

Paintings ~~live in the air~~ Would you like some coffee?

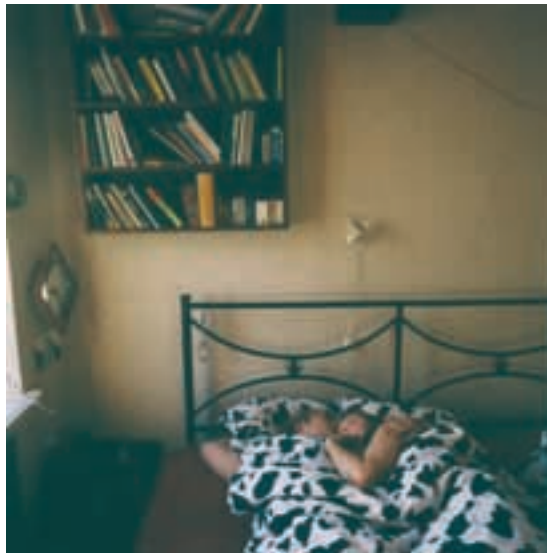
living the air! An Estonian minding his own business

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Estonian Home

Estonian Home
Henri van Noordenburg



Text by Lauri Vahtre

Estonian Home stories



What are typical Estonian stories like?

Every person is a story, one big story with several smaller ones inside. Besides, each person knows a lot of stories. They are told and heard, carried along everywhere. In order to remember the stories better, the dearest, most quintessential parts of them are framed and placed on a chest of drawers.

Stories are very different. The stories of members of one family can be different as chalk and cheese. However, if you look at them from a distance – for example as a guest from a foreign country – the stories of one nation all seem relatively similar. Different from those of another nation. Listening to numerous stories, we often suddenly realise that – for example – „this seems to be a typical English story“. Or French, Latvian, Russian.

Estonian Home Stories



A typical Estonian story could be as follows:

Auntie Maali was born 80 years ago in an average-sized Estonian village. She is still living there now, although the village is now almost empty. She has two brothers and a sister. The elder brother was conscripted to the German army and escaped Estonia in 1944. He died in Toronto in 1971, and Maali exchanges letters with his children and grandchildren. The younger brother had to join the Red Army, and was killed in Kurzeme in Latvia, when the war was almost over. He had a wife and a son whose grown-up children spend their summer holidays in the country with their Aunt Maali. Maali's younger sister had one great love in her life, but this young man was deported to Siberia in 1949, where he died of typhoid fever. The sister never married and now rests in the parish cemetery.

Estonian Home Stories



A typical story could also run like this:

Maria was born in 1958 in Vologda in Northern Russia in the family of a Soviet officer. In 1974, a year before retirement, her father was given a new post - in Estonia. After retiring the father settled in Tallinn. Maria finished a secondary school in that same city, continued her studies at a university and began working as a bookkeeper. She married a railway worker from the Ukraine. When Estonia became independent in 1991, she felt alien here, although Russia did not seem like home any more either. Maria is now learning Estonian and wants her children to know it as well.

There are many more Estonian stories. It is thus not really important whether the stories are about the people you see in the pictures. If they are not about them, they are certainly about someone else.

*Estonian Home
stories*



*Estonian Home
The geography of home*



Estonian Home

The geography of home



What, in fact, is home? Where it starts and where it ends is almost a philosophical question. Does it start at the borders of our homeland? Or on the edge of your home town? Or the garden gate? Or the threshold of your house?

On the other hand, it might not actually be that important where home begins. Maybe it has several borders, and as we cross each border we find ourselves more and more at home. And somewhere in the middle is the 'real' home - the one where we eat, sleep, love and think our most significant thoughts.

To accomplish all these things our 'real' home must have a certain minimal number of essential facilities and opportunities. Some people think

Estonian Home The geography of home

that the heart of the home is the hearth, today's stove. And why not? A stove gives off heat, and it affords us a means to cook our food. People still gather at the fireside or stove nowadays.

What about the dinner table? This is essential as well, at least in this neck of the woods. People come together, they do not just look into their plates but at one another too. Sometimes looking at one another is even more important than eating.

