At Home in Renaissance Bruges

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FOR PUBLIC ELEGANCE AND PRIVATE COMFORT: TEXTILES AND FURNITURE

Introduction

In his classic *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Jacob Burckhardt noted that ‘we read in the novelists of soft, elastic beds, of costly carpets and bedroom furniture, of which we hear nothing in other countries.’ In other words, he observed a wider interest in cleanliness and comfort in Italian households, which he described as ‘unique at the time’ as well as unique for Renaissance Italy. Although the idea of achieving comfort or ‘the self-conscious satisfaction with the relationship between one’s body and its immediate physical environment’ is believed to be discussed and debated in contemporary literature only from the seventeenth century onwards, the actual awareness of the associations between body, material culture and environment (i.e. comfort but also discomfort) can indeed be situated much earlier. Danièle Alexandre-Bidon argues that, given the frequent use of references to the experiences of ‘comfort’ in contemporary literature, the notion of comfort and discomfort must already have been present in the minds of medieval city dwellers. Heating, light, access to water, protection against draught, but also spatial and social order, for example, were considered comfortable conveniences; most medieval rooms were indeed organised and equipped in such a way as to maximise these basic comforts. Although a lot of goods such as heating facilities, candles, bed textiles and cushions were used to reach a certain level of domestic comfort, they were also frequently used as a means to some other end. Putting cushions on chairs meant far more than offering guests a comfortable seat during dinner. In Desiderius Erasmus’s booklet, *Goede, manierlijke zeden*, the preparing of the chairs and benches for dinner was an integral part of the ritual of organising a dinner party, because, as Erasmus’s readers learned, more than promoting physical comfort, these cushioned chairs and benches externalised underlying social relations, enmities and friendships among the diners and exemplified the status and social knowledge of the host. Which seat was equipped with a cushion and which was not, and for whom the comfortable
chair was intended, were vital questions in the game of domestic sociability. Comfort was therefore always linked to status and wealth. Indeed, the ability to reach a certain degree of domestic comfort and to use it as a means to other ends (such as privacy, sociability and self-fashioning) depended on wealth, and it represented the status of the entire household. That is also the reason why, according to Frank Trentmann, comfort was a dynamic ‘driver of consumption’. Textiles, more than any other household goods, served to reach many instances of domestic comfort and the inherent or indirect goals of privacy (bed curtains), sociability (cushions, upholstered chairs and tablecloths) and self-fashioning (tapestry and bed curtains).

Comfort and the Textile Environment

Household textiles and their role in daily life have long played the role of the least favourite topic of textile historians. It was only in the contribution to Beverly Lemire’s volume on the *Power of Fashion* that textile historian Giorgio Riello attempted to redirect the focus of textile historians from the history of costume, dress and attire to the history of the so-called ‘flat textiles’; textiles that were, according to him, ‘produced [not only] to decorate but also organize and govern domestic life’. He argues that our historical and methodological understanding of textiles has been too heavily influenced by dress and especially by the concept of fashion as the ever-changing material base of dress and the prerogative of scholars working on dress and clothing in the past. Surely, then, there is an urgent need to pose the question whether the *fashionability* of tailored fabrics penetrated the realm of domestic textiles and whether it was even deemed important by contemporaries that furnishing textiles had to be fashionable at all. Much depends on the role textiles played within the domestic culture of the sixteenth century and how and for what purpose members of households created a so-called textile environment.

Textile products such as cushions, bed curtains, table rugs and tapestries were all used in the structuring of the household and its inner workings precisely through its connection with furniture and morphological elements such as walls and chimneys. In other words, it was textiles and furniture that defined a person’s home – more than bricks and mortar – and shaped the desired social and domestic environment. Indeed, textiles were used to soften hard wooden benches, protect people from draught or keep them safe, warm and cosy, but also served to express standards of
material comfort, wealth and social status.\textsuperscript{17} According to Giorgio Riello, the combination of both textiles and furniture therefore captures social and cultural practices that were less transient than those associated with dress and attire, but also less structural than architecture and buildings.\textsuperscript{18}

This chapter aims, therefore, to focus precisely on the complementarity between decorative textiles and pieces of furniture such as chairs, tables and beds – influencing the ‘relationship between one’s body and its immediate physical environment’\textsuperscript{19} – and morphological features such as walls and chimneys to look for evolutions throughout the period under study in the creation of domestic comfort and uncover related social practices of creating or maintaining privacy and sociability.\textsuperscript{20} By focusing on this complementarity, we put the decorative textiles in context, which allows us to learn more about the motivations behind purchasing, using and consuming them. The chapter consists of four different components or sub-themes, all of which make the connection between textiles and furniture and the broader domestic environment.

In the first part, the connection is made between seating furniture, on the one hand, and cushions, seat covers and upholstery, on the other, as a proxy to studying changes and evolutions in the relationship between the body and material culture – focusing on posture, social behaviour and sociable life. In this respect, we will start from the idea that comfortable seating acted as an invaluable means to express deference as well as status. Second, beds and especially bedding such as curtains and \textit{saarges} are put centre stage. The bed was an important piece of furniture, because it was seen as ‘the most important space of textile use and display’.\textsuperscript{21} Beds could tell a lot about the households who owned, displayed and used them, because it was mainly social standing and hierarchy that determined the shape, the material, the decoration and the location of the bed.\textsuperscript{22} The high economic value of a bed had to do not only with the quality of the wood, but mainly with the quality of the bed textiles.\textsuperscript{23} The bedding of some beds included bed curtains as well, not only colouring the interior but also granting the bed status and prestige and dividing it from the rest of the room. Bed curtains were certainly not reserved only for the richest of households, because they could be made from the simplest, most basic and therefore cheaper fabrics such as say (\textit{saar}\textsuperscript{24}) just as well as from the most expensive and colourful fabrics such as silks and satins. In all cases and regardless of the quality of the material, bed curtains had the ability to improve physical comfort and to create a private space amidst the rest of the room. In this section, we therefore ponder on the unique ability of bed curtains not only to protect the sleeper from draught and cold but also to create a certain level
of privacy and at the same time display the household’s wealth and status. Third, the interaction between the body and its environment (i.e. the room itself) is made tangible through the study of tapestry. Tapestry has long been considered the luxury textile par excellence for princes, kings, dukes, popes and counsellors, because it was often very expensive due to the capital intensive production process and the use of rare raw materials. Though many historians of tapestry advocate going beyond the surviving pieces of tapestry, they eventually limit the subject of their study to tapestry hangings, almost ignoring the production, distribution and consumption of all other woven objects. Some do give examples of tapestry cushions and bench rugs, but it is not clear whether they see these as mere secondary tapestry products or as simply other products made from tapestry besides hangings. But tapestry as a fabric or a weave did come in various forms and qualities, especially in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Notwithstanding price and quality differences, it appears that tapestry woven for textile wall hangings, table rugs, cushions and cupboard covers was popular among different social groups in sixteenth-century Bruges. Perhaps tapestry owes its popularity to the fact that even the lesser-quality pieces of tapestry had similar propensities to the more expensive and exclusive ones? Or perhaps tapestry is favoured, because it goes well with the market for garments that were made from new and fashionable textiles, marked by ‘a renewed fascination with contrasting textures’?

In the fourth and last part of the chapter, the relationship between decorative textiles and furniture is approached in a different way. Instead of considering the visible and decorative features of textiles, we question the value of decorative textiles by looking at storage furniture and the ways sheets, blankets and cushions were presumably hidden from view. One may assume that the design, wood type, quality and location of chests and cabinets was often decisive in the decision to store a particular type of textile in a particular type of container at a specific location. Hester Dibbits found, for example, that in several seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch communities, the linen cupboard took an increasingly prominent place in the interior and in social life, proving, for one thing, the multifaceted role of decorative textiles in daily life. In this part of the chapter, two types of storage furniture are discussed, two types of chests that were specifically named after their function to treasure textiles and garments: the garderobe and the cleerschaprade. Because of their specialised name and because it appears that they were owned only by the more well-to-do, the question arises to what extent this particular piece of furniture was really intended for private storage or whether it performed a role in the self-fashioning of its owners.
The Seat of Authority? The Design and Social Character of Seating Furniture

Furniture and Textiles

In his book on the Englishman’s chair, John Gloag concisely summarises the value of the study of seating furniture: ‘seats of almost any kind, fixed or movable, reveal the posture and carriage of the men and women for whom they were made, and chairs show more faithfully than any other article of furniture the importance accorded to dignity, elegance and comfort’. The design, furnishing and related social character of seating furniture is therefore the subject of this subchapter. For our study it is instructive to question whether or not seats were upholstered or cushioned, whether these cushioned chairs and benches were intended for more than one person or had a rather individual character, to learn where they were located in the house and how they were positioned as regards each other and other objects to measure underlying social practices.

