

Women's Work: The History of the Victorian Domestic Handicraft

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By the way,
The works of women are symbolical.
We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight,
Producing what? ... (Barrett Browning L455-8)

This chapter aims to answer Aurora Leigh's famous question: what exactly were the 'works of women', the wax flowers, doilies, cardboard brackets, shell-encrusted boxes, leather-leaf frames, and embroidered slippers of the mid-Victorian era? Although this enormously popular hobby dominated middle-class women's domestic life through much of the nineteenth century, its history has received little attention.¹ I explore the history of the movement, looking at the way it expressed dominant cultural interests at different moments in the nineteenth century. Women wanted to make such artefacts because the objects articulated a certain position regarding issues central to Victorian life: nature, industrialism, economics and aesthetics. By tracking the development of the Victorian domestic handicraft movement, we can see what these humble ornaments really meant for their makers. We can also see what craft meant in a period when it was assumed to be an amateur pursuit before it became professionalised.

In the early nineteenth century, the domestic handicraft movement emerged as people began composing decorations by arranging found natural artefacts like shells, seaweed, pressed flowers, dried leaves and colourful sand. These new forms may have been inspired by the Romantic adoration of nature and a desire to introduce into the home what one manual called the 'ornaments which nature presents in the vegetable kingdom' (Parkes 99). Yet it was crucial that the space of interior culture exert a disciplining and ordering effect on these wild imports. Mary W. Helms has argued that in craft-making societies,

the safe, civilized, ordered, moral, domesticated life of the home society where people live in the here-and-now is contrasted either with a dangerous, chaotic, immoral or amoral, pre-civilized natural world outside or with the outside as a mystically powerful place of sacred superiority. (46)

The function of crafts is to transform objects from this exciting but dangerous 'outside' into an acceptable component of the 'inside'. Crafting, then, is 'the creation of form, shape, order, and refinement from that which is formless, shapeless, chaotic, and unrefined' (Helms 25). Helms's argument explains why, in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century crafts, the natural object is never presented in anything remotely like its natural setting. Natural objects would be gilded, shellacked, wrapped in foil, dipped in wax, pierced, glued together, wrapped in fabric or incorporated into larger geometrical patterns. Crafts do not in fact display the Romantic adoration of nature. Rather, they show the need to dominate nature, processing it into mere decoration. The domestic handicraft is the opposite of the sublime. Instead of the thrill of feeling overpowered by vast, infinite, dangerous nature, it is the smug satisfaction of putting a miniature, prettified bit of nature into its proper place (usually under glass).

Aurora Leigh gives us an example of these early nineteenth-century crafts. Although Aurora obediently does crochet (I.1035-52), the new craze invented in 1838, most of her work fulfils her aunt's preference for preservationist crafts (Caulfield and Saward 102). Aurora's aunt practises the arts of her youth when she produces seaweed collages, pricking the dried fronds into patterns with a pin (I.380-4)). Aurora herself 'spun glass, stuffed birds, and modelled flowers in wax, / Because she liked accomplishments in girls' (I.425-6). Taxidermy and wax flowers worked to produce a sense of permanence, to turn the decaying bird's corpse or the already-blown flowers into something that would last forever, radiant, orderly, scentless, protected under glass. In this respect, the handicrafts occupy the same kind of cultural role as Nash's orderly architectural squares, or Capability Brown's gardens that edited nature into carefully picturesque landscapes. Shell and seaweed pictures are diminutive decorative parallels to the important work of topographic reorganisation undertaken in the public sphere.

Handicrafts that incorporate natural objects also, crucially, participate in the industrial era's pleasure in producing a man-made world whose power and precision subdue nature itself. In her important study of Victorian interiors, Thad Logan argues that the nineteenth-century craze for aquariums and Wardian cases (glass cases filled with ferns) derives in part from a fascination with small enclosed spaces in which great natural forces could be domesticated (154-7):

When the 'natural' appeared in the parlour, it always did so as cleaner, more wrought, more contained, or more organized than it would have been in its original

condition. The middle-class parlour functioned, in fact, as a symbolic and practical switchpoint, transforming the natural into the cultural. (Logan 159)

The craftswoman improved on nature by preserving, cleansing, arranging and fixing the materials that nature had left in chaos.

