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The Material Culture of Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Dutch Dollhouses: Replication, Reproduction & Imitation

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Abstract

A number of collector's cabinets known as *pronk* or luxury dollhouses were formed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by women in the Netherlands. The present study examines the dollhouse cabinets as exemplars of material culture collections assembled by female collectors. Primary sources give outsized attention to the materiality of these structures, often noting types of substance, quality, and craft. Despite what appears to be a straightforward transcription of the domestic world in miniature, the dollhouses are a multifaceted intersection of authentic materials as well as clever imitations or substitutions. The dollhouse collections are themselves predicated on the notion of reproduction as they replicate the home in small scale. Documents from the period provide a rich source from which to probe the meanings invested in the materiality of these dollhouses as sources of wonder. Economic theory from the period sheds new light on the dollhouses as forums for imitation and novelty, concepts that inform the innovative nature of these collections as it intertwined with issues of multiples and miniaturization.

Keywords: seventeenth century material culture; eighteenth-century material culture; Dutch dollhouse; *pronk poppenhuis*; Early Modern Netherlands; imitations; reproductions; doll culture; cabinet collecting; history of collections; Early Modern collecting; eighteenth-century economic theory; women and collecting; Early Modern women; Netherlandish dollhouse; *pronk* dollhouses; miniatures; wonder



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1. Introduction

A number of collector's cabinets known as *pronk* or luxury dollhouses were formed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by women in the Netherlands, a type similar to the example of Petronella Oortman's collection (Figure 1) from c. 1686–1710.¹ Jet Pijzel-Dommisse first observed the relationship between Netherlandish dollhouses and *kunstkammers*, setting the stage for further studies of the dollhouses as fully formed cabinet collections (Pijzel-Dommisse 2000, pp. 13–17). In these contexts, extant cabinets provide valuable material evidence to better understand collecting practices for women of the period. They also assist in forming a more complete picture of the scope and modes of cabinet collecting in the Netherlands and Europe (Noorman et al. 2024, pp. 6–39). The cabinets are remarkable, even within collecting practices of the day, because they take the highly unusual form of dollhouses that center the domestic world as a site for further exploration, facilitated through small-scale objects that were crafted from authentic and imitation materials. The dollhouse format suggests a range of deeper meanings that invite a new kind of curiosity about the household, and they elevate the home as a subject that merits attention, presented within the wonder and spectacle of a cabinet display. The

present study is predicated on how miniaturizing the materiality of the home in the form of dollhouses enfold concepts of reproduction, imitation and repetition to construct essential meanings for the cabinets as replicas of the home. In the dollhouse cabinets, the clever nature of smallness is heightened by the haptic emphasis on the physical construction of the cabinets and their furnishings, an approach that resonates with ideas of novelty and innovation from economic theory of the period.



Figure 1. Dollhouse of Petronella Oortman, c. 1686–1710. Variable materials, h 255 × w 190 × d 78 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Dollhouse cabinets function as material culture conglomerates that present most every item found in a financially comfortable middle-class home of the period. The interiors seem to present a complete, perfected vision of home within architectonic enclosures, as seen in Petronella de la Court’s dollhouse, c. 1670–1690 (Figure 2). Furniture, linens, dishes and other household goods materialize the idea of “home,” using a vocabulary of everyday artifacts. These domestic goods are replicated to a high degree of similitude in relationship to the object it reproduces, such as a set of turned-leg wooden chairs upholstered in velvet c. 1690 (Figure 3). The specificity of the cabinet’s interior furnishings further makes these collections a trove of objects that outline the needs of domestic culture from the period, while at the same time presenting a perfected version of the domestic world. Items in the dollhouses are a veritable catalogue of materials, including silver, silk, velvet, brass, linen, wood, glass and porcelain. Likewise, imitations of materials abound: miniature silver objects such as a set of silver fire tongs (Figure 4), or a silver-handled cleaning brush (Figure 5) were types of objects that were often incorporated into the dollhouses, following popular trends of collecting small silver objects in the Netherlands, often incorporated into dollhouses or displayed separately (Pijzel-Dommisse 2000, pp. 18–25; Endlich 2011, pp. 47–48). Silver miniatures were often incorporated into dollhouses or they could be displayed separately as part of a silver collection.



Figure 2. Dollhouse of Petronella de la Court, c. 1670–1690. Variable materials, h 206.5 × w 189 × d 79 cm. Centraal Museum, Utrecht. Photo credit, Adriaan van Dam.



Figure 3. Anonymous maker, *Miniature chair with velvet cover*, c. 1690–1710. Walnut wood, textile materials, h 13.3 cm × w 8.8 cm × d 6.3 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Figure 4. Anonymous maker, *Miniature Silver fire tong*, 1730. Silver, h 10.9 cm × w 2.5 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Figure 5. Anonymous maker, *Miniature Silver Duster*, 1675–1700. Silver, hair bristles, h 7.9 cm × w 1.3 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Considering the importance of materiality and its display in the dollhouses, this essay broadens the current scope of material culture studies by assessing the strategies of presentation used in the cabinets as they echo forms of the domestic world, expressed through reproduction, replication, and imitation. While the dollhouses seem to exactly replicate the home in miniature, despite all appearances to the contrary, the materials used to construct the cabinets and furnishings within do not always correspond to the same substances intrinsic to the full-scale object. In some cases, blue-and-white “porcelain” like many of the vessels in Sara Rothé Ploos van Amstel’s *porseleinkamer* or porcelain showroom (Figure 6) from her first dollhouse, 1743 (Figure 7) are made from glass. Highly detailed rugs

and architectural elements are, in fact, painted. As reproductions of the domestic world, the dollhouses present a sophisticated intersection of authentic and illusory materials. A combination of materials that are both expected as well as exchanged for lower cost or more accessible alternatives makes these collections more richly layered in meaning than miniature objects that merely transcribe reality. In this way, the cabinets offer an abstracted version of “home” that adumbrates the domestic sphere within new visual formats to ultimately introduce an innovative mode of cabinet collecting. Research has reinforced the role of Early Modern Dutch women’s decision-making in furnishing the home, and this study uses the dollhouses to delve more deeply into materials in these contexts (Noorman 2024, pp. 110–11; Honig 1997, pp. 193–94). Along these lines, the objects in the dollhouses and their materiality speak to the powerful role of female collectors in selecting points of emphasis for the domestic world through the of domestic goods in these cabinet collections.



