

5 'A chimney-piece in Plumtree-court, Holborn'

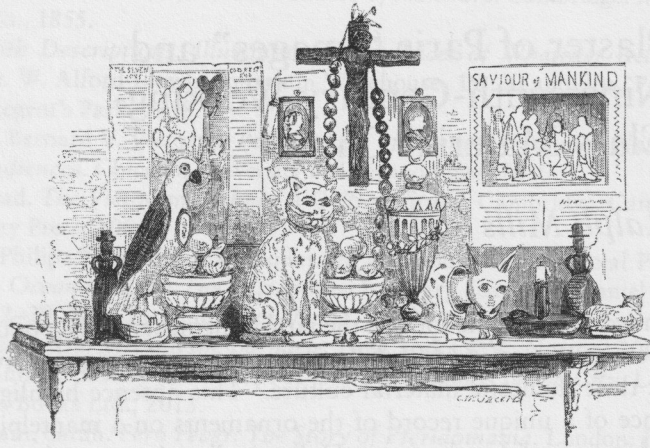
Plaster of Paris "Images" and Nineteenth-Century Working- Class Material Culture

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Although working people formed the largest elements of the populations of nineteenth-century industrializing countries, we know relatively little about their domestic material culture.¹ This absence highlights the significance of a unique record of the ornaments on a mantelpiece encountered in a squalid mid-century Holborn alley. A group of apparently prosaic objects provides a rare opportunity to explore aspects of everyday domestic life and thinking.

Situated just south of London's Holborn Viaduct, Plumtree Court is (in 2016) a gloomy side street, shadowed on one side by the brick cliff that is the rear wall of the City Temple and on the other by the new headquarters of an investment bank. It serves merely as a pedestrian link between Shoe Lane and Farringdon Street, and as an access to an underground car park. Plumtree Court was just as gloomy in the nineteenth century, as George Godwin found when he visited 'this pestilent hole' in 1854: 'Long the haunt of fever,' he recorded, and 'a cradle of immorality and misery...the court is very narrow and the drainage very imperfect.'² Godwin – architect, builder, activist, and journalist – was drawing attention to the horrendous living conditions of many who experienced suffocating overcrowding and lack of sanitation in the courts and alleys of the area. In Plumtree Court, he commented, the City Medical Officer of Health found sixty-seven people squeezed into the fifteen rooms of number 9; at number 24 he discovered eighteen adults and twenty-two children in just four rooms.³

In the midst of his explorations of these unlikely surroundings, Godwin discovered an example of something he felt was special: 'the love of art, which we find very often exhibited in the most miserable quarters, in the shape of plaster casts and little prints.' These 'not very refined...but agreeable and cheering' objects – painted parrots and spotted cats – he described as evidence of 'a striving upwards', and he had a sketch made of 'an actual chimney-piece' (Figure 5.1) 'as a record of some well-known barbaric favourites.'⁴



A Chimney-piece in Plumtree-court, Holborn.

Figure 5.1 George Godwin, 'A chimney-piece in Plumtree-court, Holborn' (1854).

Godwin's drawing is a detailed and hugely valuable record of a rarely studied aspect of the interior lives of those he called 'the labouring classes.'⁵ It reveals a mantelpiece and chimney-breast crowded with seemingly unremarkable domestic paraphernalia, some of which is utilitarian (a small mug, a clay pipe, a candlestick), some associated with faith (a crucifix, a rosary, a phial of holy water, and religious prints) surrounding a significant array of purely decorative objects. A mix of symmetry and jumble, it is possible to discern two mysterious figures (perhaps corn dollies or crocheted dolls), a pair of miniature bowls of fruit, an urn, a parrot, and three miniature cats. The smallest of the cats has its back to us, and a second is a "nodder"; its counterbalanced head suspended from a wire loop so that it moves when touched. The third leads us to the source of Godwin's "barbaric favourites," for it is recognizable as a typical *gatto lucchesi* – a plaster of Paris cat from Lucca, in Northern Italy.⁶

If, in the 1850s, you were in Shoe Lane, just around the corner from Plumtree Court, it was likely that you were in the midst of the hustle and bustle remembered by Alfred Bennett:

"Chair-menders – 'Ornaments for your fire-stoves!' – Fly-catchers – Draught-bags – Italian images – Sham sailors – Groundsel – Baked chestnuts and potatoes – Night refreshments – Fruit and vegetable hawkers – Strawberries in pottles – Street stalls – Orange

girls – Hand-bills – Beggars with paintings – Cheap Jacks – Preachers – Waits – Workmen's paper caps – Soldiers – Sailors – Pensioners – Beadles – Lamplighters – Crossing sweepers – Shoeblocks – Undertakers"⁷

Almost hidden in the midst of that crowd, probably threading his way with care between the peddlers of draught bags and the sham sailors, Bennet had noticed a seller of "Italian images."⁸ The "images" that he and his ilk hawked were miniature figures made of plaster of Paris – spotted cats, green parrots, Venuses, Shakespeares, heroes, villains, gods and goddesses, famous buildings, fake fruits, and garish flower pots.

Godwin's sketch can be regarded as an archaeological 'assemblage', a group of artefacts linked stratigraphically at a moment in time, the mantelpiece acting as the 'deposit' in which they had lain undisturbed for one hundred and fifty years. It is therefore possible to 'excavate' this deposit, which contains some eight objects that that can be defined as *miniatures*.⁹ This chapter includes some of the results of that exercise.

Before the nineteenth century, 'images' were most likely to be three-dimensional objects, usually miniature statuettes.¹⁰ The origin of the word is linked to imagination and imitation, appropriate for objects that were miniature representations of originals both real and imaginary. So it was that itinerant Italian peddlers of plaster of Paris statuettes, the *figurinai*, were known in the English-speaking world as 'image-sellers.' Contemporary illustrations, artworks and popular media, including newspapers, magazines, and even ballads, tell us that image-sellers, bearing trays of plaster statuettes on their heads, or in baskets, plied their itinerant trade throughout the nineteenth century on every continent and in every industrializing country.¹¹ They were to be found not only in both urban and rural Britain, but on the other side of the world on a dusty road in Bendigo, the gold rush town in Australia, or amongst dingy New York tenements, or hawking their wares in Russia, Scandinavia, France, Germany, Brazil, and New Zealand.

When Columbus first stepped foot in America, so the tongue-in-cheek story went, he was welcomed by an image-seller from Lucca, who enthusiastically attempted to interest him in his stock-in-trade.¹² In the nineteenth century, image-sellers were ubiquitous. *Figurinai* had been migrating from the impoverished province of Lucca, and principally from the small town of Coreglia Antelminelli, since the eighteenth century. They travelled first to France, then spread through Europe, then across the Atlantic to North and South America and beyond. They may have eventually even been present in Peking.¹³

In Italy, a "master" (*padrone* or *capo*) would collect together a *compagnia*, consisting of a varying but small number of men, often close relatives (*garzoni*). Small boys were 'sold' by their parents, sometimes for pitifully small sums, to the masters, to form the mainstay of the street sales forces.¹⁴ A *compagnia* might include sculptors and mould makers