Coincidentally, this period also saw an explosion of consumer goods, which provided a plenitude of raw materials for textile crafts in particular. Cotton went from being a luxury textile to a popular and affordable material at the end of the eighteenth century. New kinds of cotton included sheeting, plaids, and corduroys, mixed worsted and cotton blends. But there were also new fibres like alpaca and new technology for textile printing which inspired craftswomen to develop new ways of salvaging and combining them (see Lemire; Styles). The class associations of handicraft altered by the middle of the nineteenth century. Prior to the nineteenth century, needlework had been a high-status activity, associated with aristocratic practitioners. But in the early nineteenth century, handicraft was increasingly identified with a middle-class sensibility, as a thrifty, skilful mode of domestic management. This does not mean handicraft was limited to the middle class; on the contrary, needlework continued to be popular with upper-class women, while domestic ornamentation was prized even by the very poor.² But handicraft now signified the moral, managerial virtues of the *bourgeoisie*, not aristocratic leisure, and consequently members of other classes were emulating these middle-class ideals when they did craftwork. In the nineteenth century, when high-art venues were largely closed off to women, they channelled their creative urges into the world around them, using the elements most readily available (see Davidoff and Hall). This kind of domestic decoration was also sanctioned because it added to the comforts of the home, whereas more ambitious high art was condemned as a selfish use of time taken away from the family.

Indeed, by the mid-nineteenth century, the handicraft's most visible and urgent function was to signify womanhood. Craft items were made by the home's female inhabitant, and thus appeared to be an extension of her body, as well as carrying the signs of her taste and skill. The woman's hands had held it, her mind had planned it, her eyes had gauged it, and she had communicated something of her intangible subjectivity to the completed object. For the Victorians, then, women were ensconced in a cocoon of items of their own manufacture, representing otherwise invisible aspects of their identity. This is the image behind Ruskin's famous claim that 'wherever a true wife comes, this home is always around her' (152). The craft was frequently described as 'pretty' or 'elegant', qualities that elided the object with its maker's own body. The craft was the woman's household skills made concrete, a tangible trace of her household labour that was all the more valuable for having been produced in leisure hours, for it showed that labour was leisure, that she never stopped

working to improve the domestic abode. Its finished appearance also testified to the neatness and delicacy of the domestic woman's body.

Women made amateur crafts in order to perpetuate the values of the woman's sphere. This means that crafts had to remain personal emanations of their producer, given as sentimental tokens, irreducibly and inalienably part of the private world of the home. Susan Stewart explains:

Thus, while the personal memento is of little material worth, often arising, for example, amid the salvage crafts such as quilt-making and embroidery, it is of great worth to its possessor. Because of its connection to biography and its place in constituting the notion of the individual life, the memento becomes emblematic of the worth of that life and of the self's capacity to generate worthiness. (139)

This was especially the case for women, whose 'self' and 'worthiness' were confirmed and publicised through the handicraft.

Because of this intimate connection with women's lives, crafts stayed firmly in the category of what Annette Weiner has called 'inalienable possessions'. In other words, they were sacred enough to be accumulated rather than traded. Their value lies in their emotional message, not their monetary worth. Nobody put it better than Elizabeth Stone, who in 1840 described crafts as:

those numberless pretty and not unuseful tokens of remembrance, which, passing from friend to friend, soften our hearts by the intimation they convey, that we have been cared for in our absence, and that while the world looked dark and desolate about us, unforgetting hearts far, far away were holding us in remembrance, busy fingers were occupied in our behoof. Oh! a reticule, a purse, a slipper, how valueless soever in itself, is, when fraught with these home memories, worth that which the mines of Golconda could not produce. (318)

In Stone's description, domestic handicrafts are both too valuable for trade (something 'the mines of Golconda could not produce') and too worthless ('valueless in itself'), thus flying both over and under the radar of commodity culture. They thus escape commodification in the two ways Igor Kopytoff has described; they are 'sacralized' – ascribed a value beyond price and reserved for royals or priests – and they are cheap and ubiquitous enough to be virtually worthless, like a single match or a tissue (73–5). Made of worthless scraps that women salvaged and recycled, unsaleable in ordinary stores because of their amateurish construction and inadequate execution, the handicraft remained at home.

It may seem as if this amateur object, with its homemade scraps and sentimental value, was the opposite of the mass-produced commodity, but its actual relationship to the industrial economy was far more complex. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, factory production had begun to compete with manual fabrication, but as Daryl M. Hafter has pointed out, handmade work persisted alongside industrialisation, influenced it, and

