and the social and spatial connectivity of this room with the rest of the domestic space. Other commercial spaces like the shop and workshop were consciously isolated from the rest of the house and household because of transparency and concerns about product quality imposed by the craft guild, but these spaces were also vital in establishing the image of credibility and status of the artisan or merchant. Was the contoor a consciously – socially and spatially – isolated space as well? And if so, for what reasons?

Most scholarly research, however, has focused on the functions the Italian Renaissance studioli performed. For the Low Countries, similar research efforts to understand and question the existence or use of such specific rooms, presumably named after their function (infra), are practically non-existent.\textsuperscript{15} Indeed, although it has long been assumed that the Italian studiolo was the precursor of the later Kunstkammer and Wunderkammer, there seems to be a gap in our knowledge about the links between rooms like the Bruges contoor and the room types used for displaying and preserving collections of art and naturalia, objects from nature, that appear in early seventeenth-century inventories in the Low Countries.\textsuperscript{16} 

If the Bruges contoren were indeed part of the Renaissance culture of self-fashioning, not only creating and externalising an image of the merchant as an erudite scholar but also and perhaps even more so of the merchant as a business person, then traces of this purpose must be found in the interiors of these rooms, in the objects and constellations of objects that were on display (such as decorative items including paintings, intellectual tools such as maps and books and businesslike materials such as account books, money chests and writing desks). These items were not just emblematic of a culture of consumption and collecting, as Maria Ruvoldt and others argue.\textsuperscript{17} As we saw in the previous chapter on shops and workshops, material objects such as the scales, shears and looms of craftspeople are to be seen not only as repositories of monetary value but also as things that were imbued with meaning. Objects such as paintings, mirrors, maps, account books, quills and books that were both in use and on display in the contoor should therefore be seen as the tools used in practising the trade of commerce and as a means to express the owner’s
status as a business person as well as an emblem of the owner’s ideal self. The focus
must therefore be on the objects that were kept in this specific type of room and not
just on the intellectual activities that were performed there; every item in this type
of room was a messenger to the degree that it appears to have carried meaningful
messages for the user of the room and for occasional visitors. Or as Sven Dupré
puts it, some items were more functionally used in performing tasks and rituals in
that room or outside it; other objects did not have an immediate practical use but
needed to be spoken about.

The Contoor in Bruges

That a contoor was not commonly found in the domestic geography of Bruges hous-
es is clear from the fact that only ten inventories out of a total sample of 502 con-
tained references to a room labelled contoor (or its diminutive, contoirke). Only
two citizens owned two contoren: the front contoor and back contoor in the house
of gilder Adriaen Claeyssins (1569) and the contoirken and the contoorcamere of
widow Anna van der Moere (1596). Most of the contoren were located in houses
that contained a large number of rooms; house sizes in these inventories range from
six to sixteen rooms. So it would follow that the amount of space available in a house
was a clear determining factor in making the choice whether spaces with a presumed
particular functionality – such as the contoor – were to be created. In some cases, the
contoor was probably very small and perhaps a kind of simple pop-up wooden con-
struction that could be placed in another room. This might explain why the contoor of Pieter Hendrick Winkelmans (1595) was, according to the appraiser, located
inside the hall (zaal) and why the contoor of Anna van der Moere, widow of Lieven
Step (1596), was described as “t contoirken nevens de sale.” In the first case, Wink-
elmans’s space in the hall was probably reduced in size by the construction in it of
a second room that had to be more or less separate from the first one. In the second
case, the contoor is probably some sort of small annex to the hall, perhaps not a fully
defined room on its own but more of an extension of the hall. The woodcut of such
a small, wooden construction from the work of the French writer and printer Gilles
Corrozet (fig. 4) may be a good illustration of this pop-up construction (1559). In
the painting by Quentin Metsijs of Erasmus of Rotterdam (1517), the humanist is
probably seated in a similar small room with wooden panel walls (fig. 5).
Fig. 4. Detail of a woodcut ‘le blason de l’estude’, Gilles Corrozot, Les Blasons Domestiques contenantz la décoration d’une maison honneste, et du mesnage estant en icelle, invention joyeuse et moderne, Paris, 1559, © Bibliothèque nationale de France, Rés. Ye-1380, 33