One of the most common features for increasing the comfort of seating furniture and adjusting the posture of the sitter was cushions. When calculating the social diffusion of cushions, it seems that they were relatively expensive objects since they were concentrated in the wealthier households of our sample. This view is shared by Jeremy Goldberg following Mark Overton et al. for later medieval and early modern England; data on Kent suggest that by the seventeenth-century cushions (of all kinds of fabric) were a common item of furnishing, whereas this was not the case for the less prosperous county of Cornwall. In Bruges it appears from table 14 that a lot of households of the more wealthier social group (higher middling groups) possessed cushions but they owned them only in rather small numbers.

To put these numbers into context and to consider what function these cushions might have had in the interior, we have calculated the relative number of seats per sample period and per social class. We calculated the number of seats starting from the idea that all types of benches (banc, lijs, siege, scabelle banc) represent at least two potential seats, whereas all types of chairs and sofa chairs represent only one seat. The results are presented in table 15.

Looking at the results of this calculation, it is striking that cushioned seats (or the cushioned backs of these seats – depending on how they were actually used) were certainly not the standard in most households and that choices had to be made as to where to put a cushion. The chance of coming across a cushioned seat was...
Table 14. Mean Number of Cushions per Household

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SAMPLE PERIOD</th>
<th>SOCIAL GROUP</th>
<th>SUM OF CUSHIONS</th>
<th>MEAN OF TOTAL HOUSEHOLDS</th>
<th>MEAN OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH CUSHIONS</th>
<th>MEDIAN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1450–1500</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1528–1549</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1559–1574</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1584–1600</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Database of inventories © IB, JDG & IS

Table 15. Comparing Sum of Cushions with the Total Number of Seats per Sample Period and per Social Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SAMPLE PERIOD</th>
<th>SOCIAL GROUP</th>
<th>SUM OF CUSHIONS</th>
<th>NUMBER OF SEATS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1450–1500</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>182</td>
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<tr>
<td>1528–1549</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1559–1574</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>814</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>1112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1584–1600</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>482</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Database of inventories © IB, JDG & IS
much higher in houses of the wealthier social groups (High), while in the lower middle groups (Low), it was already quite exceptional to encounter a single cushion. So comfortable seating in terms of a soft and perhaps slightly elevated seat or back was certainly not commonplace.

For the 1528–1549 period, the dining room, the front room and unidentified rooms were types of rooms where the chance of encountering cushions was highest. For sample period 1559–1574, the same types of room pop up: the dining room, the salette and the back room. But the sleeping room in this case appears also to have been a preferred place to display cushions. Interestingly, the least likely place to find cushions was the kitchen. The same results also apply to the last sample period, 1584–1600; the salette, the front room and the back room yield higher ratios, whereas the kitchen continues to be of little significance. In general, therefore, cushioned seats were usually found in the more luxuriously furnished spaces that appeared to have had the potential to receive guests.

Cushions or cushion covers were made from a variety of textiles such as colourful cloths, light woollens such as say and serge and luxurious silks (especially in the later part of the sixteenth century), but the majority had a tapestry cover (graph 14). Although people had fewer and fewer cushions in their houses, the cushions they did have were probably made from tapestry.

Graph 14. Fabrics and Cushions

![Graph showing fabrics and cushions](image)

Source: Database of inventories © IB, JDG & IS
Other sorts of textiles that were used to decorate and soften seating were bank-ers or rugs to cover benches *(banccleed)*. These rugs were especially popular in the first sample period and became less important during the sixteenth century. In the first sample period, they were made of woollen fabrics, cloth and tapestry; in the later sample periods, they were made only of tapestry.

**Continuity and Change**

Although a longitudinal detailed study of the character and design of Bruges’s seating furniture throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is difficult because of a difference in language that is used in the inventories of the first sample period (the inventories of the burghers of illegitimate birth were drawn up in French and not in the Middle Dutch of the later inventories) and because some benches were not recorded because they were fixed to the walls, it is still possible to observe gradual changes in the shape, design and use of the seats and in the posture of the sitter. As we have just seen, cushioned seats were not omnipresent in domestic interiors, so one might question how ‘possessions and ideals of comfort remained part of a civic culture that continued to be oriented towards public display and posterity’.

Generally, there were two types of seating furniture, each with several derivatives: chairs and benches. Small, one-person benches and stools with hard wooden surfaces were easy to handle and easy to move to wherever they were needed. In the painting of *Jesus with Martha and Mary*, for example, a three-legged stool is used as a raised platform for a tub, containing foodstuffs (image 20). The stools and small benches were designed to be used only for a short period of time or were repurposed as seating for children or young servants when needed. Therefore, they were not meant to be comfortable, and none of them was mentioned in our inventories as having a cushion or rug. Most smaller benches and stools even lacked a backrest, which meant that sitters constantly had to control their muscles when sitting upright without support for their backs, necks and heads. *Sofa chairs* *(zetele)*, barrel chairs, basket makers’ chairs and reclining chairs, on the other hand, still forced sitters to sit upright, but in contrast to the stools and one-person benches, they allowed them to adopt a more comfortable pose due to armrests and backrests. The chairs were generally bigger, heavier and less easy to handle, and so designed to be sat in for longer periods of time. But despite their size, they were not necessarily luxurious or expensive – wickerwork and barrel chairs, for example, were by far the cheapest form of seating.
One-person benches (*schabelle* or *schabelle bank*) or small stools and triangular seats (*driestael*) (fig. 20) were the most common seating furniture in the fifteenth century, alongside benches with or without storage space underneath the seat, such as the *lys*. Small benches were scattered throughout the domestic spaces and occurred mainly in the floor and in the kitchen, where they were used in the process of food preparation. None of these smaller benches were cushioned or dressed with a banker.

Other pieces of seating furniture that were better equipped to be sat on for longer periods of time (at least in comparison with stools and one-person benches) were the so-called *quayères*. Though it is difficult to infer from the inventories what these pieces of furniture looked like, these were probably the large, massive, throne-like armchairs, often with storage space underneath the seat, we see in contemporary
paintings and illuminations. Because of their size and weight (i.e. to a certain extent deducible from the preserved copies in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London; fig. 21), they were certainly not intended to be moved very often and were therefore placed in areas where people would sit for longer periods of time.

Some scholars locate these chairs on the dais of a great hall or some other important and commanding position, often in the context of supper. The master or mistress of the house then had the privilege of sitting on the ‘seat of authority’ while other diners had to be satisfied with less comfortable benches and stools. Although the _quayère_ was indeed a rather prestigious piece of furniture (and perhaps even more expensive than other types of seating because of its raw materials such as oak) and wealthier people often possessed more than one chair, even less wealthy, single persons of the lower social strata in Bruges were able to afford at least one such chair.

To find the exact furniture arrangement around the chair, we have looked for combinations of chairs with other pieces of furniture that were all in close vicinity, in other words, mentioned by the appraiser precisely before or after the chair and in the same room. For the fifteenth-century sample of Bruges, only five contexts (in five different inventories) out of thirty-one contexts with chairs appear to match the theory of the supper hierarchy. The dining room of Willem van Nokerhoud (1444), for example, contained a table with one _quayère_ and six
The other two dining rooms in the sample (with a table) both had stools and benches as seats for sitting at the table but no chair. The upstairs chamber of Guillaume Serveur (1444), the room called bouge of Elisabeth, wife of Henry le Hollandre (1438), and the kitchen of Tanne, wife of Lampsin Bousse (1439), all included a set of one table with one chair, or quayère, and two benches, or lys. The benches were probably positioned on each side of the table with the single chair at the head of it.

However, it appears from our data that most of the high-backed chairs were placed next to a bed, a practice that is also noticeable in contemporary paintings and illuminations. As we discussed earlier in the chapter on panel paintings, a new visual iconography was rapidly gaining popularity in the fifteenth century southern Low Countries, in other words that of the Virgin in a fully developed domestic interior. Most of these Annunciation scenes were situated in a room that would resemble some sort of a bedchamber. The centre panel of the Annunciation Triptych by Rogier van der Weyden (1434) is an example of such a scene set in a bedchamber-like interior with a fully made-up canopied bed and a throne-like chair standing next to it. The engraving on paper of the Annunciation (ca. 1480) by the anonymous early Netherlandish engraver Master FVB (active ca. 1480–1500) shows a similar setting (fig. 22). In both artworks, the Virgin Mary is depicted praying on a prayer stool in

Fig. 22. A throne-like chair is standing next to the canopied bed. The Annunciation, Master of FVB, c.1480, Copper plate Engraving, Amsterdam, © Rijksmuseum
front of her bed, suddenly disturbed by the archangel bringing her the news of the imminent birth of her son. Next to the bed is a wooden throne-like chair.