Figure 6. *Porseleinkamer*, detail from the first dollhouse of Sara Rothé Ploos van Amstel, 1743. Variable materials, variable dimensions. Kunstmuseum, The Hague.



Figure 7. First dollhouse of Sara Rothé Ploos van Amstel, 1743. Variable materials. h 227.5 × w 173 × d 72.5 cm. Kunstmuseum, The Hague.

2. Descriptions of Dutch Dollhouses in Primary Sources

Today, only seven dollhouse cabinets from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries survive mostly or partly intact. These extant cabinets include examples such as the dollhouse of Petronella Dunois, c. 1676; Petronella Oortman, c. 1686–1710 (Figure 1); Petronella de la Court, 1670–1690 (Figure 2); and Sara Rothé Ploos van Amstel who assembled two cabinets, one in 1743 (Figure 7) and another from 1743–1751. Lesser well-known are the dollhouses of Maria van Egmond van de Nijenburg, 1729 (private collection) and finally, a late example of a *Grachtenhuis* or canal house assembled by an unidentified collector, c. 1760. All the dollhouses are structured as wooden cabinets with doors that close over recessed interior spaces to replicate rooms from a middle-class Dutch home from the period. The cabinet interior also encompasses a full catalogue of household goods, including everything from linens and dishes to household pets.

The cabinets were known in their own time for the contributions of well-known artists and artisans who produced objects in small scale for the interior. Artists were commissioned to make miniature paintings and prints for the walls, seen in *Birds in a Park*, c. 1690–1710 a tiny 14 cm × 12 cm scene of domestic fowl and a colorful parrot by the Amsterdam painter of birds Willem Hendrik Wilhelmus van Royen (Figure 8). Likewise, artisans including furniture makers, ceramics producers, glassmakers, and silversmiths all of whom produced miniscule utensils and articles of furniture for the interior.



Figure 8. Willem Hendrik Wilhelmus van Royen, *Birds in a Park*, c. 1690–1710. Oil on canvas, h 14 cm × w 12 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

The overwhelming number of material goods in the dollhouses form the centerpiece of these cabinets, and the displays reflect concerns with the material culture of evolving

domestic spaces. Like actual homes, Dutch dollhouses are preoccupied with filling interior spaces with goods according to tastes and fashions at the time. Therefore, the domestic culture of the dollhouses usefully reframes and elevates the home, its goods, and along with it, the women in charge of these spaces (Moseley-Christian 2014, pp. 63–65). The cabinets approximate treasuries of domestic artifacts that testify to the ability that goods now could be acquired in larger quantities than ever before. This reflects the increasing role that household goods played in the lives of Netherlanders who had access to a world of commodities, both global and domestic (Jardine 1996, pp. 3–10; Gerritsen and Riello 2016, pp. 7–8; Schama 1987, p. 150; Brewer and Porter 1993, pp. 1–15).

Following the increase in available goods, the material culture of domestic environments is a rich area of inquiry, pioneered by C. W. Fock, Julie Berger Hochstrasser, Mariët Westermann, Martha Hollander, John Michael Montias, John Loughman, and Hester Dibbits, to name only a few. A dialogue between what is inside the home and Dutch society from the outside can be explored through interpretive studies that seek to understand how the acquisition and possession of increasing amounts of material goods for the home contributes to the development of identity and status as a marker of economic and social concerns in the Early Modern Netherlands (Dibbits 1998, pp. 227–30; Fock 2001b, pp. 9–46; Hollander 2002, pp. 124–28; Westermann 2000, p. 22; Loughman and Montias 2000, p. 18).

More recently, a spate of scholarship has addressed the role of women as the primary purchasers of domestic goods (Gerritsen 2016, pp. 228–35; Noorman 2024, pp. 106–11; Noorman et al. 2024, pp. 9–26; De Groot 2022, pp. 12–14). Issues of class become a further point of discussion regarding the social status and financial means of women responsible for acquiring material goods for furnishing the home (Noorman 2024, pp. 106–9; Baer 2015, pp. 15–21). Similarly to what we know about women’s responsibility for furnishing the home, Sara Rothé’s personal accounts also show us that she integrated extant dollhouse furnishings from other collections as well as commissioned new objects. Indeed, Rothé seems to have specified most everything about the construction of her display. Dollhouse collectors allow us to form a clearer picture of domestic management as they connect with gender roles, as well as social and financial situations. Some dollhouse assemblers were members of the wealthy elite, such as Petronella Dunois and Sara Rothé, while other women who assembled these collections were from families tied to guild or labor backgrounds.² The ability to participate in the consumer culture speaks to issues of access and affordability of domestic material culture as it underpins the dollhouses and imitations and reproductions.