There are other things without which people in countries with a Western culture, hence Estonia too, cannot manage.

For instance the fridge. The Estonians learned the benefits of having a fridge in the 1960s, and are now almost as dependent on it as the Swedes or Americans. And they approach their fridges with the same childlike glee as do Swedes and Americans.

Or take the sink. A few people still manage to get by without one, but the number is decreasing. When you need to get rid of your chewing gum in a strange flat, you will find the bin in the cupboard under the sink without fail.

And the bathroom! What a joy to own a large and pretty bathroom – especially for those coming from the Soviet era when a bathroom was a rarity. People without a bathroom at that time went round to their friends to enjoy a bath. The dream of a nice bathroom was almost as overwhelming as the dream of owning your own car.

Estonians also had to start getting used to the fact that, since the 1960s, the bathroom also contained the toilet. It seemed quite a strange idea at the time.



Estonian Home
Would you like some coffee?



Older Estonians still consider coffee a refined beverage fit for gentlefolk. Tea, however, is something simpler and more mundane. After all, tea can be made from various herbs and plants, even ones that grow in Estonia. On the other hand, attempts to make coffee from local plants, have always produced a quite revolting liquid which no one can stomach.

During the Soviet era coffee appeared in the shops and disappeared from them at irregular intervals. This strengthened the notion of coffee as a refined and rare drink. The shops in Estonia today are packed with coffee, which can be enjoyed at any time. Tea too is available in umpteen varieties, including the most exotic kinds, grown in the furthest corners of the world. The tables have been turned. Coffee has now become a more mundane drink, and tea more refined.

Estonian Home
Would you like some coffee?

Nevertheless, old habits die hard. When you visit the home of an Estonian, the host will ask: "Would you like a cup of coffee?" And a little later: "Or would anyone prefer tea?"

In that order, and not the other way round. Unless you happen to visit a Russian living in Estonia. Both nationalities drink both tea and coffee, but Russians prefer tea, and we coffee.

Once you have coffee, there must be cake as well. Cakes and coffee belong together, just like cheese and beer. I am not too sure Estonians can actually make a good cup of coffee - it is often so weak that you can see the bottom of the cup - but they are much better at cakes. Cakes can be bought at the baker's, but usually they are home-made. Because one thing is certain - a woman who cannot make a decent cake is not really a good hostess. It is difficult to say what exactly constitutes an Estonian cake. Something between an English pudding and a German bun. It can be red, white, yellow, brown or even green; it can be made of curds, whipped cream, or filling of an unspecified origin; it can have fruit in it, or not. You better find out for yourself.

When eating honeycomb, tea would of course be more suitable. However, do not dip the honeycomb into your tea, it will dissolve. A piece of honeycomb should go straight into your mouth. Your hostess will tell you what to do next.



Estonian Home
Would you like some coffee?



Estonian Home
The bed

While many people regard kitchen as the heart of the home, many others prefer the bed. The questions: "Where do you live?" and "Where do you sleep?" are not that different. We can easily eat out – especially lunch – but we sleep at home. Should someone start sleeping elsewhere too often, he might as well start wondering whether this new place is not in fact becoming his true home. Except, of course, when he sleeps there against his will. In prison, for instance.



Estonian Home

The bed

It is strange that the place where you sleep is that significant. After all, a sleeping person is not at all how we actually know him. He does not speak to us, does not crack jokes, does not work, or come up with brilliant ideas. He is partly here, but partly somewhere else, in a country called the Land of Nod in children's books. Should it then really matter where exactly someone lays his head on a pillow and travels to that particular land?

Apparently it does. People all over the world, including Estonians, are amazingly particular about the piece of furniture designed for sleeping and the room where it is located. It must be comfortable enough to have a good rest in, and as pretty as anyone can afford.

Since winters in Estonia are cold, people here have to pay more attention to their bedrooms than, say, Egyptians. The main difference is that an Estonian's bedroom must be really warm. We need stoves, thick walls, ceilings and floors – and finally, we need a really good blanket. There is nothing better than a thick cosy blanket. A child creeps under it for comfort when afraid of something, or just when feeling sad. Adults do the same to escape from their daily cares. A nice warm blanket protects your body and soul better than the Great Wall of China.