The *Livre des métiers*, a schoolbook written in Bruges during the second half of the fourteenth century, containing texts in Middle Dutch with French translations, mentions that ‘neffens d’bedde, eenen setel’ is needed. The habit of placing a chair next to a bed was also made explicit in a late fifteenth-century contract between Catherine de Saint-Genois (abbess of Flines) and sculptor Ricquart to make a wooden altarpiece for the abbey church. The contract stipulated a detailed list of requirements the artist had to observe. In the middle section of the altarpiece, beneath the Crucifixion of Christ, the Birth of Christ had to be depicted. In this scene, the Virgin had to be seated on ‘un lit richement orné et garni de rideaux entr’ouverts’. Further on, we read a more detailed description of the precise setting of the bed ‘et par la costé du quavech de ladicte couche, au lez dextre, par devant, sera fourmé la manière d’une quayère appoyoire, de telle façon que on les fait en Brabant et en Flandres et en plusieurs aultres lieux’. The bed and the high chair were thus meticulously described and compared with recognisable, everyday examples. A lot of the chairs we come across in the inventories of the first sample period are indeed situated near a bed. Elisabeth, the rich widow of Arnoud d’Honde (1438), had no fewer than three chairs, of which one was mentioned as standing next to the *grand lit*. The two other chairs described as ‘old’ were supposedly moved by the widow to a room that served as a storage space for old furniture and the armour of her late husband.

The fifteenth century data suggest that the chairs could have performed different functions in different settings; as the seat of honour at the (dinner) table, but also as a prop next to a bed, for example as a standard for hanging clothes when preparing to go to bed or as a prayer stool. In some rare cases, the chair fulfilled a role in a reception room (such as the floor or front room) as one of the seats in front of the fireplace. But these chairs were only rarely discovered in rooms such as the kitchen. Interestingly, though these high chairs, or *quayères*, were the seats of honour on certain occasions, they were only rarely cushioned or dressed with a banker. Even in paintings, we hardly ever see throne-like chairs dressed with cushions. Notwithstanding the fact that this type of chair is equipped with backrests and armrests, it remains an unyielding, vertical kind of chair. The back of the sitter remains completely vertical, ‘with the result that the head is thrown off balance, the back left unsupported, and the sitting posture becoming penitential as the flat seat is not shaped to the body or tilted and is in the wrong height from the ground’. So at times when these chairs were seen as the most privileged seats in the room, fulfilling
an important role in the context of social hierarchy, representing rank and position, they were granted this role because of their uniqueness (there was often only one such chair in the room), their size and sturdiness and the fact that the sitter could sit upright for a longer period of time, but certainly not because these chairs were comfortable in terms of offering softer seating.

In contrast to these spartanly dressed chairs, larger benches such as the aforementioned leson or lys were often furnished with a loose piece of cloth employed as a seat covering called a banker, or banquier. Moreover, cushions of different types of fabric and colour were put on benches to soften the hard wooden surface of the seat and back as well. The rich inventory (1438) of Margriete, the wife of Jehan de Steenackere, describes how the outhouse or the small house in the backyard (maisoncelle derriere au jardin) was filled with smaller benches and stools standing around the table and near the bathtub and with one larger bench, or lys, offering extra seating for family members or potential visitors. According to the information from the inventory, the bench was not furnished with textiles, but Margriete and her husband had the ability to do so when the occasion arose, because the large chest, or escring, standing next to the lys held several bankers and red and blue cushions.

Cushions and bankers were not the only devices used to improve the position of the sitters; in some cases, a footstool was sometimes put in front of the bench as well. In this way, the feet of the sitters were raised, the muscles of the pelvis and the back could relax and the sitter would sit much more comfortably. But the footstool was still only rarely used to improve seating comfort around the middle of the fifteenth century. It was only throughout the second half of the century that the use of footstools in front of benches seems to have increased.

A footstool could easily be replaced by a narrow footboard, illustrated in the interior of the Annunciation scene by the Master of Flémalle (ca. 1427–1432), where we see a large bench in front of the fireplace. The bench is furnished with a green banker covering the seat and the back of the bench and a large yellow, goldish cushion. A narrow wooden footboard attached to the front of the bench could support the feet and legs of the sitter, improving ergonomics and allowing the sitter to enjoy the warming heat of the fire for a longer time. A similar bench with a rotating back and a footboard on one side is depicted on another painting by the same artist; the right panel of the Werl altarpiece depicts Saint Barbara, who is seated on a large bench that is dressed with red cushions and a red banker (fig. 23). When the radiating heat of the fire became too warm to bear, the sitter could easily rotate the backrest of the bench and sit on the other side of the bench facing away from the immediate fire.
The variety in seating furniture clearly increased in the course of the second half of the fifteenth century. In the second sample period (1450–1500), we find a larger amount and a more diversified array of seating furniture. It seems that both the throne-like chairs and stools or small one-person benches had developed into a new type of seating; in the inventories of this sample period, we find *stoelen*, or chairs. Though it is difficult to know what these chairs looked like, it was certainly not a term meant to describe seats similar to small benches or stools, because these had their own terminology: *schabelle*(*bank*) or *banxke* for one-person benches and *driestael* or *drievote stoelen* for three-legged stools. Some households had *schabellen*,

Fig. 23. Saint Barbara sitting on a bench before the hearth. The bench is decorated with a red coloured banker and some red cushions on the seat. Werl Altarpiece, right panel of St. Barbara, Robert Campin, 1438, Tempera on Panel, Madrid, © Museo del Prado
driestaelen and stoelen all at the same time and in the same room. Nor does it mean that the throne-like chairs, or quayères, no longer existed in this period either. The zetele (and perhaps also the leunstoel, or reclining chair) was probably a derivative of the previously discussed throne-like chair as the Middle Dutch term zetel has a similar meaning to the English medieval ‘chair’ or ‘seat of authority’. Some of the zetele were described as opstaende zethele or hoghe zetele, which refers to the high back of the seat. When calculating where these seats would have been situated, the results suggest that the zetele could have appeared in many different rooms (back room, dining room, room, kitchen and front room). Looking more closely at the
material contexts of this type of chair, it is telling that most of these seats were still located near a bed, just like the quayère. Some others were found near a table with small benches and three-legged chairs suggesting a hierarchical supper context, such as the setele in the back room of the house of Jehanne, the widow of Jacob Jooris (1476). The table was accompanied by two benches, three three-legged stools and one turned setele cushioned with two red cushions.

Another type of the regular wooden setele, and new in this period but remaining present in the interior throughout the whole of the sixteenth century, is the cuupsetele, or barrel chair. As the name suggests, this type of seating furniture is made from barrels or was made following the principles of barrel making. How and by whom they were made is not entirely clear. Even the ordinances of the craft of the barrel makers do not provide any information on the production of these chairs. According to Berend Dubbe, the chair was manufactured by removing a piece of the barrel so that the remaining part formed the backrest. The cuupsetele thus had low armrests and a curved back because of the barrel shape. On the miniature ‘Holy Family at Work’ in the book of hours of Catherine of Cleves (ca. 1440), Joseph is seated on a primitive example of a barrel-shape seat (fig. 24).

Not only were the shape and construction of the cuupsetele different from those of the zetele, but the function of this type of chair also seemed different from that of the ‘original’ or ‘fifteenth-century’ throne-like chairs. When calculating their relative dispersion over the rooms, they would have occurred mainly in the kitchen – an interesting development and very different from the use context of the fifteenth-century quayre. In most cases, these barrel chairs standing in the kitchen – often but not always in the company of reclining or wickerwork chairs and benches – were also cushioned. Perhaps these more comfortable chairs not only represented the growing social importance of the kitchen as a locus of sociability and conviviality but also materialised the need for comfortable seating during the prolonged act of preparing food.

The long, often decoratively crafted benches, or lys, were still popular during the second half of the fifteenth century, as were the regular benches, small benches and stools. The latter occurred especially in rooms where flexible seating furniture was often needed such as the dining room and the floor (vloer), whereas the former were spread across the house with the exception of the kitchen. Interestingly, the larger benches were still more often seen than the chairs and sofa chairs (zetele) fitted with cushions.

During the first half of the fifteenth century, people who could afford cushions preferred to have them put on benches such as the lijs or schabellebanck, rather than
on individual, throne-like chairs. The latter chairs were, in most cases, literally used as seats of authority and propagated status and prestige through their sturdiness and size. Throughout the second half of the fifteenth century, we see a larger variation in these status chairs, made of a variety of materials such as wooden barrels, wickerwork and oak. The chairs were therefore increasingly less expensive and more in reach of a larger group of consumers. Some of these ‘cheaper’ chairs were often equipped with cushions, in contrast to the ‘original’ quayres, but these cushioned chairs seem to have functioned in a wholly different context – in the kitchen near the pots and pans and the simmering soup or in situations where it was necessary to have a comfortable seat for hours in a day.