Beyond contemporary research on the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Netherlandish home, primary source documents that reference the cabinets mostly take the form of inventories or similarly brief mentions from newspaper advertisements for estate sales, that also usually lack descriptions. Additionally, catalogues that describe the cabinets are rare but provide valuable period documents that give a complete overview of the interiors of the dollhouses, room by room. Only three dollhouse catalogues are known to survive today: two different catalogues published for Margareta Slob, c. 1750 and Pieter van der Beek in 1758, a daughter and father who separately later owned Petronella de la Court’s collection (Figure 2); a third catalogue gives a later account of Petronella Oortman’s dollhouse from 1798 (Figure 1), although unlike the other two examples, the later catalogue does not identify the current owner of the dollhouse at that time. Margareta Slob’s catalogue has a title page that describes the collection as a “Catalogue of an Exceptional Cabinet.” The dollhouse is listed as “...a Household in Miniature, so as this, the most fully formed example that can be shown” (Catalogus 1750).³ The frontispiece of Pieter van der Beek’s sale catalogue introduces the cabinet as “a perfect distribution of Household decorations and Curiosities” (Catalogus 1758).⁴ The frontispiece of the 1798 catalogue of Petronella

Oortman's collection likewise notes the cabinet as a: "Description of an outstanding work of art . . . divided into nine distinct divisions in an art cabinet (Konst-Kasse); depicting in its entirety, the entire view of a clean, orderly and well-suited Household, for the Curious a brief description will be given approximating each room" (*Catalogus 1798*, p. 3).⁵

Across all three catalogues, paintings and artifacts in the cabinets are enumerated in some detail. Miniature versions of works by the hand of well-known artists of the day such as Willem van Royen are listed to emphasize the prestige of these collections, and they underscore the engagement of important artists with miniature objects, or with the cabinets themselves. Comments on the range of domestic material culture in the cabinets are observations that are repeated in all the catalogues. Pieter van der Beek's sale inventory summarizes these issues by pointing out porcelain and similar types of goods as just some examples of "the multitude of hundreds of trifles":

. . .together in eleven rooms, and all thereof rooms beautifully divided and furnished, with infinite ornament and artefacts, oriental and Chinese porcelain dishes, bowls, bottles, tea pots, coffee jugs, coffee cups, cuspidors, Cups and Dishes, &c. all of which are impossible or too long to specify because of the multitude of hundreds of trifles (*Catalogus 1758*, p. 8).⁶

All the known catalogues single out individual items as well as compile lists that draw a picture of diverse surfaces, borne out in views of the interior spaces. The second-floor lying-in bedroom, or *kraamkamer* from Petronella Oortman's dollhouse is paneled in velvet, with silk hangings, silver wall sconces, linens, tortoiseshell mirrors, and a blue and white porcelain tea service (*Catalogus 1798*, p. 9; Figure 9). The catalogues mention, for example, the various types of wood used in the dollhouses (olive wood, walnut, ebony, teakwood, etc.), as well as different metals, and textiles. Petronella Oortman's cabinet is identified as olive wood, with embellishments in teak, tortoiseshell, mirrors, pewter, copper, gold, and silver.

These texts frequently emphasize the verisimilitude of the materials that make up the objects inside, noting that they are faithful to the works they replicate. From the 1798 catalogue:

Furthermore, that each piece of furniture, etc., has its complete identity, not only in material, but that which is to be nailed, is nailed, on that which is glued, it is glued; the hewn, hewed; cast; cast; forged, forged; and all this in its full parts, joints, seams, etc.: as a large piece, is always found. More order has been used in this art cabinet (Konst-Kasse) than in any imitated one, because almost everything, in contradiction to nature, in order to give quality, luster, is seen to be made of silver: but here, silver is what people are used to in these households. Silver, and so on, copper decorations are copper; Tin, Tin; Iron, Iron; the wood, of wood; Stone, Stone: and so on, nothing excepted; which, as can be understood, provides a pleasant view, as an example (*Catalogus 1798*, pp. 4–5).⁷

The dollhouse as it compares to the full-scale object it replicates creates a sense of authenticity that is primarily forged through materials. Perceptions of faithfulness in form and materials bolstered the reputation of the dollhouses as a marvel that represented the home accurately in every way. While the catalogue claims that "each piece of furniture, etc., has its complete identity," it was, in fact, common to use different materials to create miniatures in the dollhouse that did not always correspond to the same construction found in full-scale furnishings. The use of imitative materials, however, was often executed in ways that maintained the illusion of accuracy to the original form it copied. One example where material substitutions were obvious (intentionally so) was the use of silver to create

household objects in miniature, even seemingly insignificant things such as the previously noted fire tongs or cleaning implements (Figures 4 and 5).



Figure 9. *Kraamkamer* (second floor) in Petronella Oortman's dollhouse, c. 1686–1710. Variable materials, variable dimensions. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

The 1798 catalogue states that silver had a special function that subverted an alignment with authenticity, but in return it provided a powerful signifier of class and status. Silver miniatures were “in contradiction to nature, in order to give quality, luster...silver is what people are used to in these households” (*Catalogus 1798*, p. 4). “In contradiction to nature” refers to the swapping of materials inherent to the original full-sized object for something else (here, silver). When a miniature household object was replicated in silver, (*Pijzel-Dommissie 2000*, p. 20) the exchange is regarded as having an enriching effect on the object as well as possessing a social-economic dimension that reflects on the status of the household, and by implication, the collector as well. It elevates the object, so to speak, making it a better version of itself. Or as the catalogue states, it acts as a reference point to underscore “what people are used to in these households.” Authenticity is important not only when it is part of the discussion of the dollhouses via use of materials, but it is often observed *in absentia* when alternative materials are used. The importance of materials goes beyond the financial value and prestige of the object, as materials become one metric by which the accuracy of the reproduction is measured.

3. Replication, Reproduction & Materials in the Dutch Dollhouse

Materials also fit into a larger discourse from the period where convincing substitutions were an index of innovation for the reproduction, investing the object with greater allure. While limited primary sources from the period stress the faithfulness of dollhouse furnishings to the objects they replicate, a question about reproduction arises when asking exactly what it is that the dollhouses themselves imitate. The dollhouses seem to suggest that they are scaled-down copies of the homes that belonged to the women who assembled these collections, or exact replicas of Dutch homes from the period in general (*Hollander*

2002, p. 125; Stewart 1993, p. 62; Nakamura 2020, p. 10). Framing the dollhouses as precise miniature versions of specific Dutch houses is an approach that aligns the dollhouses with models. This overemphasizes reality as a foundational principle of the collections, and invests the wonder of the collection primarily within considerations of scale. An answer to the question of what the dollhouses do represent is far from simple; while Dutch dollhouse cabinets are fully recognizable as a version of Dutch domestic interiors from the period, they do not merely hold a mirror up to an exact house, or even to a type of home. The dollhouses instead successfully present a convincing version of the home, but one that sits outside the realm of reality. For one, the dollhouses are schematic rather than architecturally based; they include selective rooms from the home rather than all rooms found in typical Dutch houses of the day, and they present a version of the home that, like domestic interiors in seventeenth-century genre imagery, are curated rather than grounded in faithful transcription (Fock 2001a, pp. 83–89; Moseley-Christian 2010, p. 356). Rather than consider a Dutch dollhouse to be a reproduction of a specific place, it instead is more appropriately understood as a manifestation of the concept of “home” based on the material ideal of how a well-appointed domestic space was envisioned at the time. As a construction of an ideal, this affects both the presentation of interior spaces as well as the household goods used to furnish these rooms.