Fig. 5. Erasmus working in a room with wooden shuttering, Portrait of Erasmus of Rotterdam, Quentin Metsijs, 1517, Oil on panel, transferred to canvas, Gallerie Nazionali di Arte Antica, © Roma (MIBACT) - Bibliotheca Hertziana, Istituto Max Planck per la storia dell’arte/Enrico Fontolan
The Italian studiolo was situated in the most private quarters of the palazzi and in the case of the Florentine or Venetian urban elites, mostly in the direct vicinity of the sleeping room.\textsuperscript{25} It was a room that was more or less detached from the rest of the house (and therefore from the other rooms), providing their users with the necessary privacy, peace and tranquillity to immerse themselves in reading and studying, offering the users a chance to invite people of their own choice into the space.\textsuperscript{26} Most of the studioli were therefore located upstairs, away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. But some of the Bruges \textit{contoren} were located downstairs.\textsuperscript{27} Although the description of the precise location of three \textit{contoren} is rather vague, all the other six \textit{contoren} were clearly situated downstairs at ground-floor level. This downstairs position had something to do with the role this type of room fulfilled in the commercially oriented character of the house.

Furthermore, judging from the sources, it would seem debatable whether these \textit{contoren} were detached from the rest of the house, because in the inventories, they were often added together with other rooms (other than sleeping rooms) such as the hall, kitchen, \textit{salette}, dining room, front room and workshop. Looking more closely at the sequence of the rooms, it seems that the \textit{contoren} were either added together with other rooms (like the \textit{contoor} in Winkelmans’s hall) or their exact location was presented as if it was not entirely clear where the room was precisely located. Indeed, in some cases, it seems as if the \textit{contoor} was floating between upstairs and downstairs, lacking a more precise location. That this type of room had a somewhat peculiar position in many houses would seem plausible.

In what follows, we will discuss the \textit{contoren} we have found for Bruges separately to fully grasp their location, layout and functionality. We will start our discussion with the \textit{contoren} that were clearly part of the business environment of the house.

The \textit{Contoor} as Office and Treasury

Marie van Cleven was a silk twiner (\textit{zydereeder}) and lived in a seven-room house in the Steenstraat in Bruges.\textsuperscript{28} An inventory of her possessions was made in 1559 because of a debt. The presence of tools such as silk mills, bobbins and raw silk reveals that Marie van Cleven conducted her activities of silk twining downstairs at the front of the house, in a space that was labelled as the floor (\textit{vloer}). The activity of silk twining was limited to this space, however, because there were no tools for twining or other silk-working activities present elsewhere in the house. Only on the upper
floor did she store some woodwork that was used during production. The house of Van Cleven also contained what was described as a *contoircamerken*, a small room that was mentioned in the inventory right after the back room and before the upper-floor room. Where this *contoor* was actually positioned in the house is difficult to establish: Could it possibly be an office on the landing – between two parts of the stairs? Or a room on a mezzanine floor? But the fact is that Marie used this small room as a storage space for her precious finished goods (bobbins of twined silk), raw materials (*rauwe zijde*) and a scale as well as for storing her household valuables such as a silver salt cellar and two (probably also silver) spoons. In no other room of her house were silver objects found. So although the size of the room was allegedly small (e.g. the diminutive form in *camerken*) and its location uncertain, it was the most valuable room in her house.

We see a similar situation in the house of fellow silk worker Jan De Burggrave (1564), who did not use his *contoor* downstairs as an annex to his commercial space as Marie van Cleven did, but he did use it as a treasury for his valuable silver and hollowware. The finished and raw silk was confined to his workhouse and the room downstairs. Pewter and silver objects were both considered by many citizens as their personal bank accounts. The intrinsic value of both types of objects is rather high (and more or less remained high) depending on the quality of the raw materials, so in times of need, pewter and silver objects could be either melted or pawned for money in pawnshops. When times were good and opportunity arose, the salt cellar, jugs, plates and dishes could be put to use in the dining room or front room (or other places to which guests were invited), impressing the guests by representing the wealth of the family. So it seems that both silk workers used their *contooren* for no other purpose than as a treasury and safe. And although the *contooren* were in both cases probably located somewhere downstairs and were spatially (in the case of Jan De Burggrave) and functionally (in the case of Marie van Cleven) linked with their professional activities and with commerce, it seems that the spaces were not meant to be accessed by anybody other than Marie and Jan themselves.