competed with it (ix-xii). During this period manual work was not necessarily seen as artistic; rather, it was associated with exhausting rural toil that was rapidly becoming obsolete. The condition of the workers in mills and textile factories was of course notoriously bad but hand-sewers were no better off, since they were forced to work extremely hard in unhealthy conditions to produce enough clothing to compete with cheaper machine-made wares. The plight of impoverished lace-makers was especially pitiable as they desperately tried to compete with machine-made lace (see Callen; Morris; Parker). Thus, middle-class women might well associate hand-sewn products with squalid, impoverished conditions. They might well view industrialism as the future and try to incorporate factory-made objects or use machine-influenced techniques in their own hobbies. In other words, what we have here is the amateur homemade artefact attempting to look like a mass-produced commodity. As Lara Kriegel records, 'several English commentators argued that machinery facilitated mastery and even liberation' (96). As a triumph over nature and a relief from toil, industrialism was idealised. Indeed, women's own bodies began to be in intimate contact with the triumphs of the machine age. James Laver describes the crinoline as 'the first great triumph of the machine age' - 'the application to feminine costume of all those principles of steel construction employed in the Menai Bridge and the Crystal Palace' (quoted in Briggs 26). In advances in corset design, new dyes, machine-made lace, false hair and all the other innovations of the period, the mid-Victorian beautiful body was itself a triumph of manufacturing.

The machine age, in fact, made the domestic handicraft necessary. Thad Logan explains, 'as the lives of men and women in the nineteenth century became more and more thoroughly constituted by industrial capitalism, there seems to have been a compensatory emphasis on the amateur practices of ornamental sewing and handicrafts' (164). In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for the first time, many middle-class women were spatially separated from the site of work. The factory was located in an unsavoury locale, dependent upon advanced machinery, tied to technological and financial innovations. It was a place middle-class females were not supposed to enter.

Domestic handicraft, however, gave women an outlet for expressing their feelings about the new economy. Homemade objects were an antidote to the mass-produced commodities of the industrial era but in a complicated way, they also emulated those commodities. This was a woman's mode of production, set up as a rival to the regular industrial machinery. Domestic handicrafts proved that women, too, were capable of swift, precise, reliable production (the hallmark of industrial mass production), but also that they were able to produce objects that were far more meaningful than the generic products of the factory. In his history of hobbies, Steven Gelber astutely notes:

hobbies developed as a category of socially valued leisure activity in the nineteenth century because they bridged the worlds of work and home. They allowed women to practice, and therefore to understand, worklike activities ... As a particular form of productive leisure they expressed the deeper meaning of the work ethic and the free market. (2)

Gelber captures the way women could express their loyalty to work via what seems like its opposite, leisure. Craft allowed women to practise the same skills that the British economy was built on. Thus the crafts that emerged in the 1840s and 1850s gave middle-class women a way to assert their own economic productivity and to comment on industrialisation, as they were being reassigned to a private domestic sphere.

In the 1840s, handicraft became more fashionable than ever, after the 1837 coronation of a young queen who loved decorative arts, particularly embroidery (Hulbert 22; Lichten 7–8). New publications stressed the activity's status; several needlework books in the 1840s were either dedicated to, or edited by, princesses, viscountesses and countesses.³ This royal imprimatur became visible at the Great Exhibition of 1851, largely organised by Prince Albert and opened by the Queen, in which handicraft played a large and visible role.

In the Great Exhibition of 1851, handicrafts received the public endorsement of representing Great Britain's manufacturing achievements. The Great Exhibition was intended to showcase industrial achievements and it only accepted art associated with mechanical processes or appliances (Steegman 221–2). Indeed, the Great Exhibition aimed to prove that industrialism was compatible with art, part of a debate that lasted from the 1830s through the *fin de siècle*, according to Patrick Brantlinger. Thus the *Official Catalogue to the Great Exhibition* called handicraft 'ornamental industry', and designated their makers either 'inventor and producer' or 'designer and manufacturer', titles that flatteringly affiliated them with industrial magnates. Indeed, Lara Kriegel points out that the ornamental arts at the Great Exhibition actually helped domesticate industrialism. They provided examples of pursuits that combined both artisanal and mechanical work, like papier mâché, ironwork and ornamental glass (96–7). Because of the double meaning of 'industry', which meant both hard work and machinery by the 1850s,

the handicraftsman was just as much a man of industry as the operator of a machine in a textile factory, which explains why objects that were the product of exceptional craftsmanship stood side by side with objects that were the product of machines. (Auerbach 97)

Precisely at mid-century, then, 'industry' aligned handicraft with mechanical manufacture. It is worth pausing to note this fact because within 20 years William Morris and his fellow reformers would redefine craft and machine

work as inherently oppositional, making it hard even to remember how allied they seemed at the Great Exhibition.