The dollhouse as a reproduction uses materiality to evoke an imaginative realm over which the collectors had absolute control. To reproduce the household in miniature is to emphasize the relationship of the reproduction with the thing it represents, a position in which the miniature invites greater scrutiny of the home as its source material. At the same time, this elevates the status of the reproduced object (the dollhouse) by orienting it in relationship to the source from which the reproduction derives (the domestic world). The dollhouses are structured around what Hanneke Grootenboer describes in Petronella Oortman’s case as a nested effect, in which forms in the cabinets repeat in ever smaller scale (Grootenboer 2021, p. 103). Visual contexts for the dollhouse as repetitions benefit from an analysis of similar dialogic relationships between a source and its versions as examined by Rosalind Krauss and Maria Loh. Krauss and Loh offer useful frameworks for considering the importance of originality and multiples as strategies of meaning in visual culture. Miniaturization itself can also be understood as a form that is automatically enmeshed in the process of replication, creating a complicated relationship between the existence of the smaller imitation and its inevitable comparison the full-size object it replicates.

Along these lines, the dollhouses as reproductions or imitations can be considered within a critical discourse that examines facets of meaning folded into modularity and repetition, as outlined by Krauss’ study of the “myth of originality,” an idea that exists within an “ethos of reproduction” (Krauss 1981, p. 49). Krauss identifies multiples as states that create a fraught chain of custody in which it becomes important to define an origin point, or an “original” to establish credentials of authenticity for the reproduction. Like Krauss’ multiples, dollhouses as imitations give shape to their own realities that are only loosely tethered to actual houses of the period and served not as a pure rendering of the home in small scale, but rather as a commentary on spaces overseen, furnished and decorated by women (Noorman 2024, pp. 106–11). As Loh has argued, Early Modern criticism saw a certain kind of virtue in imitations. Rather than rote exercises in copying, or pale versions of the thing they replicated, reproductions paid homage to the source while improving upon it (Loh 2004, pp. 482–83).

Taking Loh’s observation one step further, the dollhouse as an imitation of the domestic arena was a transportive one, repositioning the mundane as something exceptional, or wondrous in the eyes of the viewer. This returns to the point that the Dutch dollhouse as a concept expresses ideas of “home” through material furnishings that condense essential

ideas about comfort and appeal, all integral to the concept of Early Modern domestic space (Stobart 2020, pp. 8–11; De Groot 2022, pp. 12–14). In this way, Mariët Westermann connects seventeenth-century Dutch interior genre imagery to contemporary home catalogues as sources that visualize idealized interiors full of enticing home goods for consumers (Westermann 2000, pp. 7–9, 12).

As replicas the dollhouse cabinets align best with what Loh describes as a “modified notion of the work of art as a context with its own intentions, in which the possibility of originality is continuously negotiated between the producer, the object, and the spectator with each new viewing experience” (Loh 2004, pp. 477–78). The dollhouse as imitation creates enjoyment specifically because it stands in comparison to the domestic world itself, as a version that forces the viewer to look more closely at something that is familiar, now rendered as exceptional. The miniature version only exists in opposition to the full-scale object, to which it must always and constantly be compared. This corresponds to Secondo Lancellotti’s observation that “we feel great delight when we see two equal forces (or two forces between whom we are unable to detect too much difference) come together in competition” (trans. Loh 2004, p. 478).⁸ The delight of looking at the replicated object is partly invested in a recognition of the familiar, situated in surprising new contexts. For the dollhouses, miniature scale and the seeming exactitude of the copy provide these points of reference. Interest, and even wonder, derive from the alignment the viewer experiences in comparing and making distinctions between the original and the imitation. Returning to the dollhouse as a condensed presentation of the home, it is for these reasons that the cabinets need not fully, or even with absolute accuracy, replicate the domestic sphere that it imitates. The dollhouse instead acts as a point of imaginative reference to not only reflect but also to shape the qualities that visually define home, as an ideal of the period.

4. Imitations and Material Goods in Dutch Dollhouse Cabinets

The Dutch *pronk* dollhouse as an imitation of the domestic world in miniature is perfectly situated within broader concepts of imitation and reproduction that were attached to material commodities from the period. Imitation itself was a prevalent concept tied to the developing global market. By the eighteenth century an emergent class of theorists tried to account for the economic effect of imitation goods connected to women as consumers. The role of women in furnishing the home is of particular importance in this debate, as women were responsible for the material goods that made up domestic interiors (Noorman 2024, pp. 110–11; Honig 1997, pp. 193–94). Adam Smith, for one, linked imitation, at times intertwined with emerging concerns over novelty and fashion, to the economy. Innovation was often associated with new objects, whether unfamiliar commodities or imitations of known goods. Novel goods were believed to stimulate consumer appetite, a phenomenon that was thought to spur women to constantly buy new things. Innovation in this sense could also indicate revisions of scale, new materials, or other means of refiguring a familiar object to stimulate new commercial interest in it. Economic principles of imitation and novelty were further connected to widespread contemporary discussions of global and domestic commodities that characterize the types of domestic objects within the dollhouses.