Significant changes in the design and use of seating furniture and its connection with textiles occurred during the second half of the sixteenth century. So-called saelstoelen and spaansche stoelen were from then on part of the array of seating furniture in the more well-to-do households. In addition, the number of the plainer, individual seats also increased. Both the more luxurious chairs and the simpler ones were increasingly adorned and softened with cushions, such as the hall chair of Joos Themmerman (1584) standing in a room labelled camere, which was furnished with a tapestry cushion. Others were decorated with larger pieces of tapestry such as the two tapytschee zaelmakers stoelen in the dining room of Jan Baptist Lommelin (1569). Both types of chairs represented, as it were, an evolution in the design of individual seating furniture, because they were probably lighter and more graceful than the previously discussed throne-like chairs. Some of the saelstoelen and spaansche stoelen were also upholstered – a new feature of individual seating furniture, though not yet entirely replacing cushions and other textile furnishings. Upholstered seating gradually became more popular not only because it breathed comfort thanks to stuffing and leather- or textile-covered fixed seats, but their symmetrical design, attractive materials and, above all, their meticulous workmanship bestowed a distinctive splendour on their owners. Upholstered chairs were therefore first and foremost meant as luxury furniture, comfortable to sit on and also highly decorative. In England, one of the first well-known and appreciated upholstered single chairs was called the ‘farthingale chair’, referring to the hooped dress or farthingale worn by women during the sixteenth century. It was a broad-seated chair presumably made to accommodate the hooped dress or farthingale, a feature that was not necessary in the Bruges context, because Flemish women did not wear such wide, hooped dresses. Wealth and status began to be expressed through the light design and the comfort of chairs rather than their sturdiness and size.
Not unexpectedly, these luxurious leather- or textile-backed chairs with or without armrests made sitting for longer periods of time easier, which was especially convenient during dinner parties and other social occasions. They were luxury objects, status objects even, predominantly present in the wealthier households of Bruges. In the fifth sample period (1559–1574), these chairs appeared only in the wealthier households; in the sixth sample period (1584–1600), some people of the middling groups could afford such types of chairs as well, but the majority of owners were still part of the highest wealth category. The luxurious character of the hall chair also becomes clear from its distribution across the domestic space. Hall chairs were most often positioned in rooms labelled camere, middle rooms, front rooms and the salette, with a dazzling ratio of nineteen. The same compelling results were obtained for the Spanish chair; the dining room and the salette were preferred.

_Spaensche stoelen_ were by definition upholstered, but not exclusively with leather (fig. 25). Originally, the chairs were most likely covered with Spanish leather, but soon other materials were in use. In all likelihood, the Spanish chair appeared first in Antwerp at the beginning of the sixteenth century – the first records date to 1520.\(^69\) According to Ria Fabri, an expert on the subject, these chairs were first imported from the Iberian peninsula and were distributed from Antwerp to the rest of the southern Low Countries.\(^70\) But Bruges was also named as an early
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consumption centre for this type of chair. This early presence of Spanish chairs in Bruges should come as no surprise, of course, because the city had long been the second home of many Iberian traders and merchants. The chairs could easily have been imported from the Iberian peninsula to Bruges directly through the port of Sluis or imported from neighbouring Antwerp, though they might have been produced locally as well (as was eventually the case in Antwerp). Indeed, in all likelihood, the prefix ‘Spanish’ referred more to the style of the chair than to its production centre (or the origin of its leather seat). However, we cannot seem to find any evidence of a local production of this type of chair in Bruges, compared to the abundant references to this craft in the Antwerp sources – Antwerpian Gabriel Duvaël who left an inventory in 1588 was even a Spaansch stoelmaecker. So Spanish chairs were perhaps difficult to access for most Bruges citizens, and the possession of this type of seating furniture was therefore limited to the families of Spanish merchants and the Bruges well-to-do – people with money and easy access to the Antwerp or Spanish market.

Indeed, looking at ownership details, only nine households out of our total sample of 502 households owned a Spanish chair. This low figure is even more noteworthy when compared with the numbers in Antwerp. Carolien De Staelen’s research has shown that no fewer than ninety-five Antwerp households out of a total of 205 in the period between 1566 and 1599 owned at least one Spanish chair. Furthermore, most of the chairs in Bruges were in the possession of Spanish families; Fernando de Castere, for example, owned no fewer than seven Spanish chairs, and Marie Pardo, wife of Fernando de Matanca, had four Spanish chairs in her son-in-law’s room.

To conclude, during the sixteenth century, individual chairs were increasingly decorated with fabrics be it cushions or upholstery. It was no longer only the master of the household who sat on the only throne-like chair in the room, but guests and other household members could take a seat on individual – and often cushioned or upholstered – seats as well, be it in the context of dinner or in the context of work and leisure. This is not to say that differences in domestic and social hierarchy were no longer made visible. The specification of men’s and women’s chairs (mannestoelen and vrouwenstoelen), for example, probably indicated notable differences in size. In some other cases, only one upholstered chair was equipped with armrests, whereas the other upholstered chairs in the same space were not. Moreover, whereas the throne-like chair of the early and mid-fifteenth century was certainly not comfortable in terms of offering its user a soft seat, from the sixteenth century onwards,
the most prestigious pieces of seating furniture in the room were the chairs with a
fabric or leather decoration, such as luxurious upholstered Spanish chairs. So com-
fort became a vital part in the game of exemplifying social status.

The second part of the sixteenth century was, however, marked not just by
changes in individual seating facilities; the nature of multiple seating furniture also
changed. Not only did the number of benches per household decrease, benches
of all kinds were increasingly less furnished with cushions or bankers, which was
in stark contrast to the period before. Even in the poorer households, the median
number of benches decreased over time, in favour of individual chairs.

Show Me Your Bed and I’ll Tell You Who You Are!

A complete set of sleeping furniture – in other words, a wooden bed frame (coetse
or ledikant) and its accompanying appurtenances such as a mattress (bedde), sheets,
blankets, cushions and on some occasions also curtains – was one of the most ex-
pensive goods in households. Nevertheless, there were great price and quality dif-
ferences between different types of beds. These differences may be attributed to the
type of bed (coetse, wentelcoetse, lysebedde, ledikant, box-beds, fixed beds) as well as
to the number of sheets and blankets and the type of textiles used to cover the bed.

In most cases, the bed was dressed with a mattress of different fillings and qualities,
sheets, a blanket (saarge), two pillows, a bolster and in some cases also some curtains
and a rabat. But some beds in the Bruges inventories were not fully made up or
were only soberly dressed, indicating that these beds were either not in use at the
time the inventory was made or that the users of these beds held lower ranks in the
household’s social hierarchy (for example, servants or temporary lodgers). Hence,
the variations in the type of wood, in size and in workmanship of the bed frame and
in the use of textiles was quite great, but it was, above all, social standing that deter-
mimed the shape, the material, the decoration and the location of the bed. In this
regard, the marriage bed was generally larger, was furnished more richly with fabrics
and was closer to the fire than, for example, the beds of children, maidservants, appren-
tices or occasional visitors. We have also explained in a previous chapter that
in some households, the marital bed was located in a specific and suitably equipped
room, the sleeping room. Notwithstanding the assumed necessity of bedding and
textiles related to sleeping and the fact that beds were basic and almost indispensable
household goods, we could question the use value of these textiles and whether this changed throughout the period.

That the marriage bed fulfilled an important role in the household and that this was also noticeable from its size and decoration is apparent from the inventory of widow Cathelyne de Berg (1569). She had at least four rooms; an unidentified ‘room’, a kitchen, floor and an attic. All the rooms on the ground floor were equipped to cook, eat, work, receive visitors and sleep in. But the bed with the most opulent textiles, the *coedste met gordynen rabat ende tapytsche saerge*, or the bed with curtains, a *rabat* and a blanket made from tapestry, was not placed in one of the most frequently used rooms of the house but was stored away in the attic together with some pieces of clothing, a table and some cushions. A more ‘sober’ bed, without the curtains but still with a tapestry blanket, was positioned downstairs in the unidentified ‘room’ – a room that had the potential to receive and entertain guests. Perhaps Cathelyne thought it no longer necessary or even appropriate to put her marriage bed in the centre of her home? Or is this an illustration of a gradual move of the bed from the more public spaces of the house to the privacy of a separate bedroom? The fact remains that beds derived a lot of their value from their symbolic meaning as well. They were a frequent gift in wills from mothers to their daughters or aunts to their nieces or from mistresses to their domestic servant girls. Bedlinens were also vital parts of a dowry, because clean sheets, blankets and cushions were considered indispensable for a good night’s sleep. So in general, the bed was a strong symbol for marriage, the household and the creation of a home.

