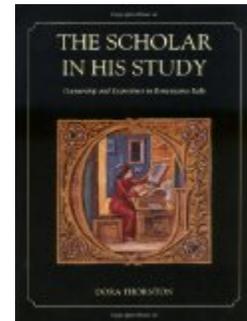


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dora Thornton. *The Scholar in His Study: Ownership and Experience in Renaissance Italy*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997. xi + 214 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-07389-8.

Reviewed by Georgen Gilliam (University of Wisconsin-Madison)
Published on H-LIS (January, 1999)



The Study Examined

Within the society of Renaissance Italy, politics and status informed all aspects of life. Dora Thornton, curator of the Renaissance collections in the Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities at the British Museum, shows that examining the material objects can reveal much about a culture. Her beautifully illustrated book, *The Scholar in His Study*, examines the study in Italy during the Renaissance. Their decor, the objects in them, and their place in Renaissance life is examined thoroughly and reveals significant features of Italian Renaissance culture, especially the society of the *gentilezza*—urbane sophisticates of the upper middle class.

The study in Renaissance Italy was a room of many purposes. It was a manifestation of social identity and a display of sophistication through decoration. It could serve as a repository of collections, a business office, and a family archive. It was often an indication of a desire for self-improvement and an appreciation of scholarship. The decorating of studies was an expensive business and supplied an entire subset of craftsmen with work to undertake the paneling, painting, specialized woodworking, furniture painting, etc. that such studies required. Markets thrived on selling the pouncepots, inkwells, storage boxes, and other items from the studies of deceased or bankrupt scholars. Artisans provided clever and beautiful examples of these objects, belying our notions of a separation between craft and fine art. The need for books to fill their shelves provided printers, binders, and papermakers a living. The studies of the *gentilezza* were an important part of the Renaissance

economy.

It is clear from the letters and diaries excerpted in Thornton's book that the study was often a chesspiece in an extended game of courtiership. Someone wanting to flatter a patron would build a study using the same design, or perhaps even borrow statuary to grace its decor. A fine collection housed in the study could be visited by many admirers, gaining the owner status. However, before we become too cynical about the study, it is important to heed the many testaments to self-improvement gained through reading and private contemplation of texts. Many writers in the Renaissance era believed the study should be kept strictly private and provide a place of solitude. Thornton quotes Montaigne's essay "On Solitude": "We should set aside a room, just for ourselves, at the back of the shop, keeping it entirely free and establishing there our true liberty, our principal solitude and asylum" (p. 177).

Thornton's investigation of the studies of Renaissance Italy focuses on those of the urban elite, using post-mortem inventories made of household goods. She is scrupulous in detailing the sources of this information, and the book is the result of both clever deductions and much meticulous work. She provides a lengthy concordance of all primary source materials used in her work, and her detailed footnoting of secondary sources provides evidence for the thoroughness of her research. The text is accompanied by many well chosen images of paintings showing studies (many are those of St. Jerome),

as well as pictures of objects from studies. Although the title would not suggest it, the book also details many women who owned studies, illustrating the topic with paintings showing women with their “studies” (then as now) often in the corners of their bedrooms, not in rooms of one’s own.

Over the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, the period of this historical investigation, there were changes in how the study was decorated and considered in Italian Renaissance society. Thornton notes that “the study as collection was to become a much wider phenomenon in the sixteenth century” (p. 8). However, the substance of these changes are not always clear, being only briefly noted and not detailed. Also, how these and other changes relate to other changing elements of Renaissance society is not elaborated. Shifts in scientific views certainly influenced the collecting activities of Renaissance individuals; the philosophical views or religious perspectives that an individual held may have influenced how the study was positioned in his (or her) life. Therefore, while this book illuminates many details of the lives of many individuals in the Renaissance, this lack of contextualizing makes it an excellent supplementary text on the period, but not a central one.

For those interested in library history, it must be

pointed out that this book is oriented towards private libraries, not public ones. However, because it is an excellent example of the use of material culture as a source of cultural information, it may be useful to anyone interested in the library as an institution involved in a system of technology and economics. Thornton examines the ramifications of the items that were typically used in the study and makes perceptive points about that culture as a result. Perhaps a study of the vast array of gadgets that librarians use in their work would be as revealing. Instead of pouncepots, convex mirrors, red inkpots, and hourglasses, we were sold by Melvil Dewey, as Wayne Wiegand pointed out recently (*American Libraries*, August 1998, p. 112), “the L.B. Perforating Stamp, Russell’s Common-Sense Revolving Book Case, and the Reader’s Readyrest Perfect Vacuum Inkstand” (p. 112). Today we use computers, sensor strips, and automatically printed checkout notices. What kind of conclusions would an examination of our material items reveal about our own library history and the place of our libraries within the economic and cultural milieu of our time? Perhaps Thornton’s book provides an example.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://www.h-net.msu.edu/~lis>

Citation: Georgen Gilliam. Review of Thornton, Dora, *The Scholar in His Study: Ownership and Experience in Renaissance Italy*. H-LIS, H-Net Reviews. January, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2707>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.