As more imported commercial goods were circulated through Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, demand increased on both ends of the supply chain: consumers desired more import commodities, such as porcelain, and exporters like the East India Company (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*) increased transportation of these consumer products to satisfy demand and maximize profit (Odell 2018, p. 178). Turning to the economic dimensions of global trade that attend the dollhouses as replicas, and the porcelain within them as imitations of imitations, minute copies of East Asian design objects in the dollhouse followed a similar principle to the manufacture of these items in

the actual marketplace. Popular ceramics in the form of Arita wares from Japan (Figure 10), are found in Petronella Oortman's *pronk keuken* or "best" kitchen, for instance (Figure 11).



Figure 10. Anonymous maker, Arita ware from *Pronk kitchen*, detail from Petronella Oortman's dollhouse, c. 1686–1710. Ceramic with glaze, d 3.5 cm × h 0.7 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Figure 11. *Pronk kitchen*, detail from Petronella Oortman's dollhouse, c. 1686–1710. Variable materials, variable dimensions. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Complicating the meanings of these types of import goods was the use of imitations as a commercial strategy. In this case, expensive goods were brought to a wider market in the form of imitations that presented lower-cost alternatives. Material imitations were used by Dutch producers, for instance, as the foundation for the domestic Delftware industry, whose earthen wares copied highly sought after blue-and-white porcelain. It was also a tactic used by China and Japan, each often undercutting the other in the production of exports for the west to gain a trading advantage. These wares reflect a trade process in which Japanese *Imari* ceramics were imported to the Netherlands as a less expensive replacement for Chinese *Kangxi* blue and white wares. As miniatures, the power of porcelain as an import good was catalyzed by its replication into miniature, stimulating a parallel mode of collecting miniature porcelain served by industries such as the Meissen porcelain manufacture that produced small-scale versions in the form of *Qianlong* blue-and-white porcelain (Figure 12) made for the European market.



Figure 12. Meissen Porcelain Manufacture, *Blue and White ware vases* from Petronella Dunois' dollhouse. d 3 cm × 4.5 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Some examples of miniaturized East Asian wares also imitate these products using different materials. Blue-and-white wares that abound in Sara Rothé's *porseleinkamer* (Figure 6) were assembled from another set of dollhouses (from Cornelia van der Gon) that she bought at auction (van Eeghen 1953, p. 110). These repurposed furnishings are predominately made of glass rather than porcelain. Other imitations are the small "porcelain" cups and saucers on the side tables in the *porseleinkamer* (Figure 13) described in Sara's own handwritten accounts as objects made of ivory (Rothé Ploos van Amstel 1745, unpaginated). Petronella Dunois' dollhouse includes a display rack with replicas of tiny plates that are fabricated from pasteboard, painted and lacquered to simulate the appearance of blue-and-white wares (Figure 14). A range of examples show that imitation collections as a prominent feature of Dutch dollhouses serve as a laboratory for micro-economic climates, indicating how reproductions were perceived in these contexts.



Figure 13. Cups and saucers on side tables in the *Porseleinkamer*, detail from the first dollhouse of Sara Rothé Ploos van Amstel, 1743. Variable materials, variable dimensions. Kunstmuseum, The Hague.



Figure 14. Anonymous maker, *Plates and Plate Rack*, Dollhouse of Petronella Dunois, c. 1676. Paste board, wood, paint, lacquer, h 9.3 cm × w 9.9 cm × d 1.3 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

An analysis of the dollhouses, filled with goods that are scaled down or material imitations of objects in the home, benefits from a reading using the lens of Smith's aesthetic discourse on objects with identities that are disrupted through an exchange of materials or ones enhanced by imitations. Smith refers to "imitation" as an exact replication of an origin object using various materials: "The most perfect imitation of an object of any kind must... be another object of the same kind, made as exactly as possible after the

same model” (Smith 1795, p. 133). This concept also encompassed changes in scale, such as the dollhouses themselves, or the use of different materials, for instance, Delftware imitating blue and white porcelain from China. Imagination is an aspect of innovation in these instances, linking the thing imitated to its imitation, a state that creates novelty and therefore fascination (Berg 2005, p. 89). Smith also asserts that pleasure derives from the artistic value of imitation, in reference to a variety of media (Malek 1972, p. 49). Smith saw these responses as a gateway to “understanding” or knowledge that contributed to “wonder” as a response to the novelty of imitations (Smith 1759, pp. 15, 21–23).

Smith traced the economic success for these kinds of objects to their imitative qualities, which made them innovative, defined by the perception that artifacts made from substituted materials endow the object with a new aesthetic aura that impresses and pleases the viewer. In addition to the enjoyment inherent in seeing an object replicated in another material, or produced in an extreme version of scale, Smith also discusses the value of imitation in reproducing an object that is otherwise mundane. Viewing an object that is reproduced using different materials may stimulate a renewed interest in the object that the original object itself may be unable to generate. For instance, quotidian fire tongs are made worthy of notice and praise through reproduction in small scale and silver (Figure 4; Smith 1795, pp. 133–39). A miniature linen-covered tea table, with its accessories in silver and blue and white porcelain, as the one from Petronella Oortman’s *kraamkamer* (Figure 15), takes a set of objects from domestic surroundings, and renders them special. Here, Smith asserts that the consumer is more likely to be stimulated by the desire to acquire an object that is replicated and miniaturized.



Figure 15. Tea table with silver, porcelain, and linen, detail from the *kraamkamer* of Petronella Oortman’s Dollhouse, c. 1686–1710. Variable materials, variable dimensions. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Often tied to imitations in eighteenth-century discourse is “novelty” is an aspect of economic innovation that also gives pleasure. Joseph Addison’s contributions to the daily publication *Spectator* (1711–1712) include his much-discussed essay “Pleasures of the Imagination.” Here, he addresses novelty as an aesthetic category, alongside other ways of

presenting commodities that elicit emotional reactions through beauty and curiosity (Black 2001, p. 271; Thorpe 1937).