However, Marie van Cleven was not the only one who used her *contoor* as an annex to her commercial or manufacturing space in the house. Gilder Adriaen Claeyssins (1569) inhabited a house with at least eight rooms, situated in the Langestraat in Bruges. He was one of the few citizens who had not one but two *contooren* in his house, both serving different purposes and occupying different locations in the dwelling. His *voor contoor* or ‘front’ *contoor* was indeed probably situated at the front of the house and served the purpose of the type of office Thornton described earlier,
in other words, a place where correspondence and accounts were settled and money was weighed (a quite literal interpretation of the Latin *computare*, or counting). The only objects the space contained (according to the inventory) were *bourgouische daelders*, or silver coins, and a small chest with *rentebrieven*, or interest letters. No pieces of furniture were mentioned nor decorative items such as paintings, mirrors or statues, though paintings, individual chairs, mirrors and luxury textiles were found in abundance elsewhere in his house. It was a room that, at least functionally, was used in the daily transactions the gilder had to perform while doing his business at the front. His other *contoor*, situated at the back of the house, was used more as a treasury for storing his expensive raw materials (purses with forged gold) and boxes with finished or semi-finished goods such as pieces of gilded or golden jewellery and rosaries. The collection was complemented by only one silver object, a silver water jug, probably owned by the gilder himself. So like Marie van Cleven’s *contoor*, both Adriaen’s front and back *contoren* were functionally (and perhaps also spatially?) part of his commercial space (administration and storage), though, unlike the shop, they were themselves not part of the retail or production space itself.

Intriguingly, although both spaces in Adriaen’s house have been given a spatial specification in the inventory (voor and achter *contoor*), their exact location in the home and especially their orientation towards other rooms is still unclear. Both rooms were mentioned at the end of the list of rooms in the inventory, without any indication of their interconnectedness with the other rooms of the house (not even with his shop). It was as if both rooms were indeed part of the house, but at the same time, they did not entirely fit in. The tasks that were performed there – storing precious materials or managing payments and debts – could be considered as requiring a certain degree of isolation from household activities that were performed elsewhere. In all likelihood, the storage of precious objects and the act of managing business was not something that was meant to be open for public view nor for other household members to see. The interior of these rooms, therefore, was kept simple and focused on the performance of this specific but important task.

One of the two *contoren* of Anna van der Moer, widow of Lieven Step (1596), combined two functions: storing valuable household objects such as hollowware, a mirror and textiles and operating as an office where money could be weighed and letters and other papers were to be kept. In contrast to the former *contoren*, this room was situated much more accurately in space. In fact, this small *contoor* (*contoirke*) was positioned next to the hall (*zaal*). The hall was a reception room (with a table, some seating furniture and two paintings) and a storage space (with a
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container filled with candlesticks and a box for grain). From its contents, this room may have been situated at the front of the house, and so, then, was the contoirke. The other contoor, however, was probably situated upstairs and was used only for storage, because it comprised only two large chests and a smaller wooden box.

In general, it seems that when the contoor was used only as an office or a room where accounts were handled, correspondence was done and where money was kept and counted, the room was situated downstairs at the front of the dwelling, lacking any kind of decoration or seating but focused on the job. The lack of seating would suggest that the space was not designed to accommodate people, or at least not for long hours. Though there is no evidence of receiving people, the contoor as a workplace or office is probably situated at the front, because people (clients, for example) could still access the space if necessary without disturbing the family and the rest of the household. In this way, the contoor certainly was ‘a solution to various logistical problems that affected the businessman: the need for seclusion and the necessity of storing confidential documents’. In other cases, the contoor was literally an annex to the commercial space of the shop or workshop and was used to store valuable raw materials or finished goods, like the contoren in the houses of gilder Claeyssins and silk twiner Marie van Cleven. And even here, the room was isolated from the rest of the house as well, treated as a safe and treasury, nobody other than its users being able to enter.