The bedding of some particular beds included bed curtains as well, colouring the interior, but also granting the bed status and prestige and dividing it from the rest of the room. Curtains protected the sleepers from draughts and cold. Draped around the bed, they made sleeping far more comfortable in houses where cracks and crevices were omnipresent. Nonetheless, when looking in the inventories, we see that not every bed was dressed with curtains. Moreover, throughout the period, we see little change in the total number of beds with curtains per sample period, with only a slight increase throughout the entire sixteenth century. So despite the comforts these textiles could offer, the majority of beds were not dressed with curtains. Antony Buxton came to a similar conclusion in his study of non-elite households of the market town of Thame in Oxfordshire in the seventeenth century. He calculated that only 14 per cent of the total sleeping furniture in the Thame inventories consisted of curtained and canopied bedsteads.
In each sample period, it is clear that each household owned on average at least one bed (with bedframe and mattress) (table 16), but also that not every household owned a bed with curtains. The mean numbers per sample period are somewhat misleading, however, because the mean number of beds with curtains per household is reduced by the small number of curtained beds in the lowest social groups. In table 17, we therefore break the calculation down per social group for sample period 1 (1438–1444) and sample period 5 (1559–1574).

Differences between the two sample periods are notable, but it is also clear that the higher up the social scale, the more likely that people owned at least one bed with curtains. This is not surprising, because fabrics required a certain investment, an investment the lower social groups were not always able to make. So our image of
the late medieval curtained bedstead is probably more coloured by the contemporary imagery of wealthier beds and households.

Scholars have discussed two other important motivations behind the use of bed curtains, which could shed light on their absence or presence: curtains would increase the privacy of the sleepers, creating a private, secluded micro space within the macro space of the room and the use of opulent curtains would lend the bed and the family a certain prestige. The quality of the fabric (and perhaps also the quality of the colouring) might have been an important tool in the representation of status. However, it appears that in the Bruges sample, curtains were only exceptionally made from expensive silks such as tulle and caffia, or taffeta. Indeed, we have found only four cases of silk curtains out of a total of seventy-five cases in which the type of fabric was known. One pair of curtains, a canopy and a rabat were of the more luxurious caffia or a silk, which Isis Sturtewagen describes as patterned silk velvet, with floral or geometric patterns. It could be both of a single colour or multicoloured. These particular textiles were part of a set of the bed furniture of the wealthy Hispano-Bruges Marie Pardo, who lived in a large house near the Borse, the city’s stock exchange (1597). Unfortunately, the caffia textiles were lumped together with all the other textiles of the household, which makes it nearly impossible to link them to a specific bed in a specific room in her house. So these bed garments were categorised separately from their furniture, though the bedding that was on the bed during appraisal was registered together with the furniture. It suggests that these caffia textiles were not used at all times and brought out only on special occasions.

Most curtains, however, were made from less expensive say (saai) (64), and a few from other fabrics such as cloth (1), linen (5) or serge (1). Say was a light woolen fabric, produced in the southern Low Countries on a large scale (and often imported from England or the Northern Netherlands) and therefore available to a wide range of consumers. Say was much lighter than tapestry and cloth (the latter was used to make warm outer garments) and probably also more permeable, permitting the passage of air and light when necessary, ideal for curtains that were used for protecting sleepers during the night. Say curtains were certainly not the most exclusive or expensive ones, especially not when compared to silk, so the argument of using high-quality, expensive curtains to show off status might be true for the higher elites in society, but was less valid for the middling groups of Bruges urban society.

Say was also an important fabric used in dress, but its popularity declined during the sixteenth century, because some say was submitted to fulling and thus no longer showed the weave structure. Sturtewagen has shown that surface textures on
the fabrics for garments were purposely sought after precisely because of a certain
fascination with the reflection of light. But while the fabrics used in the clothing
trade became much more diversified – from the mid sixteenth century, a whole ar-
ray of light textile products was encountered, made by the so-called Nouvelle Dra-
perie Légère, together with a variety of mixed weave fabrics of wool, silk or cotton
– say remained the main fabric for bed curtains even at the end of the sixteenth
century. So the fashionable new fabrics were not used in the creation of the textile
environment of the bed. In the context of dress, the outer garments were still dom-
inated by the more ‘traditional fabrics’ such as cloth and say, whereas silk and the
new light woollens were predominantly used ‘for the layer of garments underneath’,
so the garments people wore when at home. In other words, in terms of fabric,
there was a discrepancy between fabrics used for dress worn at home and fabrics
used as decorative bed textiles.

In the first sample period (1438–1444), the few beds with curtains we found
were nearly always placed in rooms with a public character. But the use of bed curt-
ains changed, however, throughout the sixteenth century. The share of beds with
curtains in rooms with a public character declined tremendously to nearly one half.
It seems that the wealthier one was, the less likely it was that the dweller would situ-
ate a bed with curtains in a room with a public character. There were, of course, still
higher middle-group households who intentionally put canopied and curtained
beds in rooms into which people could be invited (such as the dining room, the salette
or the front room), but at the same time, it appears that there was a move
away from potentially ‘public’ spaces (spaces with plenty of seats, a table, a hearth,
decoration, etc.) towards the privacy of the inner home. It follows the trend on the
sleeping room; in houses where there was enough space, people were inclined to
create a separate room for sleeping that was more private than others and only oc-
casionally open for visitors. Sarti, Thorton and Currie saw a similar trend in the
larger Renaissance houses of Florence and Milan; there were more rooms with a
bed separate from the one used for receiving guests ‘to create a relatively private per-
sonal space’, a trend that was also similar to what Carolien De Staelen witnessed in
sixteenth-century Antwerp: a growing separation between reception and sleeping
functions. So canopied or curtained beds might just as well have stayed prestig-
iouous and linked with marital life, but the marital bed itself was placed less and less
often in the more public spaces of the house. Perhaps the physical act of sleeping
itself (and all it entails such as dressing and undressing oneself, smells and sounds
of sleeping) was no longer associated with public life and the eyes of outsiders?
A phenomenon comparable to the fact that the physical act of eating was becoming less the subject of discussion, whereas dining practices, manners and the social character of the dinner party were growing in importance.¹⁰¹
To conclude, beds were omnipresent in many households throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but only a minority of these beds were decorated with curtains or a *rabat* (fig. 26 & fig. 27). Besides protecting the sleepers from cold, curtains were also used to denominate the most important bed(s) for the more important people of the household. Throughout the sixteenth century, especially in the wealthier households, these curtained beds were less and less present in the more public spaces. This might point to a growing importance attached to privacy and the controlled or semi-accessibility of private spaces or might indicate that the majority of middle-class people were not able or keen to retain in their domestic space a special ‘status’ bed used only for performative or conspicuous purposes. As
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in the previous section on seating furniture and comfort, it seems that the function of textiles such as curtains somehow changed. And choices were made as to which bed would be equipped with curtains and in which type of room this bed would be situated. Perhaps the character of how to showcase status and the ability to provide for comfort changed?

Keeping Up Appearances? Tapestry in the Domestic Interior

One of the merchants of the Spanish nation, Vélasco de Béjar, also related to the Hispano-Bruges Pardo family, died in 1555 and left an inventory and a will, which were drafted and preserved by the notary of the Spanish nation, Pedro de Paredes. Vélasco and his wife, Catalina Coquill, owned several tapestry hangings of different styles, sizes and provenance, all described in great detail. Their house had two dining rooms, one on the street side and one facing the courtyard. The walls of the two dining rooms were completely covered in tapestries. Even the windows of the larger dining room facing the courtyard were fully dressed in tapestries as well. Each separate piece of hanging was meticulously described in size and design; sometimes even the background colour of the tapestry was mentioned. All of these hangings were of the *verdure*, or foliage, type. Not only the walls of these rooms were decorated with lively weaves; even the bed in the larger dining room was covered with a large and colourful tapestry bedspread. More precisely, it was *een grote tappytse saerdse groote feullaige dienende inde groote eidcamere jeghen het hof rondomme met lysten of boorden vier ellen en half hoogh ende drie ellen en half breed dienende op tbedde van tgroote lydechampt*, or a large tapestry bedspread with foliage and decorative framework, located in the large dining room facing the courtyard, four ells high and three and a half ells wide, to cover the bed of the large bedstead. Besides the *chambers*, or the tapestry ensembles that filled the rooms to the brim with tapestry, Vélasco de Béjar and his wife possessed other tapestry bedspreads and several bench rugs as well, also of the *verdure* type. Some of the bankers were described as *met personaigen*, without further specification. Furthermore, they owned no fewer than twenty-four cushions or four sets of six cushions with the same theme; six had a rose in the centre, six the coat of arms of Vélasco’s parents-in-law, or the *wapenen vande overledene vader ende joncva moedere*, another six a red heart in the middle of the cushion and six tapestry cushions with no further specification. Two pieces
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of tapestry were labelled *velu*, hand-knotted with high pile, and the base colour of these tapestries was defined as violet and red, respectively.\textsuperscript{104} So Vélasco de Béjar and his wife owned tapestries in many guises, from opulent wall hangings covering entire rooms to tapestry cushions and colourful tapestry bedspreads. One could easily state that de Béjar’s ownership of tapestries to some extent resembles the lavishly decorated *chambres* of kings and dukes or the high urban elites. Hangings were important pieces of decoration, because they were ‘markers of wealth, power and distinction’ and because ‘tapestries functioned as eloquent expressions of their owners’ ambitions, accomplishments, policies, threats, faith and taste’.\textsuperscript{105} However, this case of tapestry ownership and tapestry use was rather exceptional in Bruges, especially for the middling classes. The majority of the references to tapestry in the Bruges inventories are about objects – utensils even – made from *tapisserie*, items such as cushions, bedspreads and table covers.

