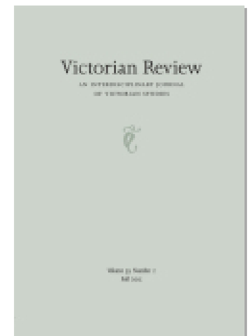
Berlin Wool

Talia Schaffer



Victorian Review, Volume 34, Number 1, Spring 2008, pp. 38-43 (Article)

Published by Victorian Studies Association of Western Canada

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/vcr/summary/v034/34.1.schaffer.html

Access provided by Saint Lawrence University (18 Nov 2015 18:42 GMT)

See her *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel*, especially her superb discussion of mahogany, deforestation, and *Jane Eyre* (30–54).

6 As costs of gutta percha escalated, Europeans realized the need for the reforestation of guttifers and attempted limited cultivation of them in the 1880s. Bright writes that "it is to be sincerely hoped ... that electrical industries may not suffer from scarcity of this almost indispensable substance" (259).

7 *Wired Love*, Ella Cheever Thayer's 1880 novel about a budding romance between two telegraphers, has been much discussed in recent criticism about the relationship between telegraphy and literature, as in Otis, 147–62, as well as Stubbs, 99–103.

8 In 1851, R. H. Horne published "The Great Peace-Maker" in *Household Words* in the context of the then new Dover-Calais cable. The poem was republished in book form in 1872, with an introduction that argued for its applicability to the Atlantic cable as well.

Works Cited

Bright, Charles. *Submarine Telegraphs: Their History, Construction, and Working*. London: Crosby Lockwood, 1898.

Dickens, Charles. *The Letters of Charles Dickens*. Ed. Graham Storey. Vol. 11. Oxford: Clarendon, 1999.

Freedgood, Elaine. *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006.

James, Henry. *The Portrait of a Lady*. Ed. Geoffrey Moore. London: Penguin, 2003.

"'Nearer and Dearer.'—The Subatlantic Splice." *Punch* 35 (1858): 73.

Obach, Eugene F. A. *Cantor Lectures on Gutta Percha*. London: William Trounce, 1898.

Otis, Laura. *Networking: Communicating with Bodies and Machines in the Nineteenth Century*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2001.

Stubbs, Katherine. "Telegraphy's Corporeal Fictions." *New Media, 1740-1915*. Ed. Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2003. 91–111.

Tomalin, Claire. *The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens*. New York: Knopf, 1991.

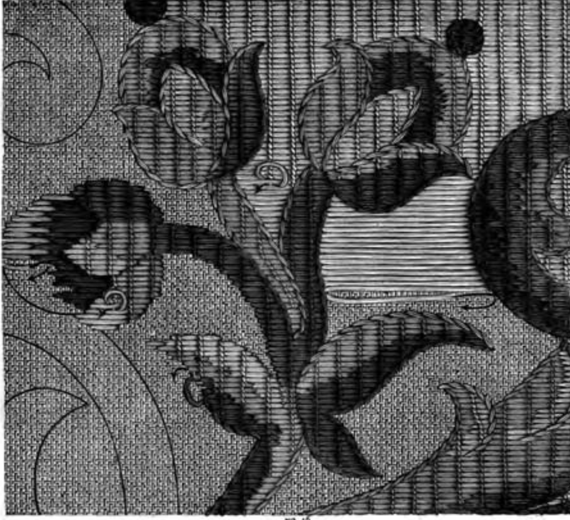
Wilson, George. "The Atlantic Wedding-Ring." *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 84 (1858): 458–61.

Berlin Wool

TALIA SCHAFFER

JOHN RUSKIN and William Morris persuaded late Victorians to identify crafts as handmade objects deriving from a peasant tradition and involving high-quality materials and skilled construction. But these Arts and Crafts ideas do not help us understand the rampant popularity of certain types of handicraft that flourished from the 1840s through the 1870s: the shell-encrusted deal boxes, the watch-holders sewn with dried cucumber seeds, the work baskets made of cardboard with sky-blue satin scraps glued on, the wires dipped in

COMPLETE GUIDE TO THE WORK-TABLE.



The Young Ladies' Journal Complete Guide to the Work-Table.
London: E. Harrison, 1885: 117 (plate 16).

congealed candle wax, the needlework portrait of the royal family's spaniels on a cushion. What does it mean when an era's dominant aesthetic paradigm prizes the machine-inflected, cheap, easily made, imitative, mass-produced, and modern?

In trying to recover the paradigm governing pre-Arts and Crafts handicrafts, I am undertaking a project that is somewhat similar to Elaine Freedgood's in *The Ideas in Things*. In her deft readings of the overlooked metonyms of Victorian realism, Freedgood shows us how the fears associated with these objects underlie discourses we thought we knew. Similarly, the mid-Victorian domestic handicraft—an underread category of material life—carries the entire structure of economic and aesthetic thought that made it possible. Through parsing these artifacts, we can deduce the Victorians' deeply alternative way of understanding art.