In houses where one would expect to find a contoor but where this type of room was not specified in the inventory for whatever reason, the objects that were associated with a contoor such as account books and scales for weighing money were mostly found in the front room or room next to the floor, in other words, at the front of the house (fig.6). Say weaver Richard Janszuene (1561), for example, did his bookkeeping ‘inde voorcamere daer men zeide dat richard zyn mesaige hielt’ or in his front room where he also carried out his work.

The Contoor: More than an Office?

In some cases, the contoor also offered the business person a comfortable place to undertake longer periods of work and a place to keep a collection of books. In this sense, it was more compatible with the image we have of the Italian Renaissance studiolo as a place for study, though the differences prove to be more important than the similarities.
The *contoor* of Spanish merchant Fernando de Castere (1568)\textsuperscript{36} did not get a precise location from the appraiser in the inventory, but based on the sequence of the rooms, it was located near the *salette*. This could be important, because as we will see in the next chapters, the *salette* became the reception room par excellence in
the second part of the sixteenth century, designed and furnished to accommodate family and visitors comfortably. De Castere’s *salette* contained no fewer than six luxurious Spanish chairs and several benches with cushions, a table with a tapestry table cover, a painting and judging from the hearth equipment, a well-functioning fireplace. Though it was not specified as such, we may suppose that the *contoor* was situated next to it. This room, in turn, was a well-equipped working room where De Castere could manage his business and correspondence. Just like the other *contoren* discussed above, the practical nature of the room is reflected in many of its objects such as the scales for weighing money, utensils used for writing (writing desk or *schriftlade*, penknife to cut paper, sand and scissors) and answering correspondence (seal with coat of arms of the family) and a *silvertresoor*, a cupboard for storing precious silver objects. But unlike the other *contoren*, his *contoor* also comprised some rather peculiar objects such as the two *geleyerse* or majolica saucers, three brushes, a small chest with some shirts, a mirror, a portrait of his wife Claudine Lem, a Latin Bible, a book by the Roman writer and stoic philosopher Seneca and a *plakaatbook*, a book with a collection of official open letters, marked by a stamp.

The two *geleyerse* or majolica dishes De Castere owned could be seen as evidence of a wish to decorate the space with exclusively refined crockery and a desire to have either something fashionable or familiar displayed. Though we do not know the exact quality of his majolica dishes, majolica in general not only stood for refinement and taste but also represented high status and wealth; only the wealthiest class in Bruges owned specimens of this glazed earthenware. Moreover, most of the majolica or tin-glazed earthenware that was found in Bruges was owned by the wealthier Hispano-Bruges households in particular. In her study on tableware, Inneke Baatsen offers a possible explanation by saying that these families used this material to establish a specific identity. Not only did the possession of these luxuries mean high status and prosperity but also implied a certain connection with (international) trade. I would like to add that the possession of a certain type of majolica also indicates the strong commercial link between the Spanish nation, its home country and the Bruges market (infra). Originally, most of the majolica earthenware was indeed imported into the Low Countries from abroad; first from Valencia in Spain and later on also from local production centres in northern Italy. As we will see in the second part of this book, the nations of Castile and Biskaje were important commercial players in the city of Bruges even when the economy went downhill. Through the port of Sluis, they traded goods with their homeland of Spain but also with the New World and other overseas regions. As a result, they
came into contact with Antwerp, which in the meantime, had become not only the commercial centre but also the main production centre for tin-glazed earthenware (geleyers werck) in the Low Countries (fig. 7).\textsuperscript{41} Thanks to these commercial ties with Antwerp and their existing ties with homeland Spain, these Hispano-Bruges households had the ideal opportunity to come into contact with novelties such as majolica from Valencia, Italy and Antwerp. So in the case of the dishes in De Castere’s contoor, we tend to agree with Baatsen’s conclusion: ‘the majolica added to both the merchant’s social and cultural capital, which in turn increased his credibility as a man in and of this world, up-to-date with the newest fashion and firmly connected to foreign trade.’\textsuperscript{42} So the fashion for collecting and displaying valuable objects was not only an expression of humanistic and scholarly ambition\textsuperscript{43} but also fitted the image merchants wanted to propagate.