Estonian Home
The bed



However, a bedroom needs several more useful things. For some, it is a teddy-bear, but more often it is an ordinary bookshelf and a good reading lamp. An evening ends thus: the rustle of a closing book, a soft thud when the book is returned to the bedside cupboard or shelf, and finally the click of the lamp. Maybe a yawn or two, and the Land of Nod beckons.

Estonian Home
The bed



Estonian Home
Through the looking glass



*Estonian Home
Through the looking glass*



For thousands of years, people have been tormented by the suspicion that there is another world nearby, where everything is the other way round. Occasionally, we catch glimpses of the other world in the mirror, and sometimes the window of our living-room becomes a magic portal – revealing something else, a blue light, ethereal beauty. That other world could catch our attention even more simply, for example through an open door, making the most mundane and boring things suddenly look quite different.

The other world really seems to be teasing us – it reveals itself momentarily, but vanishes as soon as we intend to take a closer look.

*Estorian Home
Through the looking glass*



*Estonian Home
Through the looking glass*



The entrances to the other world have been known to man since time immemorial – water, for example, mirrors your reflection. You can also see it in the glass mirror, although no-one can actually pass through. Only Alice managed that.

So we have to spend our lives in the world we have, continually tormented by the question what the other one could be like. We go about our daily business, have a family, look our nearest and dearest in the eye. Maybe their eyes in fact constitute the gates through which we could glimpse the beauty behind the mirror?

Today's average Estonian family is small, just like that of any other European nation. A family can consist of just one person, although he or she then has no-one into whose eyes they can look, and life therefore becomes desolate. A family might be made up of a mother and child because the father has left. Nevertheless, we mostly live in threes or fours – mother, father and a child or two.

Materially, we live better than ever before, but we love to complain that life is difficult and for that reason we have so few children. Sometimes grandmother lives in with the family as well, but this happens quite rarely, because one man's grandmother is another man's mother-in-law.

We mostly live in towns but we do not much like it there. Those who can set up a home in the country. Or we try and find a home in town where we can see trees from the windows. This could then be a glance into the world beyond the looking glass.

*Estonian Home
Surroundings*



Estonian Home surroundings



The other world is a dream. What we see from the window or when we find ourselves stepping out of an Estonian home, is reality.

Reality can only catch up with dreams very briefly, once in a blue moon. Mostly it lags far behind. Sometimes too far, and then the Estonian is consumed by dark despair. Sometimes it is not that far, and life seems worth living. Occasionally prospects are quite good – not exactly fantastic but nevertheless pleasant. You see work that needs to be finished, nature created by the Almighty, skies and light. You also see black soil where seeds must be sown so that they may sprout. Estonians belong to those nations that like to stick their hands in the soil, preferably in their own garden close to home. Not everyone, of course; some prefer to exercise their fingers on a computer keyboard, and others by clutching beer mugs.

In town, many inhabitants have to make do with the view from the window of a high-rise block that does not exactly lift the spirit. But human beings are intelligent creatures; they adapt.

Estonian Home surroundings

The high-rise building boom hit Estonia during the Soviet era. Within a short period of time, a large number of dull box-like blocks of flats were built, and the new inhabitants were mostly alien to Estonia and strangers among themselves. Between such buildings extended a no-man's-land, where a desolate emptiness prevails even today. This is neither town nor country, but a kind of limbo.

New buildings went up, but the housing crisis remained acute, and people could wait years for a new flat. Moving, even into a block of flats like that, was a dream come true. Even to those who yearned to see a forest or an orchard or at least their own flowerbed from their window. There are no such things when you live five storeys up. There is merely a vase into which you can put the flowers of your memories, dreams and expectations.



*Estorian Home
surroundings*



*Estorian Home
surroundings*



Estonian Home
Noisy Still Lifes



The world around us consists of stories, but it also consists of pictures. You simply have to know how to look at it. A picture is, after all, a frozen life – a captured moment, halted time. A picture stops a flying bird and a falling leaf; in a picture we can count the snowflakes as they float down, something that is quite impossible in real life.

