

June 3rd 2005

That Piece of Furniture

By Paola Lizares



Found in almost all Spanish apartments

A Spanish couple invites me for dinner at their apartment. *Ding-dong*. The door opens and the ritual begins: a kiss on the left, a kiss on the right, a "let me hang your jacket", an "oh, you brought some pastries, you shouldn't have", etc. Then, even if I have no desire whatsoever to see the rest of the apartment, the Spanish couple puts me on the guided tour of their little palace: "Here's the kitchen... here's the dining room... that's Nacho's room... Nacho, turn the volume down... we're painting this room pink for our baby daughter... see what an elegant toilet we've got".

After a couple of beers half-watching TV, talking about the weather and about Real Madrid, finally I am seated at table. The entrée has just been served; it tastes good and more delicious aromas are coming out of the kitchen down the hallway. Conversation has become more interesting, and, over all, the people surrounding me are warm and friendly. Everything is a treat to my senses of taste, smell, hearing and touch. However, my sight is suffering badly, for right in front of me towers that great monstrosity found in many Spanish houses: the 'mueble'.

There is no specific word for 'muebles' in English. They aren't so common in other countries, where normal, simple shelves are the rule. Most 'muebles' are too dark and too big for my taste, but what really bothers me about 'muebles' is what people usually put *inside* them: in an honorable niche, the television set; behind the glass and on top of the doilies¹ made by grandma, the best crockery² of the house (perhaps not even used on special occasions); on the shelves, infinite framed pictures of the lady of the house, useless souvenirs bought in cities visited and... little more.

While I nibble on some ham, suddenly I realize what is bothering me the most: *where are the books?* When my hosts showed me around their apartment an hour ago, I didn't see a single decent pile of books. On the 'mueble' I can see an encyclopedia, a dictionary, *Catedrales de España*, and a couple of collections bought at the newsstand below. But they don't really count as books because they are the kind of books that children use only when they need to write a paper for school.

I have seen far too many bookless apartments in Spain. If I had a 'mueble', I would fill it up with books, books that are read from cover to cover, not just 'coffeetable books', as we like to call them in English. But no, many people here prefer to fill it up with objects that do little to improve their cultural literacy and artistic sensibility. Now I understand why, each September, the Spanish media complain about how expensive textbooks are. Isn't a book probably the best source of knowledge? Why don't the media focus instead on the rising price of the new famous-brand sneakers³ that the kids will need for next school year?

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¹ tapetes de ganchillo

² vajilla

³ zapatillas de deporte (East Coast American English)