De Castere’s two majolica dishes were not the only items found in the Bruges contoren that could fit with this desire to articulate the image of the entrepreneur as a man of the world. Guillaume van Damast (1566)\textsuperscript{44} four exotic knives and the world map, or mappa mundi, in the contoor of silk trader Domenicus Vaerheil (1567)\textsuperscript{45} could also be seen as objects of knowledge and commerce and therefore assisting in drawing a picture of the business person’s connection with contemporary knowledge of geography and trade\textsuperscript{46} – just like the globes in seventeenth-century Kunstkammers that also reflected the involvement of Antwerp’s merchant-collectors in global trade networks.\textsuperscript{47} Like the seventeenth-century art and naturalia


collectors, it seems that these merchant-entrepreneurs attached a similar importance to the dissemination of their constructed identity.48 But in contrast to these Kunstkammers, the contoren were probably not open to a wide public, and what our Bruges merchants had on display was not a large commodity collection in the sense of a group of related objects like the art or minerals collections of seventeenth-century connoisseurs-collectors. The fact that they were able to have at least one dish of majolica or an exotic knife on display was thought to be convincing enough. Furthermore, what they had on show was not something that could be described as a 'marvel of nature', such as gemstones, seashells, dried sea creatures, plants, flowers or insects.49 What we find in the contoren of Bruges was therefore not (yet?) a type of consumption that pursued natural knowledge, investigating the world and engaging with nature. Instead, it was intended primarily to symbolise the economic and social status of its owner. The only direct references to nature (i.e. to flora and fauna) we can find in the inventories are the birdcages with or without exotic birds and the kynchoorne or seashell (Buccinum undatum) that was kept in the small room, called the garderobe, belonging to Jan Blaeuvoet (1563).50

However, in the inventory of the same Jan Blaeuvoet, we did find traces of a particular way of engaging with nature – alchemy.51 In his contoor were nine fiolen, or small glass bottles, and a distilleerclocke. The latter probably referred to the so-called alembic, which was a frequently used distillation device.52 Bruges archaeologists have also found such alembics and related glass containers in a cesspool in the Spanjaardstraat (near the nation house of the Castilians).53 The alembic was used, for example, to distil alcohol, water and hydroliths, liquids with a concentration of flavours and fragrances and volatile essential oils.54 The oldest alembics are made of glass, but in the late Middle Ages, alembics of pottery and stoneware came into use – copper and brass were used only after the Middle Ages. Intriguingly, Blaeuvoet’s was said to be made of lead or was used in relation to lead. In any case, if he wanted to extract a fluid through the distillation process, the alembic was to be heated to the evaporation point. At that temperature, steam is formed, which after cooling in the dome, would flow via the spout into the reservoir as a liquid.55

By the mid sixteenth century, alchemy was of widespread interest and no longer the preserve of a small group of initiates.56 Indeed, the forerunner of chemistry was even commodified and commercialised during the sixteenth century so that alchemical knowledge had become more accessible and widely dispersed. For novices and practitioners alike, it was not that difficult to find a variety of theoretical alchemical literature and practical books in the vernacular; books, as well as recipes and skills,
could easily be purchased from a variety of people. This commercialised practical alchemical knowledge was by no means limited to metallurgy or the transmutation or multiplication of metals (forging lead into gold and the production of noble metals), but was also about medicine and brewing (alcoholic) liquids. Blaeuvoet chose to practise the art of alchemy – or to have it all stored – in one specific room, a room that stood separate from all the others. In his large house of eleven rooms, all filled with a tremendous number of objects, he chose to do this in a small, almost unfurnished room that had no potential of inviting people in. Where exactly his contoor was located in the house is not entirely clear. In the inventory, it was drafted right after the collections of silverware, clothing, hollowware and linen, whereas all the other rooms were summarised prior to these collections of goods. So it seems that the role of the room in the whole of the house was again not entirely clear to the appraiser either. But it was perhaps this insulating character of the room that convinced Blaeuvoet to perform his alchemical processes exactly there.