The Great Exhibition's view of 'ornamental industry' can be parsed through its physical categories. It displayed needlework and other decorative handicrafts alongside its turbines, ores and knives, glossing all these objects as equally significant components of the newly flourishing industrial economy. The organising principles of the Great Exhibition made all objects equally specular, monumental and desirable, mystifying modes of production and local differences among them. As Thomas Richards has famously explained:

under a single ceiling, surrounded by trees and flooded with light, commodities appeared to have come out of nowhere, radiant and ordered into departments that fixed the place of each article and gave it a caption and a numbered place in the catalogue. (4)

The craft exhibitions at the Great Exhibition fell into several different groups. Some were objects remarkable for the skill of their producers. These included most of the embroidery and tapestry work; stamped-leather book covers; patriotic scenes in needlework depicting Napoleon or Mary Queen of Scots (*Official* II.564). Others were outstandingly large, like 'a hearth-rug, with the border and ends formed of upwards of 20,000 shreds of cloth, and the centre of lamb's wool', or W. Bridges's 'tapestry wool-work, "The Last Supper", after Leonardo da Vinci, containing five hundred thousand stitches' (II.573, 564). A third group consisted of objects produced, for the first time, wholly by machine, including an ivory pagoda and machine-made lace, to which the editors of the Great Exhibition catalogue could not refrain from adding the enthusiastic comment, 'The application of machinery to the production of lace is very remarkable and interesting' (II.824, 561).

This 'tapestry wool-work' was a type of needlework called Berlin-wool work. Berlin-wool work became phenomenally popular 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-wool work, 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. Workers used thick wools, which made it easy to fill in the picture fast. The yarn was also cheaper and easier to work than embroidery silks. Indeed, it became possible to purchase canvas with the picture printed directly upon it, obviating the need even to transfer the design. And 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). In fact it was a kind of stitch-by-numbers kit, rather like its descendant, modern needlework

kits. 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 group of Royal spaniels, a basket of fruit, or a scene from Sir Walter Scott (Morris 21-3). Even a child could produce perfect replicas. This sort of work was adaptable to virtually anything – chair backs, cushion covers, even slippers and bookmarks. Aurora Leigh memorialises the range and productivity of Berlin-wool work: '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 ...' (I.458-61). The slippers, stool and cushion emerge too swiftly, faster than their male recipient can learn their place.

If the Great Exhibition showcased Berlin-wool work, however, it also made a point of displaying another type of artefact: objects that pretended to be made of a material different from their actual composition. The mid-Victorians were fascinated by these 'imitative arts' (Lambert 22-3). James Howard Earle displayed a folding screen with encaustic painting 'in imitation of antique gems' beside a 'table-top imitation of buhl'. Alongside the marble statues in the sculpture galleries, the inquisitive visitor could find objects made of perforated paper, modelled in wax, cut out of cardboard, or cast in composition to resemble marble. Visitors might also spot Alexander Vischi's stall, with woollen flowers arranged on artificial pads of green turf in a porcelain basket (*Official* II.823, 826, 561). Brantlinger comments on the prevalence of imitative arts at the Great Exhibition, listing: 'furniture made from new types of fake wood (*gutta percha* and papier mâché), electroplated vases and statues, [and] painted "stained glass" windows' (92).

The imitative arts had been popular before the Great Exhibition, of course. Edward Lucie-Smith notes that 'between 1827 and 1846 thirty-five patents were taken out at the British Patent Office for processes which involved coating one substance or material so that it looked like another and (usually) more expensive one' (200). Many mid-Victorian domestic handicrafts were designed to fool the viewer by composing inexpensive matter, including household waste, into a simulacrum of a more costly consumer good. Two very popular crafts involved transferring a colourful paper print to glass and varnishing it to imitate either porcelain ('potichomanie') or stained glass ('diaphanie') respectively (see Henderson and Wilkinson 67; Dodd). Craftswomen were often exhorted to twist a rough shape out of wire or twigs, wrap it in cotton wool and slather it with molten wax to make it resemble coral (Henderson and Wilkinson 140). Even imitative arts could themselves spawn imitations. Marble might be too expensive, but 'scagliola work' was an Italian substitute made of plaster. Scagliola itself being a costly high-status object, the *Lady's Album of Fancy Work* in 1850 suggested that its readers copy the effect by using a piece of sycamore wood painted with India-ink and then varnished. The *Lady's Album* went on to point out that the sycamore itself

could be imitated by a piece of cheap deal 'covered with good cream-coloured drawing-paper' (22). In this rather remarkable series, paper imitates sycamore which imitates plaster which imitates marble.

Successful imitative art testified to the thriftiness, imaginativeness and manual dexterity of the craftswoman. It also confirmed¹ the visual sophistication of the viewer. In fact, any imitative art good enough to fool a naïve viewer would actually have failed. The viewer had to be momentarily tricked into believing the illusion, while knowing at a deeper level that it was fictional and puzzling out the method that produced it. It was precisely the successful navigation of that double perspective that made imitative art pleasurable.