Until recently, however, scholars were primarily focused on the most imposing of hangings, the sumptuous silk weavings with gold and silver thread (tapestries that were also best preserved) and used only on special occasions.\textsuperscript{106} Moreover, the study of tapestry and the definition of the ‘tapestry’ article has long been centred around surviving hangings.\textsuperscript{107} Guy Delmarcel unintentionally stresses the dangers of a study of just these remains, by referring to them as ‘archaeological remains of the art of tapestry’ although he himself is guilty of using only surviving hangings as a source material to base his study on.\textsuperscript{108} Meanwhile, scholars have started to realise that tapestry came in various forms and qualities, especially in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{109} The well-known tapestry hangings themselves varied greatly in size, quality and price in this period – from expensive Brussels tapestry hangings to lower-end *verdure* tapestry from Oudenaarde\textsuperscript{110} and also Bruges – and were supplemented by other forms of tapestry that themselves varied greatly in quality and price, such as woven pillow covers, bench, table and chimney rugs and woven bedding.\textsuperscript{111} Even the duke of Burgundy himself, Philip the Bold, ordered a *chambre*, or an ensemble of tapestry goods, in 1410, which included not only wall hangings but also bench covers, couch covers and tapestry squares.\textsuperscript{112}

Especially because there was ‘space in the medieval trade for the production of tapestry of varying degrees of quality’\textsuperscript{113} and therefore for cheaper variants of the product – such as those made out of wool instead of silk – tapestry-producing centres, including Bruges, set out to produce a more standardised and therefore cheaper mass product attainable for a larger group of potential consumers already in the late fifteenth century. Guy Delmarcel and Erik Duverger both specify that the shops
and workshops of tapestry weavers in the city of Bruges had a wide selection of figured carpets, verdures, cushion covers, banking and tablecloths and bedspreads displayed, all ready-made for on spec sale (fig. 28–30).\textsuperscript{114} Indeed, both authors agree that one of the reasons why only few pieces of Bruges tapestry are still preserved today had to do with the fact that late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Bruges weavers produced tapestry predominantly intended for daily use.\textsuperscript{115}

The cushions, bankers, bed curtains and upholstery of seats discussed in the previous sections were not the only types of textiles that granted specific pieces of furniture a particular place or a special role in the spaces and rituals of daily life. Other types of household textiles, such as textile wall decorations, table rugs and cupboard covers were all part of the same ‘textile environment’ of the interior. We know that most bed curtains were made from light woollen fabrics such as say, with some exceptions, but most of the other textile objects in the interior were made from tapestry.

Graph 15 unmistakably emphasises the large presence of tapestry in the interior as it shows for each object type the most common type of fabric used (when the fabric was mentioned in the inventory). Tapestry and carpet were put into two different categories. Tapestry was woven and could be made from different types of fabric such as silk and wool. Carpet, or \textit{carpette}, was probably also a certain type of weaving, but differed somehow from tapestry and intended to cover objects, not walls.\textsuperscript{116} So it was appreciated because it had the look of a woven fabric, but was cheaper than tapestry. Many bedspreads and table covers were made from \textit{carpette}. The two fabrics did not differ much in resale value, although some pieces of tapestry were clearly much more expensive than any type of carpet. Textile expert Peter Stabel proposes that carpet was thus a different type of tapestry, not necessarily of lesser quality.\textsuperscript{117}

Although the precise type of fabric is not always specified by the appraiser, the relative preponderance of tapestry objects is undeniably clear. The categories of \textit{canopy} – which comprises canopies or covers of mirrors and which were predominantly made of silk – and of \textit{cupboard covers} are both exceptions to the rule, together with the aforementioned bed curtains, which were primarily made from say. Cupboard covers were made from lighter fabrics, such as say, linen and cloth. These kinds of fabrics were much lighter than tapestry and easier to fold and handle than the stiffer woven fabrics. And because devotional paintings were often displayed on top of a cupboard, we may assume that the focus was on these images and not on the fabric underneath. Moreover, as we have seen, many such cupboards with devotional paintings and candlesticks mimicked church altars, so the cloth on top of the cupboard might also mimic the altar cloth the priest used for drying his hands during Mass.
Fig. 28. Bruges-styled verdure of wool and silk, fragment, Bruges, © Musea Brugge, www.artinflanders.be

Fig. 29. Bruges-styled tapestry hanging of wool and silk, Bruges, © Musea Brugge, www.artinflanders.be
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Fig. 30. Cushion cover with the arms of Sacheverell, Silk and wool, with silver and silver-gilt thread, Sheldon Tapestry Workshops (maker), Warwickshire (possibly, made), 1600-1620 (made), © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Graph 15. Fabrics and Decorative Textiles

Source: Database of inventories © IB, JDG & IS
Bench covers and *saarges*, or bedspreads, were in the majority of cases, made from tapestry, but the number is particularly striking in the case of cushions. Nearly 80 per cent of all the cushions of which the material was mentioned were labelled as *tapijts kussens*, or cushions made from tapestry. The same applies to bankers or bench covers – approximately 80 per cent of which were identified as tapestry.

Table covers in particular were made either from tapestry or from *carpette*. The table covers in graph 16 were of a more decorative nature and used to decorate tables – not for covering the table during dinner. Sometimes, plain white linen or cloth tablecloths were spread over the decorative table covers to protect the fabric from stains and greasy hands. According to Marco Spallanzani, these rugs to cover tables had a purely ornamental function. Coloured table covers were mentioned only in the inventories from the fifth sample period (1559–1574) onwards, so from the second part of the sixteenth century. They were often stored in the *bottelarij*, or the pantry, in larger houses, together with other table furnishings, cutlery, dishes and plates. When in use, we could find coloured table covers especially in the dining room and the *salette*, both rooms where guests could be invited for dinner. But table covers were also used as a decorative feature for tables in sleeping rooms and front rooms.

In general, it seems that when people wanted to cover furniture to embellish the wooden structures of chairs, benches, beds and tables, tapestry was the preferred medium. It was as if items of furniture were ‘dressed’ in it. Though objects of say
and cloth, such as bed curtains, *saarges* and cupboard covers were often colourful and therefore visible as well, many art and textile historians have stated that tapestry could be used more easily to communicate subliminal messages of status, family lineage and taste and figured well in a newly developing taste for luxurious-looking, colourful fabrics with contrasting and light-reflecting textures obvious in the domain of dress.\(^{121}\) Cushions, tablecloths, bench covers, wall decorations and spreads were in general all attractive to the eyes of the observer and were to be used, felt and experienced by visitor and host alike.

Nearly all households of the wealthier middle groups owned at least one piece of tapestry (table 18). The mean number of tapestry objects even increases for the wealthiest group throughout the sixteenth century, whereas the number for the middling groups remains more or less steady. We know that from the late fifteenth century onwards, a lot of tapestry-producing centres were embarking on the production of a more standardised and therefore cheaper mass product attainable for a larger group of potential consumers. So thanks to the local production of on spec goods, people started to buy and use the fabrics that were previously only within the reach of the court and a rich elite. At the same time, however, these middle-class consumers had

<table>
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<tr>
<th>SAMPLE PERIOD</th>
<th>SOCIAL GROUP</th>
<th>NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS</th>
<th>NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH TAPESTRY OBJECTS</th>
<th>SUM OF TAPESTRY OBJECTS</th>
<th>MEAN</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>1500–1510</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6.00</td>
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<tr>
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<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>161</td>
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<tr>
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<td>33</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>High</td>
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<td>13</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Database of inventories © IB, JDG & IS
to satisfy themselves with lesser-quality varieties of fabrics, because high-end and high-quality silk and tapestry were still available only to the richest in society.

In this context, there is a certain similarity to the ownership of silks in clothing. Earlier on, owning and wearing silks such as velvets, brocades and satins were the prerogative of the elites. According to Jeroen Puttevils, the market for silks was a limited one, ‘dominated by the luxurious consumption of silks by the urban high nobility’. But the genesis of a ‘local silk production made it possible, in theory at least, to offer luxuriously looking but at the same time reasonably affordable fabrics [...] to an increasing group of people’. So a cheaper silk fabric that was woven from half satin and half silk (i.e. Bruges satin) became increasingly popular among the middling social groups to use in dress but also in accessories. So it was the best of both worlds, because the fabric was cheaper and therefore easier to afford, but it still retained the ‘luscious look of real silk satin’. And here as well, Sturtewagen concludes that ‘during the sixteenth century the number of half silk and silk objects mentioned in the inventories increases considerably, although surely, this middling class consumption should not be over-estimated compared to the expenditure of the court.’ Silk was therefore no longer the prerogative of the higher elites and came within the reach of other social layers of society – which, to some extent, also explains the flood of sumptuary legislation ‘that swamped large parts of Europe during the late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period, but remained largely absent in the Low Countries’.