In four other inventories in our sample, we came across references to other lode clocken, though it is uncertain whether these were also used in the process of distillation. Only in the case of teacher Domen Vleedorp (1550) did the appraiser find twee looden clocke omme water te deselen. Although the meaning of the last word is not entirely clear, these devices were probably used to distillate water as well, which Vleedorp chose to do in his kitchen rather than elsewhere in his house.

In Blaeuvoet’s room, the fiolen or glass bottles could then have served as receptacles in the distillation process or as containers for storing the liquids. Besides the alembic and other elements of the distilling process, he also had two goutgewichten, small scales for weighing money or gold, stored in his contoor. Perhaps these scales that could weigh smaller objects very accurately were even used in the alchemical context as well. The fact is, of course, that a lot of objects that should have been there in the context of alchemy were not listed in the inventory after all, so we probably only have a glimpse of Jan Blaeuvoet’s alchemy room. The other objects in his room were mostly used for storage, such as the two cupboards with several drawers (one cupboard had gilded drawers), the iron chest, a certain number of barrels and four little baskets. However, many objects of his household were included in the list of items that had already been sold or were about to be sold (venditie). And these items were not listed per room or location, so it might be possible for the contoor to have comprised more items than the few objects that were assigned to it. The mirror that was added to the list of the venditie, for example, could have been such an example.
An item that, according to scholarly literature, was often found in studies was indeed the mirror. According to Paula Findlen, the object was thought to be suitable in a study, because it ‘made visible the dialectic between knowledge and self-knowledge’.

And it was commonly used in contemporary literature and art to warn those looking into it to ‘know themselves’, in other words, it was a visual stimulant to encourage contemplation and self-consciousness. But mirrors had more practical uses as well, especially in the context of reading and writing when managing business administration. The Roman de la Rose, for example, offers a thorough description of the properties of mirrors, ‘which have such marvelous powers that they magnify small letters and illuminate ancient, faded script so that it could be read more easily.’

So it was believed to be an aid to one’s reading; a mirror was not only used as an optical glass in reading, it also reflected incoming rays of daylight, creating an extra light source, which was welcome in a period when only candles, fireplaces and oil lamps produced it.

Another pleasing effect of a mirror hanging in a small but well-furnished room is that it reduces the feeling of being trapped in a small and often crowded room by making the room feel more spacious. Furthermore, it allows a person to see everything reflected in the mirror – ideal when one has stored one’s collection of valuable items in there. But apart from their practical uses, mirrors were often exclusive and costly luxury items as well – especially the more expensive and also more complex christallijne mirrors produced according to the Venetian glass-making technique.

Consequently, mirrors were only rarely found in the living quarters of the people in our sample. Until the end of the sixteenth century, only a small proportion of the population owned a mirror, and it seems that these objects have been favoured most by a wealthier audience. When calculating the general ratio of mirrors – and thus the likelihood that mirrors would have been located in a specific room – it appears that the contoor yields a relatively high ratio of 3.1. But other rooms, such as the dining room (4.3), the sleeping room (5.4) and the salette (3.2), yield even higher ratios. So the contoor was certainly not the only place where mirrors were displayed, and mirrors also occurred frequently in other spaces.