The Great Exhibition provoked some anxiety about the absence of originality in imitative arts, part of a larger worry about the lack of imagination in British art generally.⁴ But on the whole, imitative arts continued to signal successful manufacturing. In 1862,

Alsagar and Neville produced papier mâché that looked like malachite. Earl Granville, speaking in a debate on paper in the House of Lords in 1860, found it a positive merit that paper could be made to look like Moroccan leather and pigskin. (Briggs 291)

When read as manufacture, 'imitative arts' were distinctly laudable. The imitative arts were the plastics of their day, promising to make heretofore forbiddingly expensive items affordable. Now working-class or middle-class consumers too could enjoy the visual pleasure and status of Moroccan leather, marble and malachite.

The crafts exhibited in 1851 fit into the machine ethos. They celebrated inexpensive materials utilised ingeniously and objects too vast for a single producer to create. The ideal craft of 1851 was made of an inexpensive, readily available material (wax, cardboard, wool), formed into the likeness of something rarer. The Great Exhibition promised magical transformations. Those vast, rough bales of raw materials, coal, cotton or iron, could go into a machine which would shape them into finished consumer items, and similarly, the detritus of Victorian life, feathers, ink, paper, wax, fabric scraps or seaweed, could be supplied to an ingenious craftsman who would fashion them into a decorative delight.

Imitative art also satisfied the mid-Victorian fascination with ingenious ways to incorporate waste products back into an efficient economy, a fascination with recycling and salvage described perhaps most famously in Henry Mayhew's examination of how each class lived off the drippings and debris of the one above it, and in the vast dust-heaps of Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1864). The imitative arts, therefore, testified that a skilful domestic manager could deliver the visual pleasure of valuable artefacts by finding novel uses for the bits of cotton, fragments of wire, scrap remnants and old

candle-ends otherwise relegated to the rubbish heap. One particularly labour-intensive craft employed fish scales in lieu of sequins; the woman would scrape the scales off the fish, clean them, soak them, punch tiny holes in them, snip them into the shape of leaves and sew them to objects (Morris 161-2; Urbino and Day 302). Cucumber or melon seeds could be sewn in intricate patterns to decorate mats, bags or table ornaments (Urbino and Day 301). This craft emblematised the world in which rags became paper, textile fibres were processed into 'flock', bones turned into matches, animal and human waste could be sold for fertilizer, dead horses became glue, and coal by-products produced new dyes (Briggs 49-50). Handicrafts encapsulated a kind of progress upwards through the ranks of material objects, a material evolution, as it were, when rubbish could be reshaped into treasure, or inexpensive common things made to bear uncanny resemblances to precious materials. When the visitor to the Great Exhibition looked at imitation marble or shreds of wool, what he saw was human skill elevating waste matter to unforeseen heights.

What the visitor to the Great Exhibition also felt was the intense satisfaction of common materials representing something recognisable. The preference for careful copying dominates the history of the handicraft. While precise replication was a desideratum for all crafts, it is perhaps most often articulated in embroidery manuals because of embroidery's explicitly representational patterns. The most admired craftswoman in England from the 1790s to the 1820s was Mary Linwood, who became famous for her 'pictorial embroidery': precise replicas of famous oil paintings (by artists like Raphael and Gainsborough) done in needlework. Miss Linwood's Gallery in Leicester Square was one of the sights of London (Parker 144-6). Linwood's needlework replicas of sportive dogs, Mount Vesuvius, lobsters, pathetic nuns and King Lear were perceived as the height of skill. No wonder that in 1842 Miss Lambert wrote:

Needlework may be regarded (if we may be allowed the expression) as the sister art of painting; the aim of the accomplished needlewoman of the present day, being to produce as true a picture of nature as possible; soaring far beyond the commonplace ideas of the ancient embroideries, which, perhaps, are more to be admired for the richness of their materials, and the labour bestowed upon them, than for any merit they possess as works of art. (20-21)

Indeed, she cautions, 'let us remember that the true intention of the art is to copy nature, not to distort her' (40). Notice that here Lambert exults in modern superiority to 'ancient embroideries'. She is dubious about medieval embroidery, so admired by Pugin and Morris, because it fails to 'produce as true a picture of nature as possible'. 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* (Official II.561). Mee, Lambert and Linwood are, in effect, reworking embroidery to resemble photography, and some of the enthusiasm for this precise replication surely comes from the enthusiasm for early photographic reproductions.

In other words, handicrafts were a local expression of the overriding mid-Victorian drive for realism. The craftswoman had to embroider what was actually there, just as authors were supposed to adhere strictly to the conventions and probabilities of real life, just as photographs were supposed to be a precise record of nature and just as applicants for the Royal Academy had to prove their drawing skill by painstakingly stippling endless copies of classical models. In Charlotte Yonge's early novel *Abbeychurch* (1844), Helen embroiders an orange rose among the more orthodox red and pink ones. Consternation ensues until it can be definitively established, by recourse to a diary entry that she had indeed witnessed an orange rose. This ocular proof makes the orange rose acceptable (230-2). No aesthetic concerns about the visual qualities of Helen's embroidery occur to the characters of *Abbeychurch*; documentary corroboration is paramount. The 'imitative arts', similarly, satisfied the shared belief that faithful mimesis of another object was the highest goal of handicraft.