Every thing that is new or uncommon raises a Pleasure in the Imagination, because it fills the Soul with an agreeable Surprise, gratifies its Curiosity, and gives it an Idea of which it was not before possest [sic]. . . whatever is new or uncommon contributes a little to vary human Life, and to divert our Minds, for a while, with the Strangeness of its Appearance: . . . It is this that recommends Variety, where the Mind is every Instant called off to something new (Addison 1712, p. 139).

We can examine the dollhouses as grandly conceptualized imitations presented through miniaturization, a form that negotiates an Early Modern understanding of Smith's market-driven idea, intertwined with Addison's aesthetic theory. These ingredients also contribute to the idea of novelty which, as a frame for the reception of material goods, functioned to stimulate interest and desire. East Asian design through porcelain as one example is a fruitful part of period conversation about imitations that can also encompass the dollhouses. Porcelain, like the dollhouses, enfold multiple versions of imitations as copied commercial goods alongside crafted small-scale dollhouse furnishings. Imitation as an economic strategy, often in gendered contexts, is a lively but little-studied corner of discourse from the period between some of the most important economic theorists of the day. Smith saw imitation and innovation as dual engines that were buttressed by aesthetic theory. The crafted object, for example, had appeal for the consumer because its newness and remarkable nature stimulated pleasure and a desire for acquisition.

We can more broadly connect the economic principles of imitation and novelty to previous discussions of gender and consumerism since the impulse to amass material goods, to pursue novelty, and thus to follow fashion were impulses primarily attributed to women (Nijboer 2007, p. 23). In addition to negative associations with gender, eighteenth-century arguments against novelty took up the position that tradition was being overthrown for newfangledness. Not only was the established order in danger of being made irrelevant, but those opposed to novelty raised concerns that "as new inventions become more common, and variety is enjoyed with greater frequency," it creates a self-perpetuating desire for the new ("Reflections on Novelty" 1787, p. 187). In this discourse, concerns centered on the possibility that the consumer would never be satisfied because she will always want to buy whatever is new and intriguing. Novelty raised moral concerns over whether the constant need for new things might create a perpetual state of mindless consumption, resulting in a self-centered society without care for tradition and convention (Black 2001, pp. 269–71).

It is the ingenuity inherent in an imitation of quality that prevents an imitative object from becoming a rote and sterile copy—the craft, presented with "care and success" that represents an object through imitation can bestow a fresh appeal on pedestrian objects, creating an interest that the original object, such as a set tea table, may not generate by itself (Smith 1880, p. 409). Smith used the example of a carpet depicted in a Dutch painting to make his point, as carpets in Dutch paintings are but representations in different media of the same kind of item in the home. Carpets, of course, were imported items that were valued as global goods.

A painted cloth, the work of some laborious Dutch artist, so curiously shaded and coloured as to represent the pile and softness of a woollen one, might derive some merit from its resemblance even to the sorry carpet which now lies before me. . . the imitation frequently pleases, though the original object be indifferent, or even offensive. . . A butcher's-stall, or a kitchen-dresser, with the objects which they commonly present, are not certainly the happiest subjects, even for Painting. They have, however, been represented with so much care and success by some

Dutch masters, that it is impossible to view the picture [representation] without some degree of pleasure (Smith 1795, p. 137).

By rendering a carpet in paint, using illusionism or dramatic lighting, the object is lifted to the realm of innovation, inciting closer examination through its representation in the visual arts.

5. Imitation, Novelty and the Dollhouse Cabinet as Wonder

Smith's theory informs interpretations of the Early Modern Dutch dollhouse, as it makes clearer how imitations elicit enjoyment from the beholder through their crafted forms and use of materials. According to Smith, pleasure is found in the relationship between the object and its imitator, which emphasizes the artful "design and contrivance" of the represented object, carefully distinguished from rote copying. Smith's interest in craft and imitation as a facet of ingenuity further proposes how the materiality of an object engages the viewer. In economic terms, these qualities encourage the viewer to possess the object because it stimulates wonder and enjoyment. . . "Every time he looks at it, he is put in mind of this pleasure; and the object in this manner becomes a source of perpetual satisfaction and enjoyment" (Smith 1759, p. 264). The miniaturization of a copy and its intrinsic haptic nature—for it must be handled to be looked at carefully—establishes how the material construction of a small thing reveals itself. In Smith's discussion "Of Wonder, or of the effects of Novelty," he observes that pleasure, knowledge and understanding derive from "observing the resemblances that are discoverable betwixt different objects." (Smith 1795, p. 10; De Marchi 2006, p. 140). This serves to heighten the artfulness of the imitation, but even more, to stimulate enjoyment by inviting a deeper examination of what might otherwise be considered routine.

Conversely, arguments were made that it was the introduction of new inventions and ideas that pushed humanity into an age of knowledge, science, and enlightenment. In other words, novelty was (and remained) an agent of wonder, "...every pleasure that can touch the heart, and every good that can improve the mind, is to be expected from the fullest enjoyments of variety, and the keenest thirst of Novelty" ("Reflections on Novelty" 1787, pp. 187–89). The qualities that made novelty so appealing were also seen as a feature of imagination (directly linked in Addison). Wonder was described by a variety of philosophers including Smith as a kind of amazement that caused the viewer's heart to beat faster, to become breathless, along with other physical symptoms of awe (Kareem 2014, p. 39). In this way, the wonder of new inventions reflected an epistemology of discovery.

Smith isolates the experience of ingenuity, novelty, and innovation as interconnected phenomena that express wonder as a form of "curiosity" and "admiration," (Kareem 2014, p. 36). In a material and economic sense, it is these same responses that return the dollhouse to the formative concept in which it was grounded as cabinet displays of the *kunstkamer* (Pijzel-Dommisse 2000, p. 13). Materials and materiality were central to wonder, as it is described in one form as imitations. In analyzing the meanings of imitative materials, Smith observes that the imitator:

means to make an object of one kind resembling another object of a very different kind; and to the original beauty of figure to join the relative beauty of imitation: but the disparity between the imitating and the imitated object is the foundation of the beauty of the imitation. It is because the one object does not naturally resemble the other, that we are so much pleased with it, when by art it is made to do so (Smith 1872, p. 412).

