

Title:

Gender, Identity and the Imagination: Baby Houses in Eighteenth-Century England

Abstract:

This paper demonstrates how personal identities were constructed in miniature domestic spaces by exploring the baby house held at Uppark Park in West Sussex. Brought to the estate by Sarah Lethieullier when she married Sir Matthew Fetherstonhaugh in 1735, it is one of the earliest known domestic miniatures in England. Baby houses have almost exclusively been treated in scholarship as a pedagogical tool for young women to learn about the households they would inevitably oversee, or have been thought to grow out of the trend for creating cabinets of curiosities, which displayed fashionable, extraordinary, and often exotic collections. This paper reveals how owners of English baby houses such as Sarah Lethieullier organised their miniature properties to instead represent a personal container of memories. The rooms depicted in the baby house highlight her individual taste through the assembly of old and new objects with what would have been a mixture of dated and fashionable domestic interiors. A number of rooms that would be typically found in houses of a miniature or large scale from the period are pointedly missing from Uppark's baby house, and so this paper uncovers the ways in which women exerted their creativity and imagination in their organisation of miniature domestic spaces. I argue that baby houses were seen as domestic spaces that encouraged the portrayal of make-believe worlds, rather than a miniature embodiment of the houses within which they stood; they allowed for a freedom of expression that was otherwise impossible for them to create within their life-size homes. Finally, by investigating eighteenth-century representations of domestic space such as baby houses, this paper situates itself within a wider discourse of what 'home' and 'homeliness' meant to the Georgians.

Biography:

Helena Kaznowska is a DPhil candidate in her first year of study in the Faculty of English at the University of Oxford. Her thesis explores imagined and ideal homes in England between 1600-1735. Helena also has a wider interest in heritage and currently works as a historical consultant for the National Trust. She is an associate of the Ashmolean Museum and her academic research is in collaboration with the Geffrye Museum of the Home.

AV:

PowerPoint

Chair:

Would be happy to, if needed