Handicrafts, in fact, could even move beyond mimesis. They were a privileged locus of realism because they could be the thing, not merely represent it. In this respect, they were preferable even to photography. Craft instructions often incorporated the desirable original directly into the craft object. *Art Recreations*, a craft manual from 1861, demonstrates how to decorate already-drawn pictures or showcase existing physical objects, pasting hair, seaweed and shells onto pages and casting wax fruit from real fruit. 'Anglo-Japanese Work' consists of gluing pressed leaves directly onto the article to be ornamented and then painting and varnishing the whole product.⁵ High art involved endless copying of classical models, but it was only in the realm of domestic handicrafts that one could be presented with the model itself, the actual acorn or moss, the craftsperson's only role being to fix that object in such a way as to arrest its decay. Taxidermy is perhaps the craft that most clearly expresses this naturalistic urge, since the craftsperson's entire role is simply to preserve an animal in a fit state for public display.

At mid-century, the domestic handicraft, then, expressed both modernity and tradition. Interestingly, it did each in slightly different venues. Craft items were produced according to mass-circulation magazines, utilising premade kits, often incorporating mass-produced commodities and being made to look as much like a finished, accurate, machine-made object as possible. Thus craft practice seems harmonious with mid-Victorian economic norms. Yet the craft ideal was quite different. The craft was supposed to be a uniquely personal expression of a strong domestic attachment, to bear the individual marks of the producer's particular taste, inventiveness and skill, and to be given as an

inalienable testimonial to their relationship. This split between handicraft practice and handicraft rhetoric was ideologically useful; the item could secretly satisfy women's desire to emulate industrial production, hiding behind a virtuous facade of sentimental rhetoric. It was the handicraft's ability to satisfy competing imperatives simultaneously that helped make it popular.

These stresses are visible in the crafts themselves. The 'Elizabethan watch-hook' is a typical example: a large embroidered flower made of loops of decorative cord, with a mother-of-pearl watch-hook sewn in the centre (*Lady's* 10).⁶ Victorians could easily buy inexpensive imitation mother-of-pearl watch-hooks (Fraser 189). So why did the women of the mid-nineteenth century feel a need to swathe this cheap disposable product in layers of decoration? The answer is that the craftswoman was literally surrounding and wrapping the bought object in the fabric which testified to her labour, skill, taste and affection. We might remember Helms's claim that craft turns dangerous 'outside' objects safely 'inside', a theory that nicely explains the motivation for this reworking. Similarly, Daniel Miller explains that purchased goods get refashioned, an act which 'may be defined as that which translates the object from an alienable to an inalienable condition: that is, from being a symbol of estrangement and price value to being an artefact invested with particular inseparable connotations' (quoted in Edwards 16). It is precisely because the artefact is purchased that it requires to be literally enwrapped in signifiers of the home.

The watch was a status symbol, an emblem of professional status, often a sign of patriarchal succession as it was inherited from a father or grandfather. It was also a personal machine that made it possible to systematise labour into mill and factory shifts, to organise railroad timetables, and to develop precise mechanisms working in concert. The man's watch signified his participation in a shared public time. But the decorative watch-hook forced him to hang up his watch, relinquishing it to his wife's or daughter's own space, making him trust this heavy valuable object to their frail container.

It is no accident that among the most popular handicrafts were men's slippers, embroidered caps and smoking accessories (tobacco pouches, cigar-cases and Orientalist smoking garb). These objects facilitated the transformation of a business-oriented man into a leisured, domestic inhabitant. When he removed his hat, shoes, watch and other appurtenances of public work, his own body would be overwritten with the work of the women of the house, from head to toe bearing the embroidered signs that he was now in a space defined by their labour and his own leisure. Thus the watch-hook, slippers and other male-intended gifts are profoundly anti-commodity; they insist on their own status as private and domestic objects.

If crafts for men emphasised male leisure in the home, then crafts for women mystified female labour in the home. One very common object was the workbasket, usually made of frail woven straw or cardboard and decorated

with layers of frilled and quilted satin, studded with bows. Its fragility enforced only the most gossamer and diminutive of projects; it projected a life in which activities like the darning of men's wool socks quite literally had no place. The most popular types of handicrafts – vases, centrepieces, card-racks, picture frames and decorative stands – were meant to be shown off in the public rooms of the house. Public display confirmed that the articles were just as good as any of the professionally-made, purchased commodities around them. Such ornamental arts also confirmed that the female inhabitant had household tasks so well organised as to enjoy leisure time for delicate work.