Beyond the catalogues, other records capture a different dimension of the contemporary response to the dollhouses as a wondrous collection. German collector and scholar Zacharias Von Uffenbach visited a number of collections in England, Germany and the

Netherlands in the early decades of the eighteenth century, including the dollhouse of Petronella Oortman (in 1718, at that time belonging to her daughter Hendrina Brandt). Von Uffenbach's commentary from these trips illuminates an understanding of how collections were explored and received at the time, as he was an experienced viewer of cabinet collections and voiced a decisive opinion on most everything he saw.

Von Uffenbach and his party secured an invitation to view the dollhouse cabinet, which, he describes, was notoriously difficult to access. His party apparently spent three hours touring the dollhouse collection in order to view the objects inside the cabinet (ter Molen 1994, p. 122; 2017, pp. 265–66). Much of the discussion that he recorded is, in fact, about the materials used to create the miniature household items. Von Uffenbach took notice of the marble flooring, blown glass, tortoiseshell, with particular mention of “the finest Indian porcelain” made from models he says were sent to East Asia to be replicated in miniature “with the utmost subtlety” (ter Molen 2017, p. 267).⁹ He was impressed by the cabinet itself, now known to have been designed by Charles Bolle. Von Uffenbach identified the elaborate inlay on the exterior decoration as silver, a feature that undoubtedly gave the cabinet an aura of costly luxury. In reality, however, the inlay was actually pewter, a material that was certainly used to imitate the more expensive silver (ter Molen 1994, p. 125; 2017, p. 266).¹⁰ In the end, Von Uffenbach's inclusion of the dollhouse among a circuit of important collections in Amsterdam (and elsewhere) locates these among other wondrous cabinets he viewed on his tour. Von Uffenbach thus situates the reception of the dollhouse within the worlds of wonder that were a critical feature of collections during the period.

6. Conclusions: Imitation, Materials and Materiality

The dollhouses are exemplary of key points that reflect Smith's thoughts on the wonders of imitation as innovation; the expense of these collections considered alongside the quantity of multimedia objects that they contain, the level of exquisite detail that requires engaged, close looking, and the detail and scale of the collective structure, all converge to create a spectacle that overawes the viewer. The objects in the dollhouses are made marvelous by their craft as well as the unexpected materials used to create many of them. Even imitations of objects in the dollhouses that are made of the same materials as the original forms are wondrous due to shifts in scale. Thus, the cabinets present intersecting sets of imitations, a situation in which the imitation becomes more vividly representative of authenticity—in this case an ideal of “home”—than the thing it reproduces.

The dollhouses as imagined replicas of well-appointed middle-class Dutch homes remain collections that continue to fascinate viewers today. Not only are the dollhouses some of the most popular attractions at the Rijksmuseum, for instance, but a full-scale modern replica of a dollhouse cabinet was constructed and shown at the TEFAF Maastricht fair in 2017 (TEFAF 2017, pp. 232–33). This modern reconstructed version of a Dutch dollhouse was acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts Boston (Figure 16). The Boston example is formed from a c. 1700 cabinet, furnished with silver miniatures, porcelain, and augmented by framed drawings and paintings from the period (Endlich 2011, p. 17). The artifacts that furnish the rooms of the cabinet, for instance, the salon, includes silver miniatures and miniature blue-and-white porcelain. These objects were acquired from various sources brought together in this collection, assembled in a manner not unlike the curation of dollhouse cabinets from the seventeenth and eighteenth century (Figure 17). Even so, the conglomerate of objects and many of the cabinet's details (aside from some furnishings) are a collective contemporary imitation of Early Modern dollhouse cabinets (Harris 2023, pp. 52–55).



Figure 16. *Doll's house with silver and porcelain miniatures, 1700–1800.* Variable materials, cabinet 196 × 150 × 57 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo Collection.



Figure 17. *Detail with silver miniatures and blue and white wares from Doll's house with silver and porcelain miniatures, 1700–1800.* Variable materials, variable dimensions. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo Collection. Photo credit: Author.

As a reproduction of objects that were themselves reproductions, the Boston cabinet inserts itself into a cycle of repetitions that situate notions of “home” as it connects to global commodities in the household, expressed through the materiality of its goods. The cabinet presents an imitation of an imitation, and functions through a convincing illusion of authenticity. Even so, the cabinet enclosure itself was not originally constructed as

a dollhouse, no collector from the period was the starting point of its form, dolls have never populated the interiors, and the decoration of the interior rooms, such as the painted scenes in the garden, are modern fabrications. But its visualization of “home” using the same arrangement as the Early Modern Dutch dollhouses, allows the Boston cabinet to elide a defined point of origin in the same manner that the Dutch dollhouses sidestep a clear relationship to actual domestic interiors from the period. In this way the Boston cabinet engages with questions that probe Krauss’ “myth of originality” (Krauss 1981, p. 49). As a collection that approximates but was not assembled by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century female collectors, it nevertheless evokes a relationship to the Dutch cabinets in similarly imaginative ways, extending the existence of these cabinets through a continuation of innovation, novelty, and illusion.

Finally, dollhouses as cabinet collections have always enticed the eye as well as the imagination by leveraging the unusual choice of domestic setting with scenes of material comfort and luxury. In this format, due to the miniaturization of the collection, the entire contents of the home can be taken in all at once. Upon closer inspection, however, the objects inside are a *mélange* of expensive materials interleaved with imitations of high-priced goods, providing an impression of luxury. The conglomerate, of course, makes little distinction between the illusion of materials that are authentic versus imitations. At the same time, the dollhouse presents a reproduction of the home that is itself an imitation.