So the middling groups clearly owned lower-quality but equally splendid tapestry objects, though the number of tapestry wall hangings was limited. Tapestry objects were mainly used as functional objects or props, such as cushions and bedspreads, and only rarely as wall decoration. People had good alternatives or substitutes for the more expensive tapestry hangings, such as larger canvas paintings (see previous chapter), so there was no need to invest in expensive tapestry hangings. But the question remains why people would prefer to have tapestry as the most important fabric of their textile environment.

Though Bruges harboured several ateliers, it was certainly not the main centre for tapestry production in the Low Countries at that time. Brussels, Oudenaarde, Arras and Tournai produced far larger quantities of tapestry and were widely known for quality in both fabric and design. Antwerp acted as an important distribution centre for the marketing of tapestry from other urban centres. But especially in the fifteenth century, the Bruges tapestry industry was thriving and was even attractive to foreigners, because several foreign masters bought citizenship and membership
Guy Delmarcel claims that most tapestry coming off the Bruges looms was specifically characterised as a type of millefleurs tapestry with a central coat of arms or central cartouche with figures set on a densely flowered ground, on the one hand, and as figurative sets characterised by ‘the direct simplicity of their drawing’, on the other hand. Delmarcel asserts furthermore that the Bruges market was also an export market with a large Spanish outlet, especially for heraldic tapestries and with a preference for ‘a more traditional presentation’, similar to their taste for paintings.

Although tapestry objects were easily the most visually alluring interior objects, references to these objects in inventories were mostly brief, without much detail of the iconography or weaving structure. We have found only sixteen references to the iconography or the aesthetic layout of the weave out of a total of 740 entries (individual entries, so without exact numbers). Four references included cushions with armorial illustrations and a tapestry tablecloth representing a coat of arms. Two bedspreads were ghefigureerd, or had a figurative design, and one bedspread was labelled as a verdure, or a design with foliage, flowers or animals. In addition, there were nine more references for thirty-two individual pieces of tapestry, where more information on the design of the weave was revealed. François de la Vega (1545) owned tapestries with greens, flowers and animals (verdures) and displayed them in his dining room. Cornelis van Praet (1561), who lived near the Koningsbrug by the river, displayed six pieces of tapestry in his dining room, together with a tapestry tablecloth to cover the large square table and two tapestry or embroidered cushions that were part of his textile environment as well. In general, the tapestry objects that were given most attention in the inventories were owned by the upper social layers of Bruges society – such as the many foreign merchants eager to buy luxury products to furnish their own homes and to export to their home countries – and were mainly used as wall hangings. These were probably also the most expensive ones, with a high resale value. So the appraiser and the family of the deceased had every reason to note these objects in great detail.

Indeed, the only inventories that do give more information on the iconography and even sometimes the provenance of the tapestry hangings and other tapestry objects were nearly all of members (or spouses of these members) of the Spanish nation. This higher degree of detail in the description of objects in these inventories may be due to the fact that most were drawn up by a notary appointed by the nation itself and not by the appraisers working for the city. Jacquemyne van Steeland (1583) was married to Pedro de Oroses, consul and bailiff of the nation of Biscaye in
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Bruges, and owned three pieces of tapestry, again of the *verdure* type, with coats of arms. Though we do not know where she bought her tapestries or who delivered them, judging from the iconography of the tapestry described, it seems likely that she bought tapestry that was Bruges-made or had a clear Bruges-like iconography. The tapestries were displayed in a room above the hall, or *inde tweetste camere boven de zaele*, where a bed with yellow curtains, a green rug on the chimney, benches and a wardrobe were found as well – probably not the most public and luxurious room in the house. Also members of the wealthy Pardo family possessed a large collection of tapestry hangings. Jozijne Pardo, married to Adriaen De Bosch, died in 1574 and left behind an impressive legacy. *Tapisserie* was one of the object clusters in her inventory, following the silverwork and preceding all the linen. Jozijne Pardo and her husband clearly loved the more fashionable tapestry collections in addition to the more traditional (and often less expensive) *verdure*, because their inventory comprised no fewer than *zes sticken van bruesselsche tapitserie met personnageyn*, or six pieces of figurative Brussels tapestry, and *vijf sticken van tapitserie van feuillage*, or five pieces of *verdure*. Besides these hangings, Jozijne owned many tapestry cushions, all bearing a coat of arms.

As explained above, the Spanish nation in Bruges had its own notary and therefore its own system of administration. In the archives of that organisation, we could find five more inventories, of which copies were not found in the city archives, but which yield important information on the ownership of decorative textiles, especially tapestry. Jasper de Caestre, son of Diego de Canuna, native of Burgos in Spain and bailiff of the Spanish nation, died in 1569. He and his wife did not own any woven tapestry hangings, but they did own tapestry cushions and bedspreads and *cinq pieches de tapyts dhispagne de cuyr dore*, or five pieces of Spanish tapestry or gold leather, which were displayed in the hall. This is quite unusual for Bruges – only two other inventories refer to gold leather hangings, of which one was from a descendant of a renowned Hispano-Bruges family. The production of locally produced gold leather on a larger scale began only at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries in Mechelen, the main production centre for this luxury product in the southern Low Countries. So Jasper de Caestre’s gold leather hangings were probably imported from Spain as well, because most of the gold leather that was consumed in Europe was mainly produced in Spanish urban centres and, from there, exported to other European regions and to the colonies.

In general, it seems that the vast majority of the tapestry hangings in the inventories had a *verdure* theme, though some were specifically labelled as made in
avant-garde Brussels or according to the Brussels figurative style. However, the absence of provenance data makes it difficult to determine where the hangings were produced, distributed and bought. But because Bruges tapestries were sought after in overseas Spanish regions\textsuperscript{141} and they were exported by Bruges ships from Sluis,\textsuperscript{142} it does not seem implausible that many of these hangings were Bruges-made goods. Of the other tapestry products we know very little in terms of iconography, except for some cushions with coat of arms. In all likelihood, it would have been a mixture of figurative scenes and foliage potentially combined with coats of arms (i.e. the Bruges style) – themes that, in principle, did not differ much from the iconography on the expensive tapestry hangings in the court rooms of the people from the upper layers of society.\textsuperscript{143}

What did differ, however, was the way tapestries were used; the more expensive wall hangings that covered the walls of palaces had to play an important but also active role in the events that took place in front of them. James Bloom even found that, in some contexts, tapestry hangings with specific themes were often replaced by other hangings that would fit the event and the company better.\textsuperscript{144} Given the limited number of tapestries in the houses of the urban middle classes and given that most tapestries there was made into usable objects such as cushions and bedspreads, we believe that the ownership and display of tapestry in itself was deemed important to invoke its ability to represent status, taste and affluence – and above all, to embellish the interior with bright colour.

A Colourful Interior

That interiors were colourful seems beyond dispute. Colourful wall hangings and murals must have embellished the walls of many houses,\textsuperscript{145} whereas decorative textiles were invaluable in vivifying the whole of the interior. Adding to this the different types and colours of the woods of the benches, chairs, tables and chests, the shining surfaces of brass and copper chandeliers, pewter dishes and metal pots, the paints of pictures and statuettes, the interior certainly became a true collection of a wide spectrum of colour.

In terms of colour schemes, Giorgio Riello’s argument that textiles historians focus almost exclusively on dress applies once more. Most literature on the use of colours in late medieval society tends to concentrate on the colours in the clothing
of the urban middling and higher social groups. Based on city accounts, portraits, dyers’ manuals and probate inventories, interesting findings were made. Isis Sturtewagen noticed, for instance, that black was, by far, the favourite colour in Bruges, followed in popularity only by various shades of red, and to a lesser extent, blues and greys, brown, green and white. The colour black was predominantly used for outer garments worn outside the home, whereas more colourful dress was worn closer to the body and thus most probably at home. Consequently, because we mostly find vibrant colours in most interiors (especially blue-, green- and red-coloured textiles) rather than black, the indoor outfits of the citizens fit perfectly well with the colour of their interiors. Moreover, Sturtewagen found only few changes in the use of colour during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in contrast to the use of fabrics and the decoration of garments. But as can be seen from the pie charts (graph 17), the colour spectrum for interior textiles was completely different from that of dress, and it showed a major shift throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in colour preferences from blue and red to predominantly green and red. Instead of a ‘shift to the Dark side’, we see the growing popularity of green and the declining importance of the colour blue. Raymond Van Uytven argued that blue as a colour for interior textiles gained attractiveness only from the fifteenth century onwards. So its popularity in Bruges was probably relatively short-lived and lasted only half a century. In contrast, the role of different shades of red seems to have remained unchanged over the two centuries. Violet, yellow and white became popular during the sixteenth century as well, though still in very small numbers. The colour black, increasingly popular for clothing, was no more than a rarity in the case of interior textiles.

