



History MA Thesis Defence

Student: Kelly Hughes

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Time: 10:00am – 12:00pm

Place: Hybrid – email
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room location.

“Vernacular Encounters: Domestic Marginalia and the Production of Everyday History, 1800 to the Present”

Abstract

The practice of writing on the material surfaces of domestic interiors has been examined primarily in relation to archeological discoveries of graffiti in antiquity, or as a part of broader studies of writing arts in the early modern period. This scholarship has demonstrated that the spatial, structural, and symbolic conditions of domestic dwellings have produced a distinct category of written artefacts. This thesis terms the products of this practice *domestic marginalia*: informal writing of various typologies that constitutes a distinct form of interaction through which occupants encounter, interpret, and respond to the histories embedded within their homes. Despite extensive evidence of such practices in earlier periods, domestic marginalia produced after 1800 has received little sustained scholarly attention, leaving more than two centuries of domestic writing largely unexamined.

Yet this period is vital to establish that writing in domestic interiors in Western cultures has been a virtually continuous and evolving practice from antiquity to the present. Through interdisciplinary engagement with domestic spatial theory, material culture studies, and heritage discourse, this thesis frames domestic dwellings as critical sites of historical inscription, and places diverse forms of domestic marginalia—from childhood growth charts to names and dates to hidden messages and religious inscriptions—into dialogue across temporal periods.

By historicizing domestic marginalia after 1800 within a *longue durée* framework, this research demonstrates how ordinary dwellings become sites of historical meaning. Read as material traces of lived experience, domestic marginalia narrate family relationships, memory, and identity, and provide a rich source for micro-historical information about everyday life. Examining these inscriptions reveals how dwellings function as sites of informal historical production and interpretation, in which occupants engage with inherited traces of past lives and, in turn, contribute their own. In this way, domestic marginalia can be understood as a form of everyday public history and an expression of heritage from below.

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