Moreover, the dollhouses present the domestic as a site that enfolds the global, with goods brought from East Asia, India, Africa, and the Americas eventually landing in the home, where as Gerritsen has noted, they become “domesticated” (Gerritsen 2016, p. 228). The flow of commodities, including unfamiliar wood (ebony, teak), ivory, shells and porcelain within the dollhouses aligns them with displays of colonial artifacts that were an essential part of many *wunderkammers* and *kunstkammers* (Swan 2024, p. 528; Grootenboer 2021, p. 107).¹¹ As scholars have situated the flood of Early Modern domestic goods within a globally networked consumer culture, the dollhouses act as microcosmic commentaries on the role of material culture and growing consumerism. Goods reproduced using different materials conform to consumer theories of the day that stress an economic response to the new and exciting, underpinned by concerns over women’s spending.

Early Modern Dutch dollhouses are assemblages that converge in multiple ways as an echoing form, playing on the illusory reality inherent in repetitions and multiples to visualize an ideal concept of home. This is principally borne out through the materiality of the articles in the cabinet, which were promoted by sources of the period that stressed the one-to-one connection between miniatures and the materials of the objects they reproduced. Prominent artifacts such as porcelain are but one example of the miniaturized objects in the dollhouse that have on a faceted relationship with replications and reproductions, even as the cabinets themselves are exemplary manifestations of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century material culture. They are a convincing fiction in form, display and presentation, as well as in the use of materials. The reality of the dollhouses finds that, contrary to what they seem, they are less a shrunken-down, complete version of an actual home. Instead, they are a materialized exemplar that reflects the economic, gender, and social complexities of the domestic sphere. As collections that elevated the home as a subject worthy of closer examination, itself a marvel, the dollhouses remain exceptional as an innovative kind of collection assembled by Dutch women.

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Notes

- ¹ With thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. This study of *pronk poppenhuisen* takes cues from larger issues touched on in the forthcoming monograph, Michelle Moseley-Christian, *At Home in the Early Modern Dutch Dollhouse: Gender, Materiality, and Collecting in the Seventeenth-and Eighteenth-century Netherlands* (Amsterdam University Press).
- ² New observations about the class and financial situation in which dollhouses were assembled are explored in *At Home in the Early Modern Dutch Dollhouse*.
- ³ From *Catalogus van een overheerlijk kabinet, verbeeldende, een huyshouding in 't kleyn, so als zulks, ten volleedigsten soudén kunnen worden vertoond*: "...Bestaande in vyftien verdeelingen, alle zeer konstig en kostbaar, met allerhande meubilaire goederen verciert, in een volmaakte proportie der huys-cieraaden, konststukken, schilderyen en rareyten. ..." (*Catalogus 1750*)
- ⁴ "Bestaande in Elf Vertrekken, all zeer konstig en kostelyk met allerhande Meubelaire Goederen van binnen versiert in 't kleyn, zoo als 't in't groot op zyn heerlykste zoude kunnen vertoont werden, in een volmaakte verdeling van Huyscieraaden en Rareyten. ..." (*Catalogus 1750*)
- ⁵ "Bestaande, in eene Konst-Kasse in negen onderscheyde verdeelingen afgeberkt; verbeeldende in zyn geheel, den ganschen omslag van een proper, ordentelyk en welgeschikt Huishouden, waar van den Niuwsgierigen in't beschryven van yder vertrek, ten naasten by; een kleyn denkbeeldt zal gegeven werden." (*Catalogus 1798*)
- ⁶ "Bestaande al zoo te zaamen in elf Vertrekken, en alle derzelver Vertrekken op't heerlykst verdeeld en gemeublieert, met oneindige Cieraaden en Konstelykheden, Orientaalse en Chinese Porcelynen van Schotelwerk, Kommen, Flessen, Théé-Potten, Koffy-Kannen, Koonvoor, Quispedooren, Kopjes en Schootels, &c. welke alle om de meenigte van honderderhande kleinigheden onmogelyk, of te lang om te specificceeren zyn." (*Catalogus 1758*)
- ⁷ *Catalogus van het wydvermaarde en alom bekende koninglyk kabinet, zynde een poppe-kas* [...]: "Voorts, dat yder Meubil enz: heeft zyne volslagene eygenschap, niet alleen in stof, maar, 't geen gespykert moet weezen, is gespykerdt 't gelymde, gelmyde; 't gehouwen, gehouwern; gegoten; gegoten; gesmeedt, gesmeedt; en dit alles in zyne volle deelen, leeden, voegingen naden enz: als stuk in het groot, immer wordt gevonden. Zynde in deeze Konst-Kasse meerder ordeel gebruykt als in eenige nagebootste, daar men byna alles, strydig tegen de Natuurlykheyd, om quanswys, luyster te geven van zilver ziet: doch hier, is zilver, 't geen men in destige Huishoudingen gewoon is van zilver te zien, en zoo vervolgens, Koopre Huyscieraaden Kooper; Tin, Tin; Yzer, Yzer; de Hout, van Hout; Steene, Steen: en zo verder niets uytgezondert; 't geen, gelyk te begrypen is, een aangename be schouwing geeft, als by voorbeeldt." (*Catalogus 1758*).
- ⁸ "...sentire, quando veggiamo venire in concorrenza due di forze eguali, ò fra quale non sappiamo conoscere molta differenza. ..." From Secondo Lancellotti, *L'Hoggidi ovvero il mondo non peggiore ne piit calamitoso del passato* (Venice: Giovanni Guerigli, 1630 edition), 11. Translated in Loh (2004, p. 478).
- ⁹ "Löffeln undt gabeln von Silber, das Spitzen küßen von schildkrott war sehr curieux. Vor allen aber ist zumercken das feinst-Indische Porcellan, Welches expresse zu dießem Cabinet in Ost-Indien nachdem die modell dahin geschickt worden auf das Subtilste gemachte worden."
- ¹⁰ Transcribed in Molen (2017, pp. 265–70) from Von Uffenbach's hand-written diaries in Niedersächsische Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek (SUB) Gottingen, Uffenb. Ms 46.
- ¹¹ Swan has connected ebony to the enslaved labor that produced these articles.

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