Sometimes, however, life itself is almost like a picture: fixed and still, with its own composition and colours. When caught on canvas or a photograph, it is called “dead life” – nature morte. But also still life.

Such pictures can be found everywhere, and anyone who has dabbled in photography will see them in their mind’s eye as long as they live. After all, you just have to find a piece of reality and frame it. Only the subject must be right, and the picture correctly framed.

Pictures are, in fact, also stories. A visitor to an art exhibition who stands in front of a picture he does not understand, wonders: “What is this supposed to tell me?” And a highly educated art critic faced with the same problem, writes in a cultural supplement that he was unable to grasp the message.

These pictures here are extremely eloquent. They are almost garrulous. A still-life that chatters – isn’t that absurd? Certainly not – it is just a figure speech.

And how they talk! The lamp with an orange shade tells about its birth in a Tallinn factory during the 1970s, when men had flared trousers and women wore platform shoes.

*Estonian Home
Naisy still loves*



*Estonian Home
Noisy Still Kofes*



The faience teapot with red flowers is probably reminiscing about the 1950s, the hideous, heavily breathing green radiator ribs, on the other hand, keep muttering something about mining in the Donbass in the Ukraine, and complain that no-one has ever regulated them, not even once. The red tin jars with white polka dots and intended for flour, sugar and other such foodstuffs, are calmer. They occasionally chip in and say that they are classics. A few decades ago there was hardly any Estonian household without exactly this type of jar. The mobile phone, a hapless newcomer, is astonished to listen to all this racket, and wonders how on earth he has ended up here.

Estorian Home
Quiet still lifes



Estonian Home

Quiet still lifes



Other still lifes are indeed still. Not dumb, as the world is never totally voiceless, and as mentioned above, all pictures tell their story. Some pictures shout and some chatter, whereas some whisper. Or at least talk to you quietly, calmly and slowly.

All these homes are Estonian homes. Not particularly poor or particularly rich, not too tasteful and not too tasteless. No extremes here, just straightforward homes, with probably quite straightforward Estonians living in them. Occasionally they might leave a brisk message above the sink, but then add a little drawing of the sun and some flowers. Just to have some balance.

Estonians are fond of regarding themselves as calm people. A Russian writer once remarked that an Estonian's silence is the silence of the antitank missile – you never know when it might explode. So calm is not perhaps the right word.

These homes are certainly quite peaceful. Maybe an Estonian tries to set up a home for himself that is as peaceful as possible – so that domestic bliss will prevent any explosions of anti-tank missiles. Who knows.

An Estonian home is of course never quite as quiet as in these pictures. The reason is simple enough – there is nobody at home. The home is thinking its own thoughts. Home is like a family member, with its wishes and worries, which the others should notice.

*Estonian Home
Quiet still lifes*



What should we think of people with homes like these? It is difficult for Estonians to judge, as everything seems so ordinary. An outsider might find something surprising. Anyway, people brush their teeth, cook their meals in a thick red iron pot, place flowers and candles on the table, flush the toilet, and even celebrate Easter if you look carefully. They have electricity, and some smoke at home. They certainly do not seem to be wealthy. By comparison with the citizens of wealthy nations. Compared with poor nations, they are doing quite nicely.



Estorlian Home
Quiet still lifes



Estonian Home Paintings

These pictures are actually paintings, left unpainted by mistake. Luckily for us, the photographer has rescued them. In some cases it is even possible to guess who the artist could have been. The one with the fish, for instance, could have been created by the brush of a Dutch master, whereas the room with a red wall is crying out for someone to recognise it as Japanese.

The picture with berries, a plant and some more berries, was obviously left unpainted by an Estonian artist. The same goes for the picture containing a watermelon, so we can quite ignore the fact that watermelons do not grow in Estonia. Today, this does not really matter. No coffee bushes grow in Lapland, and yet coffee is the national beverage of the Saami people.