The type of mirror displayed in the contoren is hard to say, because appraisers did not give a precise description of the mirrors they found. In the case of Vander Moer, the square mirror was probably stored there as one of many other precious items the widow had put away safely in her contoor. De Castere’s mirror, on the other hand, was grouped together with his writing equipment and seals, probably
referring to its role in a particular writing context. But in the case of De Castere, we would suggest that the mirror also had another function, a function that it shared with the two majolica dishes mentioned before; in other words, it emblematised his success as a business person and his image as a man of the world, fascinated by the pleasure and benefit of the ‘natural magic’ of optical manipulations. Mirrors were indeed expensive and exclusive objects at that time, and the technique of producing crystal-glass mirrors was still new to the Low Countries. Though transparent crystal glass was mentioned as early as the early sixteenth century, it took until 1537 before Lucas van Helmont developed a local industry and was making ‘verre cristallin l’instar de Venise’ in Antwerp. In contrast to mirrors, many more contoor owners had books stored and displayed in their rooms. In fact, it seems that books were the most defining items of this type of room. When we calculate where or in what type of room there was the highest possibility to find any type of book, the contoor seems to yield the highest ratio (11.9) along with the dining room (2.8), the front room (2.4) and the salette (1.7). So the contoor was not the only location in the house where books were kept and potentially read, but when this room was available in houses, it was certainly the most preferred one.

The collections of books that were listed in the inventories under study are not extensive, which does not mean that some Bruges canons, wealthy international traders and political leaders were not able to have impressive private libraries at the time. But their inventories were not part of our sample. Spanish merchant Jan I Pardo, for example, had an extensive library, evidenced by a book list found in the family archive of the Pardos (1560). The list contains no fewer than twenty-eight book titles, ranging from books in the vernacular, medieval scholastic literature and holy lives to contemporary Spanish religious books. Canon Jacob de Heere (1546–1602), in turn, donated no fewer than 120 individual books in his will. But these large collections of books were rather the exception than the rule, especially for middle-class households of Bruges. Most people who were interested in books had only a handful of them.

Unfortunately, however, only in exceptional circumstances is the subject of the book known. Fernando De Castere, for example, had in his contoor a collection of twenty-four small printed books in Latin, French and Spanish (including a Latin bible), a book by Seneca (referring to Stoic philosophy) and a book with plakkat- en. But the title identification usually does not go much further than that. What is striking, then, is that appraisers did make the effort to make a distinction between
printed books and manuscripts, a practice that was still prevalent in the seventeenth century. Guillaume van Damast, for example, had three manuscripts and an undefined number of printed books, while Domenicus Vaerheil had *dive[sche] gheprente boucken*, or printed books in his *contoor* as well as one paper book – probably a notebook. Printed books and booklets were, in general, easier to obtain from a bookseller than the handwritten manuscripts were. Due to the rapid development of book printing, such printed books were also accessible to a wide audience. Though the epicentre of sixteenth-century book printing and bookselling was set in Antwerp (for example, in the famous Officina Plantiniana or the printing business of Christophe Plantin), several successful booksellers and printing companies such as Hubertus Goltzius’s Officina Goltziana remained in Bruges. Though these booksellers had several internationally and locally written books on offer, ranging from treatises and humanistic literature to recipe books, dictionaries and religiously inspired literature and bibles, most books in the inventories are religious in nature, like bibles and books of hours (the latter type was particularly found in the fifteenth-century sample period). But this should not come as a surprise; since the fifteenth century, the so-called Devotio Moderna movement, originating in the Netherlands and neighbouring parts of Germany, promoted a type of affective piety that had become popular in vernacular as well as in Latin devotional literature – so private, often solitary, devotion within the home became widespread. In this sphere, the demand for religious texts increased enormously. In particular, devotional texts in the vernacular began to flourish in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, an increase that was already apparent in the time of handwritten manuscripts and which was subsequently stimulated by the rise of the printing art. Although books were easier to obtain thanks to the printing press, they were still seen as a symbol of the ability to read. The more varied a collection was – in theme but also in language – the more it became a status symbol for its owner (fig. 8).

**Similarities and Differences: The Broader Picture**

In general, it seems that the *contoor* was a rather small room, functionally and spatially set apart from the other rooms in the same house (often even by the appraiser). In some instances, the *contoor* was more or less an annex of another room (in most cases of the hall), but it was always built as a separate space (it was a hall with a
Fig. 8. Saint Hieronymus in his Study, Albrecht Dürer, 1514, Kupferstichkabinett, © Staatliche Museen, Berlin, bpk / Gemäldegalerie, SMB / Jörg P. Anders
contoor and not just a large hall). And whether the room was located at the front of the house or somewhere upstairs, it was deliberately intended to harbour certain activities and certain items, keeping them apart from the rest of the household. This was perhaps also the reason why few pieces of furniture were found in these rooms. The only pieces of furniture found there were several types of cabinets and chests to store things, along with an occasional chair or writing desk for the merchant to read and write comfortably.