Carolien De Staelen observed the same evolution in the colour scheme for the decorative textiles in the Antwerp inventories. Her findings underline the idea that this shift was not a unique Bruges phenomenon and that explanations should probably be set in a broader context. The shift from blue to green in the colour of predominantly cushions, curtains and bedspreads is also noticeable in contemporary paintings. On fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century paintings and miniatures, bed curtains are predominantly blue, whereas the curtains of late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century beds were bright or dark green (and on some occasions even red). For the importance of black as a colour of attire, Sturtewagen proposes the hypothesis that it was not so much the colour of black that came into fashion, but the symbolic values of authority, modesty and decency, seriousness and competence – ideal for ‘formal’ outer garments – attached to it that became important.
Uytven argued for a symbolic language of colours as well, especially for the colour green.¹⁵⁴ His findings argued that the colour green was often associated with loyalty, love, newness, joy and fertility, which would be the main reason why green was used for bed hangings in paintings and in courtly literature.¹⁵⁵ Van Uytven’s argument will certainly be valuable for textiles in paintings, but as Jeanne Nuechterlein warns us, caution is needed when props in painted scenes are compared with objects in reality, because they often have a symbolic layer that did not necessarily correspond to real life experience.¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the popularity of the vibrant colours of blue, green and red as colours of the interior and of domestic life, as opposed to the popular colour black of outdoor clothing, might underline a separation between the life indoors and outdoors.

Curtains and cushions occur in the earliest sample periods and remain present in the interior of many Bruges citizens’ houses throughout the whole period under study. However, their colour palette changed. In the fifteenth-century samples,
curtains were always coloured blue. In the first part of the sixteenth century, curtains changed to blue, green and red, but in the second part of the sixteenth century, the colour blue disappeared completely. The colour palette of cushions shows a similar pattern, though the evolution is less obvious. In the fifteenth-century samples, blue cushions were clearly more frequent than in sixteenth-century samples. But the opposite applied for the colour green. The colour palette of saerges, or bedspreads, was more variegated already from the beginning of the period and, besides blue and green, also included different reds, yellow, black and lots of white. The latter ones, the white bedspreads, were often specified as ‘Spanish’, probably referring to the type of wool that was used to make them.

The shift cannot immediately be explained by a shortage of dyes or any other problem on the supply and production side either, because according to Isis Sturtewagen citing Judith Hofenck de Graeff, ‘different shades of green were achieved by over-dying woad (i.e. the fermented leaves of the woad plant were used to produce the colour blue) with yellow; sometimes mixed with red, resulting in brownish green tones’. So the colours or dyestuffs in blue and yellow were still needed to produce the colour green. And also black colours were always obtained by a combination of red and blue dyeing. In Bruges, the craft of the blue dyers had the exclusive right to dye textiles blue using the raw materials woad and indigo. The red dyers were allowed to dye fabrics in different shades of red. These shades of red were produced using different types of raw materials, one more expensive than the others. The rarer the raw material, the more it granted prestige to the wearer or the owner of the dyed fabric. But unfortunately, no further details of the shades or qualities of the colours were given for the flat textiles.

Furthermore, the yellow dyestuff that was used for dying yellow and green was collected from both the locally cultivated weld (Reseda luteola) and since 1500, also from the fustic or dyer’s mulberry (Maclura tinctoria) that was imported from the New World. When combined with other dyestuffs and mordants, a range of yellow and greenish colours could be produced. Perhaps the greater availability of the latter raw material made it easier and cheaper for dyers to produce more greens? And perhaps this more extensive palette of colour variations made the colour more attractive for consumers?
Exposing or Storing Textiles: The *Garderobe* and the *Cleerschaprade*

Different types of objects were used to store the colourful textiles, such as chests, cupboards and wardrobes, but only two types of storage furniture, the *garderobe* and the *cleerschaprade*, were specifically named after their function of storing textiles.\(^{162}\) Presumably, the names of the two types of furniture were sometimes interchangeable, as De Staelen found in her research: the Antwerp canon Simon Moors, had a ‘groote garde robe ofte cleerscappraye’ (1598).\(^{163}\) It was not used just for storing pieces of clothing, but also for keeping household textiles such as napkins, sheets and tablecloths.

In the households of the fifteenth-century Bruges samples, the presence of a *cleerschaprade* is still rather an exception. The single woman Christine De Gheits (1438) was the only one to own an *amaires a mettre habis* in the first sample period (1438–1444).\(^{164}\) The same goes for clergymen Jan Badereau (1460), who was the only owner of a *cleerscaprade* in the second sample period (1450–1500).\(^{165}\) This type of furniture appeared most often from the fourth sample period (1528–1549) onwards and especially in the samples of the second half of the sixteenth century, which corresponds to the greater variation in furniture pieces in households throughout the sixteenth century. The *cleerschaprades* were generally located in rooms where storage furniture for textiles was needed: the ratios were highest for the back room, sleeping room, front room and hall. In the sleeping room, they were mainly used to store sheets, blankets, pillows and curtains, besides pieces of clothing. The *cleerschaprades* that were located in the halls were all used in the context of maintenance, laundry and general storage of different types of goods. The *cleerschaprades* in the front rooms were probably also used to store the textiles when these were not in use or were used to store extra pieces of household textiles and frequently used clothing. It is, however, difficult to know whether these pieces of storage furniture also had a performative function, comparable with the linen cupboards and cabinets in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch households Hester Dibbits described earlier.\(^{166}\) Some *cleerschaprades* were described as large, so they must have drawn the attention of visitors, especially in rooms people had to pass through when entering the house, such as the hall at the front of the house, or where they were received by the host, such as the front room. The pieces of furniture were never described as decorated or furnished in the inventories, but perhaps their size and appearance
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were more important and much more telling than their decoration and craftsmanship; the larger the *cleerschaprade*, the more textiles it could contain (fig. 31).

Like the *cleerschaprade*, the *garderobe* was relatively unknown in the earlier sample periods and more common from the second half of the sixteenth century on. The term was used to denote both a small room used to store household goods and a piece of storage furniture (probably a type of chest). One could suggest that both varieties of the *garderobe* fulfilled a similar function: both were used to store decorative textiles such as cushions, table covers and clothing.\(^{167}\) Jan Baptiste Lommelin (1569), for example, owned a *garderobe* as a piece of furniture where he kept two green silk and embroidered curtains that were remade and used as a table cover.\(^ {168}\) The *garderobes*, especially in their spatial form, were reserved only for the wealthier social groups.

People were most likely aware that certain chests, trunks and other kinds of furniture were often the repositories of valuable or frequently used objects.\(^ {169}\) This is illustrated not only by the locks and reinforced straps on chests and trunks of all sizes but also by the fact that when goods were seized or confiscated in case of debt, chests, coffins and trunks were often immediately locked and sealed by the bailiff. In this way, goods could not leave the house unnoticed, and they were kept together in the chest (preventing the estate from decreasing in value). The unfortunate servant girl of canon Jacob Vrombert (1502), for example, lost some of her personal

Fig. 31. Cabinet, 16th Century, Bruges, © Musea Brugge, www.artinflanders.be
possessions, because her master’s chests, which contained some of her own possessions, were already sealed by the bailiff during appraisal without her noticing: an interesting but unfortunate example of the effectiveness of the chest’s function of concealing and protecting goods. Both the garderobe and the cleerschaprade were used to conceal and protect the most expensive textiles (flat textiles and clothing), but at the same time, also hinted at their precious content and the related status of the household.

Conclusions

According to Giorgio Riello, the combination of textiles and furniture captures social and cultural practices that were less temporary than those associated with dress and clothing but also less structural than architecture and buildings. Throughout the sixteenth century, a changing interconnection between furniture and flat textiles as a proxy for the importance accorded to taste, elegance and posture and gradual changes in the nature of sociability and comfort could be noticed. It was a shift inherent of a prevailing civic culture; a culture that entailed a different kind of sociability from before, but also a culture in which design, posture, comfort, taste, touch, colour and variety were all deemed increasingly important. Tapestry as a fabric or weave, for example, represented first and foremost status, affluence but also taste and knowledge about what was fashionable. People used tapestry not only because it represented status but also because it had an important aesthetic appeal as well, because it added visual interest and it satisfied a taste for colour and texture. In other words, it was the design and the aspirational look of goods and the behaviour associated with them that were deemed most important for the urban middling groups, in this case more important perhaps than the intrinsic value. This civic culture did therefore not go as far as what De Clercq, Dumolyn and Haemers labelled ‘vivre noblement’, or emulating the lifestyle of the ennobled elite. The urban middle groups seem to have had their own use culture of luxury objects, fostering their own civic identity and social status.