The crafts had one disadvantage relative to mass-produced objects: they were extremely brittle. Often fastened with nothing more than weak homemade paste or bits of thread, the crafts must have fallen apart constantly. Moreover, the basic materials were not built to last. As Steven Gelber puts it, in nineteenth-century craft construction 'cardboard functioned as female wood' (169). The fragility of these objects is a fault, however, only if we assume the objects were meant to last. In the case of the domestic handicraft, however, the market preferred planned obsolescence. The craft's wobbliness was actually an advantage, because it kept women constantly employed, replacing items that were either disintegrating or outmoded. Its brittleness also guaranteed its value, paradoxically enough, for it forced its owners to treasure it, to keep it in the safest spaces of the home. And since the craft was seen as an extension of the woman herself, its bodily delicacy reinforced and guaranteed her own. Finally, there was no incentive to make permanent objects for the craft was part of the fashion system and was seen as disposable and changeable. The handicraft was closely associated with fashion: both appeared in lavish illustrations in women's magazines, both used elaborate textiles, both involved patterns and both were offered in new sets every month. Thus the craft's amateur brittleness was actually desirable. When Arts and Crafts professionalised the handicraft, they stressed that it needed to showcase strong construction and truth to materials. But these were new criteria for craft. Such professional-quality construction would have actually been counterproductive for the amateur women's craft, which wanted to showcase an attractive fragility, provide an excuse for constant alterations, and enable women to replace items with more fashionable objects.

By the 1870s, instructions for domestic handicrafts were ubiquitous but their quality had markedly declined. An 'imitation marble statuette' recommended by *Cassell's Household Guide* in 1869 reveals the deterioration of handicraft technique. This form of craft involved encasing an object in solidified wax. *Cassell's* recommended purchasing a cheap plaster cast and pouring half a pound of melted white candle wax over it until it was entirely coated. Thus the maker of the 'Wax Statuette' took a cheap commodity and expended transformative labour to render it into a sign of domestic care and an intimate denizen of a unique home. However, in this case, the transformative labour has been reduced

to the merest sign. As *Cassell's* itself pointed out, 'no skill is needed; any one can do it well'. Probably, however, no one could have done it well. For even by handicraft standards, the fragility of this object is worrying. The hot wax would have probably melted the cheap plaster; even if the plaster had held its shape, the wax would have caught bits of fluff or grit, thumbprints, and smudges, it probably would have cracked as the wax cooled, and of course if displayed anywhere near the fire or candles, the whole contraption would have melted.

Part of the decay of craft quality is due, ironically, to the explosion of print venues for handicraft instructions. Technological innovations had made it possible to print patterns, colour plates and detailed illustrations better than ever before (Beetham 100–101). New Berlin-wool work designs appeared constantly; in 1876, a typical issue of the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* contained 55 pages, 25 pages of which consisted of needlework and fashion engravings and patterns. With the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* producing dozens of craft ideas per month; craft columns in the *Queen*, the *Girl's Own Paper* and most other women's magazines; and pamphlets and manuals constantly appearing, the competitive drive to invent new handicrafts simply outpaced any kind of quality control (Adburgham; Beetham; White). Moreover, the enormous profusion of craft articles after 1870 may not indicate that crafts had become more popular. Rather, it might actually mean that craft production had become wholly specular, that as Victorian advertising and visual culture flourished, women would rather look at engravings of crafts than actually make them (see Flint; Richards). If the pictures were the point, there was no reason to take any particular care with the instructions, which now functioned merely to make the reader feel virtuously pragmatic, to occlude her real specular hunger.

The craft had, in fact, become a residual element in Victorian culture. Just as craft technique aimed to preserve fragile natural specimens, so too did the craft genre itself sustain outmoded economic and aesthetic preferences. Craft itself became a kind of taxidermy, a stuffed relic of what had once been alive. By the 1870s, the domestic handicraft lingered on as a despised vestigial practice, becoming as a sort of underground rallying point for reactionary women who were disaffected from the new gender models, dissatisfied with the new aesthetic fashions, and distressed by the new techniques of retail trade. Identified with the early Victorian notion of domestic managerial femininity and cheerfully participating in mid-Victorian forms of mass-production, the handicraft was such a precise expression of 1840s and 1850s thought that it could not update itself. As the years marched on, anyone who made domestic handicraft was stubbornly allying herself with a mindset that was a generation or two past.