One of the most ubiquitous Victorian crafts was a form of needlework called Berlin woolwork, which used inexpensive thick, brightly coloured wools to fill in what was essentially a stitch-by-numbers kit. This craft became so popular because it was easy, quick, reliable, and adaptable. One could make a square of Berlin woolwork for virtually anything: chair backs, cushion covers, even slippers and bookmarks. Aurora Leigh describes the range and productivity of this form of handicraft: "Producing what? A pair of slippers, sir, / To put on when you're weary—or a stool / To stumble over and vex you … 'curse that stool!' / Or else at best, a cushion … " (19).

These qualities of quick, identical, reliable, and adaptable production were not just convenient for Berlin woolworkers; they also aligned the craft with the central aesthetic values of handicraft in the early to mid-Victorian period. As Thad Logan notes about these artifacts, "It is sometimes hard not to be amused—or appalled—by what was considered attractive or interesting." Citing some rather startling instructions for displaying ant-eaten mouse corpses, Logan comments dryly, "There are indeed times when studying Victorian handicrafts brings us face-to-face with the otherness of Victorian life" (164–65). Berlin woolwork is certainly not as "other" as a dead-mouse display. It resembles modern needlework, though it looks rougher and shaggier. Yet if the mouse skeleton seems odd to us, the impulse it expresses does not; we can understand the desire to celebrate scientific curiosity. By contrast, the Berlin woolworked bookmark may seem humdrum, but in fact it derives from a quite radically unfamiliar idea of art.

Berlin woolwork became widespread by the 1840s, although it had appeared as early as 1796, according to Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall (258). Traditional embroidery involves working a design on top of an opaque piece of silk or cotton. Berlin woolwork, however, offered a completely different model. A picture (often adapted from a popular painting) was divided into a grid and keyed to a piece of coarse canvas, sometimes with every tenth thread in the canvas coloured yellow to help the worker transfer each square in the grid properly. Indeed, it became possible to purchase canvas with the picture printed directly upon it, obviating the need even to transfer the design. Machines that perforated paper were also used to produce cheap paper patterns with holes already punched for the needle. Such patterns could be laid over cloth and simply sewn right into the fabric (Ames 97–146). Without needing to exercise any individual drawing skill, a worker could simply purchase and work the Last Supper, a Madonna and Child, a view of the Prince of Wales as a baby, a basket of fruit, or a scene from Sir Walter Scott (Morris 21–23). Thus Berlin woolworkers churned out identical copies of mass-produced replicas of art. Moreover, as Logan points out, the circulation of handicraft kits and patterns meant that hundreds of Victorian women were simultaneously working on identical projects, in a kind of nation-wide mass production (166).

Victorians were quite aware that they were using handicraft as a form of mass production. In 1880, a critic marvelled:

> Look at all the time wasted in depicting and grounding those impossible bunches of patchwork roses, those ladies with square red blocks of woolen mosaic to represent their cheeks, those lap-dogs with lustreless eyes and rectangularly waving tails. Yet, incredible as it seems, human beings used to buy pieces of this work with the pattern already finished, and spend days in mechanically filling-in the black background. They paid work-girls

> for doing the only interesting part of the design, such as it was, to save themselves even the faint intellectual effort of counting the holes, and then contentedly reduced their individuality to the level of a steam power-loom, to cover the remainder of the canvas with uniform lines of black stitches. (G. A.)

This chance to prove one *could* work like a steam power-loom was precisely the appeal of Berlin woolwork. By churning out these identical products, middle-class women demonstrated that they too could boast the skills that made British manufactures flourish.

The products' identical nature could be guaranteed because Berlin woolwork canvases reproduced their sources inch for inch. Where we might see this as problematically derivative, Victorians exulted in it. Creativity and originality were not desirable goals. In 1842, Miss Lambert wrote: "Let us remember that the true intention of the art is to copy nature, not to distort her" (40). Similarly, Cornelia Mee, displaying her embroidery at the Great Exhibition, made a point of boasting in the catalogue that "the needlework of most of the articles is done from flowers, minutely copied from Paxton's Magazine of Botany" (*Catalogue* 561). Faithful mimesis of another object was the highest goal of handicraft. No wonder then that Elizabeth Stone commented in 1840:

> The French ladies persevere in the practice of working on drawings previously traced on the canvas: the consequence is that, notwithstanding their general skill and assiduity, good work is often wasted on that which cannot produce an artist-like effect. . . . By the help of the Berlin patterns more *good* things are produced here as articles of furniture than in France. (399)

Stone's perspective is the opposite of the Arts and Crafts mentality. The French ladies' traditional embroidery practice wastes labour and time. Berlin woolwork can be relied upon to produce viable textiles, and is therefore a better bet. What is desirable in a worker is the same thing that's desirable in a factory: reliable and economical production methods, without wasted labour.

Another factory-like aspect of Berlin woolwork was its use of cheap raw materials. Handicrafts were often used as a way of recycling household debris, incorporating such materials as wax candle-ends, cleaned fish scales, walnut shells, and bits of cotton wool. This recycling created a pleasing effect of "industry" in both senses: it made the home function like a factory, while confirming the craftswoman's managerial skill. Cheap, thick Berlin wool offered a kind of guarantee of its maker's fiscal probity and ingenious thriftiness. (A generation later, however, cheap materials signified inadequate commitment to one's craft. After the 1870s, good needlewomen derived status from high-quality silks, not brightly dyed wool skeins.)