Estonian Home Paintings



Instead, this unpainted painting appeared in the picture taken by a Dutch photographer. Anyone can have a guess. Those orange things next to the watermelon – probably peaches – could be considered Cézanne's apples. It is an Estonian view on things, nevertheless.

Those three-litre jars, a little shelf with spices, saucepan hanging on the wall, the electric stove, the salt cellar... Believe me, this kind of set is seen only in Estonia.

As for the red and silver pots by the green wall, one might well wonder what is so Estonian about them. Not much, it is true. However, anyone who knows Estonia, even slightly, can be fairly certain that one contains pea soup and the other boiled potatoes. Not haggis or pasta with curry sauce.

But wait a minute – these are paintings. A painting tells a story but it must also be decorative. Merely decorative, as it were, so it would therefore be a little rude to try and peep inside the pots. So let us forget the pea soup and potatoes, and admire the sight of a red pot against the background of the green wall. The thought alone could fill your stomach.

*Estonian Home
Paintings*



*Estonian Home
Paintings*



Estonian Home
An Estonian minding his own business

An Estonian is quite happy to mind his own business. He is not such an incorrigible individualist as he likes to think, but he is really fond of quietly going about his business. Whether in the country or in town, in his house or his flat – there is always a lot to do, chores that do not require a team. No need to explain your actions to anyone, no need to listen to advice or comments.



Estonian Home

An Estonian minding his own business



Washing up, for instance, requires no comment of any kind. This chore must be performed quietly and instantly forgotten. Until a next time, which will inevitably come tomorrow at the latest, if not today. However, there are tasks you perform just once a year. They are especially numerous in the country. Once a year you draught-proof the windows, sweep the chimney, and bring a Christmas tree in from the forest.

Nowadays, windows are usually washed twice a year. It is not clear whether it is too much or too little. It depends on the epoch, fashion and habits. Equally unclear is the problem of how often you should wash your hair. Thirty years ago it was once a week, now some claim it should be done every single day.

Estonian Home *An Estonian minding his own business*

Estonians thus go about their business. Silently, because there is no-one to talk to, and it wouldn't do to sing while at work, despite the fact that Estonians consider themselves to be a singing nation. An Estonian sings when a large crowd has gathered, for example at a song festival. It is much safer to sing together with 20,000 others. (However, an Estonian might well go about his work humming away).