Part of the problem was that crafts came to symbolise a traditional model of womanhood. We have seen that the domestic handicraft was associated with the sentimental and industrious domestic manager, but starting in the

1860s that role competed with a range of newer identities becoming available to women. Women who wanted to affirm their fidelity to the traditional housewifely model might make handicrafts to symbolise this identification. But for women affiliating themselves with more contemporary gender models, like the emergent aesthetic or New Woman roles, the domestic handicraft symbolised a retrograde past.

Another issue was that the domestic handicraft was now seriously out of step with the artistic ideas promulgated by the Design Reform movement, the Arts and Crafts movement, and later, the aesthetes.⁷ Well into the late nineteenth century, domestic handicraft retained its fidelity to mid-Victorian visual culture with bright colours, imitative arts and elaborate objects made of pasted cardboard and scraps of fabric, based on magazine illustrations or prefabricated kits. But Arts and Crafts had taught Victorians to value new standards: artistic expertise, originality, connoisseurship, tertiary colours and skilled labour. Above all, the Arts and Crafts movement introduced a new code of professionalism. Now the handicraft showcased its maker's training, its form demonstrating the craftsman's personal skill, handmade investment, historical knowledge and interest in the material. This craft was sold in stores or galleries, not exchanged as gifts or circulated in charity bazaars like its female counterpart. In this respect, the professional craft after 1860 is quite opposed to the amateur female craft.

While it is important that Aurora Leigh suffered through craft instruction in her youth, it is also important that, as an adult, she feels free to critique it. Her rejection of domestic handicraft symbolises the intellectual woman's rebellion and the decline of domestic handicraft into deep unfashionability. Aurora concludes that '... we are paid / The worth of our work, perhaps' (I.464-5). But if Aurora could not see the value of this 'work', perhaps we can. We can see how amateur handicrafts enabled women to express their ambivalence about the industrial economy, their emulation, critique and competition with the work of men. We can see how amateur handicrafts let women assert themselves as participants in mid-Victorian imitation, recycling, fashion and realism. Handicrafts articulated a specific position for women at a time of rapidly shifting values, and they achieved immense popularity because they were indeed, as Aurora noted, 'symbolical' (I.457).

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Notes

- 1 Deborah Cohen and Thad Logan are honourable exceptions. Other than those excellent recent studies, see Briggs; Lichten; Toller. Much work in allied fields sheds interesting light on handicrafts; in thing theory, for instance, see Freedgood; Plotz, and in museum studies see Kriegel; Lubbock.
- 2 A painted tea-tray, a Staffordshire figurine, some decorative china, were prized markers of luxury for the working poor. Hippolyte Taine's comment is revealing: 'You draw near a house, look in, and, in the half-light of a passage, see mother and grown daughter crouching, wearing little more than a chemise. What rooms! A threadbare slip of oilcloth on the floor, sometimes a big sea-shell or one or two plaster ornaments ...' (quoted in Lubbock 228–9). Here the starving women would rather have plaster ornaments than decent clothing, surely a strong testimony to the psychological appeal of such luxury items.
- 3 Miss Lambert dedicated *The Handbook of Needlework* (1851) to Princess Mary, while the Countess of Wilton edited E. Stone's *The Art of Needle-Work, from the Earliest Ages* (1840) and C.H. Hartshorne dedicated her *English Medieval Embroidery* (1848) to Marianne, Viscountess Alford.
- 4 A leader in *The Times* on July 1, 1851 complained about the 'imitative rage' among the carpets and pottery at the Great Exhibition (quoted in Briggs 71–2). Also see Kriegel's informative discussion.

- 5 The title alludes not to Japan, but to japanning, an effect emulated by the varnishing.
- 6 A similar design for a watch-pocket made of straw and ribbons appears in *The Lady's Newspaper* (later the *Queen*) 11 (5 June 1852): 342-3.
- 7 The Design Reform movement refers to the mid-century reformers like Sir Henry Cole, Owen Jones and Richard Redgrave who reacted to the quality of art manufactures at the Great Exhibition by vigorously championing new rules for decorative art and by setting up the South Kensington Museum to educate Britons about good design. It was strongest in the 1850s (the Great Exhibition was 1851) and its participants were prominent governmental figures. The Arts and Crafts movement got its name from the first Arts and Crafts exhibition in 1888, although its participants were, of course, active earlier. Flourishing between the 1850s and 1870s, and, obviously, overlapping with the Design Reform movement, their ranks included artists and art critics like John Ruskin, William Morris, Walter Crane and the Pre-Raphaelite painters. They rebelled vociferously against the domestic handicraft. The next generation, the aesthetes (between the 1870s and 1890s), built on their predecessors' achievements but elaborated their belief in beautiful objects into a philosophy that governed personal behaviour, morality, literature and leisure; they included Max Beerbohm, Lucas Malet, Rosamund Marriott Watson and Oscar Wilde.