Berlin woolwork also enacted mid-Victorian preferences for strong contrasting colours. The French colour theorist Michel Chevreul and the Scottish painter David Ramsay Hay both noted that staring at a purple spot produces a faint yellow afterimage. They interpreted this effect as nature's law for putting colours together: a secondary colour had to go with the opposite primary colour. Purple, therefore, went with yellow, and red went with green. These combinations dominated Berlin woolwork patterns. For instance, one set of embroidery instructions told women they would require "black satin; six shades of crimson, five shades of yellow, three shades of puce, two shades of scarlet, three shades of yellow-greens, three shades of blue-greens, and two shades of brown embroidery silk" (*Lady's Album* 7). In the 1860s, typical patterns included the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*'s instructions for a black, yellow, scarlet, maroon, and green sofa cushion in Berlin woolwork and a crocheted carriage-rug in alternating red and green woolen squares, embroidered in green, red, purple, yellow, and white. Keeping up with the latest scientific colour theories, the Berlin woolworker strenuously asserted her modernity.

Finally, Berlin woolwork was closely tied to the fashion system. In the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, monthly fashion and craft pages were visually associated; they appeared with new instructions monthly, were printed near each other, used fabric (often the same fabric), and featured patterns and colour plates. Moreover, craft was often used for small clothing items. Berlin woolwork was used to decorate slippers, caps, and tobacco pouches. Thus it was allied with a feminized, fluctuating, urban, international market of disposable goods, rather than being read as a form of timeless, traditional, rural art.

The story Berlin woolwork tells us is very different from our current sense of craft. It reveals craft as modern and industrial; the purpose of craft was to produce many identical replicas as quickly as possible. Berlin woolwork presents craft as a modern pursuit, an easy and recently invented hobby, inexpensive and fashionable, adaptable to any object.

That thousands of British subjects colluded in this understanding for at least a generation indicates just how widespread and influential these aesthetic concepts were. From the 1840s through the 1870s, art was understood in a manner drastically different from our current sense. As Aurora Leigh asks, "The works of women are symbolical. / We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight, / Producing what?" (19). What they were producing was, among other things, a love of productivity itself, a sign of allegiance to a nation exulting in its industrial might. Printed in fashion magazines, sold in prefabricated kits, marketed across the empire to women in India, applied indiscriminately to furniture and apparel and knick-knacks, the Berlin woolwork craze spread its message with the speed and reach of mid-century Britain itself.

Works Cited

Ames, Kenneth L. *Death in the Dining Room and Other Tales of Victorian Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1992.

Browning, Elizabeth Barrett. *Aurora Leigh*. Ed. Margaret Reynolds. Rev. ed. 1859. New York: Norton, 1996.

Catalogue of the Great Exhibition. London: Spicer Brothers, 1851. Vol 2: iii, nos. 144, 561.

Chevreul, Michel. *The Principles of Harmony and Contrast of Colours*. Trans. Charles Martel. 3rd ed. London: Henry G. Bohn, 1859.

Davidoff, Leonore, and Catherine Hall. "The Hidden Investment: Women and the Enterprise." *Women's Work: The English Experience 1650-1914*. Ed. Pamela Sharpe. London: Arnold, 1998. 239–94.

Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine Vol 1, 3rd Series (August 1865): 255; (March 1869): 124–26.

Freedgood, Elaine. *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006.

G. A. "Decorative Decorations." *Cornhill Magazine* 42 (1880): 599.

Hay, David Ramsay. *The Laws of Harmonious Colouring, Adapted to Interior Decorations, Manufactures, and Other Useful Purposes*. 3rd ed. Edinburgh: W. & R. Chambers, 1836.

Lady's Album of Fancy Work. London: Grant & Griffith, 1850.

Lambert, Miss. *The Handbook of Needlework*. London: John Murray, 1842.

Logan, Thad. *The Victorian Parlour*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.

Morris, Barbara. *Victorian Embroidery*. London: Herbert Jenkins, 1962.

Stone, Elizabeth. *The Art of Needle-Work From the Earliest Ages*. London: Henry Colburn, 1840.

Cemetery

JULIE RUGG

THE VICTORIAN city, which massed people on a hitherto unimaginable scale, contained elements that were intended to promote classical civility in its residents. Civic building was pedagogic as well as functional, and aimed to nurture—in town halls, market places, function rooms, and libraries—ordered and educated citizens. The demarcation of space could both promote and exclude, and new building to celebrate civic ethos was accompanied by the containment of social ills in prisons and workhouses. The cemetery constituted a distinctive addition to the Victorian city, blending the two principles of civility and containment in a new landscape form.

It is not new to consider the Victorian cemetery as a material object. Much of the literature relating to cemeteries lies in the field of architectural and landscape history. This stream of research has traced the development of particular aesthetics and contributed to an understanding of the ideals underpinning new cemetery development. However, research into the history of an object should travel beyond its design and construction and consider its meaning and usage. The cemetery is a Victorian thing of remarkable complexity, with