Despite the room’s label as contoor – specifically referring to the act of counting and to the act of doing business in general (from the Latin *computare*) – specialisation was not the rule. Though the activities of reading, counting and writing were central to this space, several other items convey the range of interests encompassed by this type of room. For the group of middle-class and urban elitist owners of contoren, the room ‘answered a range of needs’. It could be used as an office or writing room, as a storeroom or treasury for household or commercial valuables, or as a place where a merchant could read, study and pray. It was a place where owners could immerse themselves in contemplation, but where they could also articulate their status as trustworthy, honourable and competent entrepreneurs.

More importantly, and even for this period, ‘objects displayed in a study were expressions of the self’. In scholarly literature on Italian Renaissance case, the room where business entered the realm of the home is immediately connected with the growing interest in the creation of collections and with the humanistic love for the exotic and the cult of erudition. However, we are inclined to link it to yet another facet of the owner’s ideal self: the objects in the contoren were meant to portray and even strengthen the owner’s status as a trustworthy, honourable and competent business person. So the objects in the contoor were not intended to represent the ideal of the humanist scholar, but rather expressed the image of an educated entrepreneur, fully fitting within the commercial climate of the city. Indeed, in the case of the Bruges contoren, clear tangible and visual associations were made with the world of business and commerce. The objects on display had to represent the necessary virtues of organisation, rigour and credibility a merchant-entrepreneur (merchant and artisan) had to master to manage a business. The majolica dishes and the mirror in the room of Fernando De Castere, the *mappa mundi* of Domenicus Vaerheil, the alchemy installation of Jan Blaeuvoet and the books of Guillaume van Damast were all signifiers of this social and economic status. These luxury items were not only expensive and therefore exclusive, they also exemplified the knowledge and expertise these people had regarding the world, trade and perhaps also nature. In this but
also in their correspondence, they consciously engaged with the outside world – although it was not necessarily staged for outsiders to see. Like shops and workshops, *contoren* were therefore part of the business space of a house but, like the shop and workshop, physically and functionally set apart from the domestic living quarters.

In the Bruges *contoren*, a rarefied atmosphere of retreat from the everyday was thus created. Merchants and artisans retreated into their *contoor*, experiencing the room ‘through the power of the objects it contained’. To underline the study’s similar metamorphic powers, Ruvoldt cites an oft-quoted passage from the works of Niccolò Machiavelli in which, on the threshold of his study, he strips off his mundane, everyday clothes and puts on the robes of court and palace. In doing this, he passes into the world of study and contemplation. Though we are less convinced of the spiritual atmosphere of the *contoor*, several black garments were found in some Bruges *contoren* too, as well as clothes brushes and water pots used for personal hygiene. Black as a colour for clothing was strongly associated with formality and with officials and urban elites. And it is considered as a given that traders and city elites were quite often completely dressed in black in portraits as well, especially in the second part of the sixteenth century. So although we cannot be completely sure about their usage or the reason why these garments were kept there, it seems that these special garments (or at least clean garments) were worn by the merchants when they resided in the *contoor* (and perhaps also outside in the city), because the clothes conferred upon their wearers a sense of awareness of the tasks that await them, enhancing their retreat from the everyday, perhaps also sharpening concentration and their diligence.

This type of room was, in most cases, specifically tailored to fulfil the needs of the sixteenth-century Bruges business person. As a working room, the *contoor* formed a strategic location in terms of doing administration and the act of conducting business. It was a small room, spatially isolated at home, but functionally and materially oriented towards the outside world, although it was also socially exclusive. The *contoor* was the least common space encountered in inventories and was especially present in the inventories of the wealthier citizens. This means that people made a conscious decision whether such a room was built (or created) or not. Having enough space was, after all, an important precondition to be able to differentiate between spaces. In the next chapter, we will move from the least common space in a house to a room that was present in nearly all houses, small or large: the kitchen.