

## **Proposal for RESCO Study Day, 'At Home': Exploring Eighteenth-Century Domestic Space**

### STAGING FICTIONS OF PRIVACY IN EARLY-MODERN LONDON HOUSEHOLDS

by Paula Humfrey

We know the value of a multidisciplinary approach to studying the early modern past, recognizing that people created key self-representations in the form of artifacts and settings specific to their activities. To study these, we draw methods from art, design, architecture, geography, anthropology, archeology, economics, psychology, criticism and history. One important concept that practitioners in each of these fields encounter is the idea of privacy.

A concern with the theme of privacy is obviously very much in focus where early modern dwellings and the households set within them are under study. In the preindustrial metropolis, the house was the locus not only of familial interaction but also of community reputation and credit. Houses were also the seat of businesses, trades and light industry. Domestic life was central to urban interaction between all kinds of people.

Modern uses of privacy include autonomy; space for unfettered, unobserved self-expression; and intentional withdrawal into seclusion. I suggest here that these were not dominant parts of the definition of privacy in the early modern urban setting. Ideas about the utility of privacy transcended class lines in early eighteenth-century London, but early modern notions of privacy were very different from modern ones.

In a primarily oral, face-to-face culture, the way one represented oneself and was represented by others mattered a great deal. Privacy was determined by both official and subversive information exchange precipitated within the walls of houses. Every dwelling was potentially a public stage on account of the inter-permeability of public and private spaces in the metropolis. Domestic rooms were tableaux vivants upon which representations of self and others were set and enacted.

Rooms were settings for self-representational tableaux when others in the household or neighbourhood were watching. Accordingly, we can learn a great deal about the nature of privacy in early modern dwellings from descriptions of household objects and settings, because actions taken and commentary concerning furnishings and durable goods remain indicative of the structure of social relationships.

This paper offers a snapshot of London at the start of the eighteenth century, derived from my research for a micro-history of one female servant's London community. This was a constellation of people linked by their mutual associations and by their association with a domestic named Phebe Harrison. My research relies on depositions taken before the London Court of Arches. The deposition texts point to important features of the material culture of the household.

In early modern London, the main utility of privacy was the protection of personal information, rather than privacy having a primary spatial reference. However, informational privacy had to be literally staged, as it greatly depended on the persuasiveness of the domestic tableaux that supported it. The fabric and contents of houses were key to this effort.