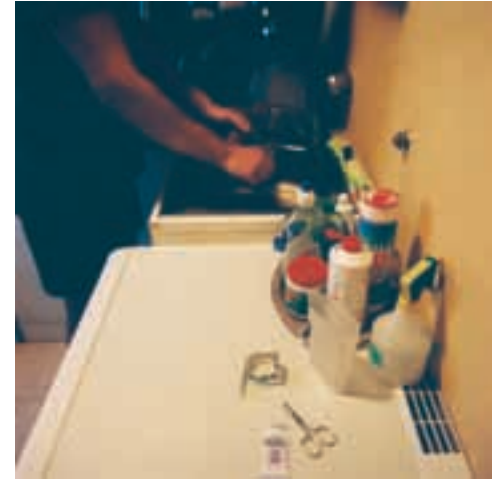
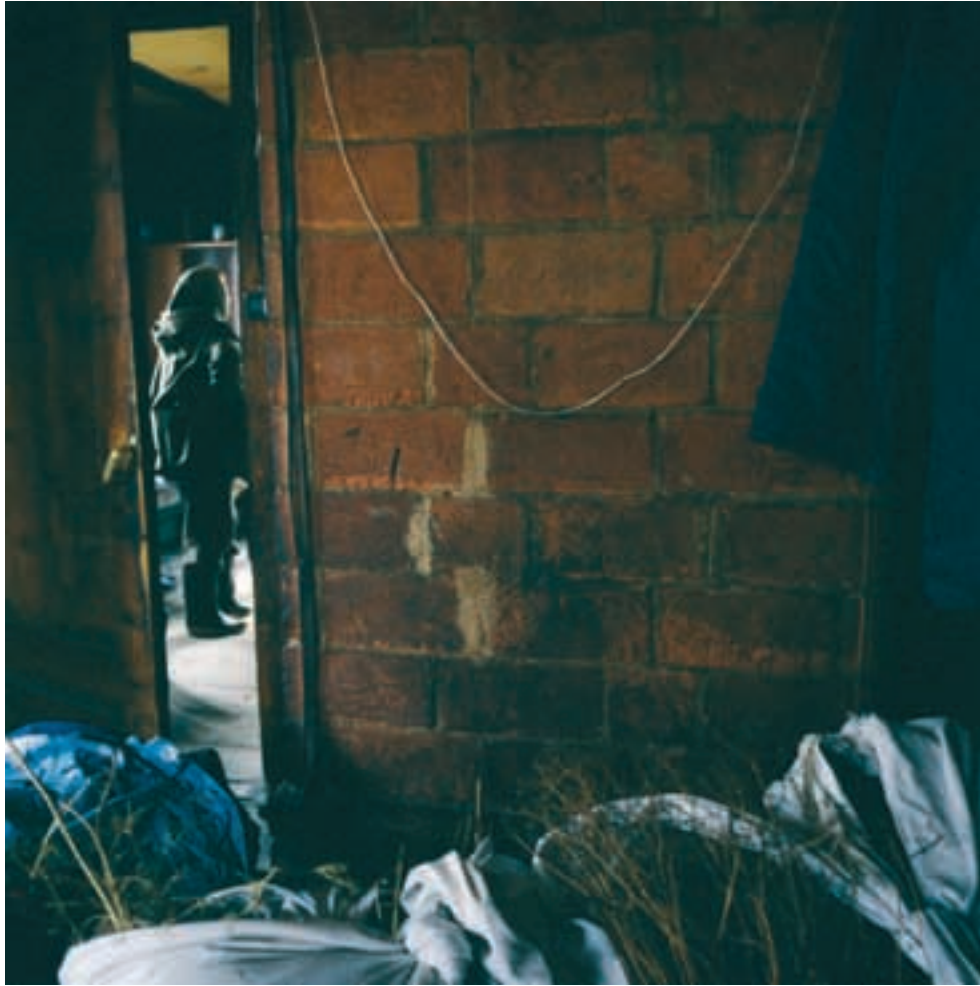
An Estonian is generally hardworking, and gets things done at an even pace. He is not likely to leave things unfinished in order to play a tune on the harmonica or watch a film on TV. Occasionally, however, he stops in mid-track and reflects. Nobody knows what exactly he is thinking about. He might not even know himself.

Maybe he is mulling over the creation of the universe, maybe over the origin of time. Or perhaps he is wondering whether it was such a good idea to get married after all. Or whether he should buy another carton of milk for supper.



Estonian Home

An Estonian minding his own business



Estonian Home
Me, you and us

An Estonian's home is his castle, as with an Englishman, and he is most put out at the arrival of uninvited guests. He is not keen to ask in a stranger who rings on his doorbell; only deserving people can enter.

However, his home is by no means inhospitable, as this is where an Estonian sees his friends. In order to enjoy a nice chat with his friends, an Estonian invites them over, and not to a nearby café as the French usually do. His home is then filled with talk, laughter and occasionally even some singing.

Closest friends might not get invited to the living-room at all. Instead, they can spend time in the warmest and cosiest of all rooms – the kitchen. You can truly relax in the kitchen where everything is nicely on hand, and where a kind hostess even allows the guest to puff on his cigarette.



Estonian Home
Me, you and us



*He, you and us
Estonian Home*

Someone once suggested that Estonians are more open and frank in the kitchen than in the living-room. Maybe this is true for other nations as well. If this is true, it is no more than a statistical probability that does not say much about any specific group of people in a specific home.

The Estonian home constitutes the force and the institution that helped the Estonian people survive the Soviet era, helped them to win through. There was no Soviet power in the home, among your nearest and dearest. In Soviet days, an Estonian would step in from the street and enter his home, and then found himself in Estonia, and therefore in Europe. At home everything was called by its proper name, and people encouraged one another to hope that life would change for the better.

It did, and Europe returned to the streets of Estonia.



Estonian Home



He, you and us



Eesti Instituut

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