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Women's Touch

Constance Classen

A woman's touch. The expression evokes women as media of softness, comfort and refinement, the symbolic and tactile counterpart to rough and tough men. On its underside, it alludes to the corrupting effects of feminine sensuality, which can seduce and enfeeble the most hardened warrior or rigorous ascetic. Behind the notion of a woman's touch lies the concept of woman *as* touch. This declares that, while men are inherently rational, women are all body, all feeling.

The ancient association between women and touch has been rejected, reworked and reclaimed over the centuries by women trying to formulate or conjecture a feminine identity and mode of action. In 1600 the Italian Humanist Lucrezia Marinelli argued that "the soft and delicate flesh" of women indicated a more perceptive intelligence than that conveyed by the "tough and hard flesh" of men (cited in Classen 1998: 84). In the eighteenth century Mary Wollstonecraft claimed that as long as women were associated with feeling, rather than reason, they could not achieve intellectual equality with men (Wollstonecraft 1971). In the twentieth century Luce Irigaray made the controversial suggestion that women are not simply forced into a blind alley of touch by oppressive gender norms but in fact find tactile engagement more fulfilling than the visual mastery associated with men (see Vasseleu 1998).

Whatever the ultimate or uppermost reason for the link between femininity and tactility, the culture of women's touch has been extensively elaborated in Western history and in many non-Western societies. This is particularly evident in what has been deemed "women's work," a term that includes family care, housework, craftwork and conventionally feminine occupations such as seamstress or nurse. The tactile intimacies and intricacies of such, often slighted, women's work provides the central theme of this section. The crucial question concerning women's touch within mainstream Western culture has been: "how does it affect men?" The question asked here is: "how has it been creatively employed by women?"

The setting for the first essay is one of the harshest environments in the world for the sense of touch: the Arctic. In "Saarak's Crisis" anthropologist Jean Briggs begins her account of childbirth and weaning among the Utku Inuit of Canada by describing the kinesthetic sensations of travelling by sled over melting snow followed by the labor of building an igloo. Her Inuit companion, Allaq, though advanced in pregnancy, takes full part in the work: helping to push the sled when it is stuck and to build the interior of the igloo out of blocks of snow. When the igloo is ready Allaq prepares supper and nurses her three-year-old daughter Saarak. That night her baby is born and the same knife Allaq used to perform her household chores is used to cut the umbilical cord.

While the prolonged physical intimacy of mother and child among so-called primitive peoples has often been lauded by Western childcare theorists, such intimacy requires the skill to disengage the child from its mother's body when necessary. The rest of Briggs' account deals with the techniques Allaq employs to overcome Saarak's resistance to being displaced at her mother's breast by the new baby. Even after Saarak is successfully discouraged from nursing, she continues to long for the dark cosiness of the interior of her mother's parka. In a culture that disapproves of direct expressions of anger or refusal, Allaq relies on resistance, distraction and pacification to maneuver Saarak out from her parka in order to leave room for the baby. The struggle is considerable, but, after a few months, Saarak no longer craves access to her mother's body. Allaq's skill at manipulating the tactile desires of her children matches her skill at sculpting and patting a home into shape out of snow.

In "Saarak's Crisis" Allaq puts her tactile and tactical abilities to work ordering bodies and space. A crucial component of women's work in many cultures is, in fact, the work women perform on their own bodies in order to render them more attractive or socially acceptable. In China, footbinding traditionally fell into this category of women's work. A brief account provided below relates one woman's personal experience of this practice. Footbinding, which stunts and reshapes the feet, was both a form of masculine control – women with bound feet could not stray far from home – and a source of feminine empowerment. As the account below indicates, by wrapping the bandages ever more tightly, "even if I died of pain," a Chinese woman could significantly improve her social standing by creating admirably small feet. Physically footbinding was disabling, socially it was enabling. The tiny feet – known as lotuses – they labored so long and suffered so much over, gave women a sense of personal accomplishment and a common bond. How long did footbinding last in China, painfully passed on from mother to daughter, exalted, fetishized and endured, until it was abolished in the twentieth century? A thousand years.

With their bound feet restricting their mobility, it was customary for women in China to dedicate much time to embroidery (including the embroidery of shoes to decorate their "lotuses"). In *"Nu Shu"* Wang Ping explores how country women in the Hunan area of China developed a

secret script for use amongst themselves based on their embroidery patterns. In the West needlework has often been seen as opposed to writing: men write, women sew (see Classen 1998: 86–106). The Chinese writers of *nu shu* ("female writing"), however, were able to claim their script as an extension of women's work.

Aside from the fact that it was solely used by women, *nu shu* had many distinct features. It was customarily used to record women's songs and it was taught with the aid of songs. It was practiced in the feminine space of the embroidery room and was often written, or embroidered, on the handicrafts produced there, such as aprons, fans and handkerchiefs. *Nu shu* was furthermore chiefly a medium of communication between "sworn sisters," women who formally agreed to be close friends. *Nu shu* writings could only be delivered by women to women, and when a woman died her *nu shu* texts were usually burned. The aim of *nu shu* was not to ensure lasting renown but to convey one's feelings to one's friends. These characteristics suggest a much more embodied, personal and tactile form of writing than the disembodied and reified form we are accustomed to in the West. A form of writing that remained closely tied to physical intimacy and which was integrated into a network of social and aesthetic practices (see also Endo 2004).

The usual subject-matter of *nu shu* texts was the hardships and sufferings of women's lives. Western feminists have sometimes longed for women to have a writing of their own with which to express themselves. Now that something approaching one has been made known, it is painful to learn that, as one *nu shu* poem puts it: "every word is soaked in blood." Yet using *nu shu* to communicate one's pain to sympathetic friends made it more bearable. One of the last writers of *nu shu* said when she was interviewed in 1996: "By writing so much suffering disappears" (Martin 2004).

In the next chapter "Feminine Tactics," I look at how women in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England used their handiwork as the basis for elaborating, not a female writing, but a female aesthetic. During a period when the notion of art as a solitary, masculine, visual exercise was gaining ascendancy, many artistically inclined women developed an alternative aesthetic by working together on such handicrafts as paperwork, featherwork, shellwork, and embroidery. In one example discussed below, two nineteenth-century women transformed part of their home into an intricately textured and eminently tactile grotto. (Ironically, it is now only possible for visitors to experience this grotto through closed-circuit television.) Contemporary wisdom has it that women dedicated themselves to such "trivial" handiwork because they were restricted from "higher" pursuits. I argue, however, that these crafty ladies were not just making do with second-rate amusements, but actively pursuing an aesthetic tactics of their own – one which valued touch as well as sight, and communal production as much as individual ability.

The women I write about in "Feminine Tactics" had the leisure and income to pursue their handicrafts as a pastime. The women described in the follow-

ing piece by Madeleine Henrey are at the other end of the social scale and are obliged to struggle for their daily bread. Henrey's contribution consists of a series of excerpts from her autobiography, *Little Madeleine*, in which, like a female, working-class counterpart of Marcel Proust, she vividly recalls the workaday world of early twentieth-century Paris. The women in her book are humble lace makers, seamstresses, and marketwomen; yet – like the gentlewomen described above – they too elaborate a feminine tactics and aesthetics within the possibilities of their circumstances. While the men she describes also work with their hands, laying bricks and building roads, in Madeleine Henrey's experience it is the women who are "geniuses with their fingers," crafting miracles of workwomanship out of scanty resources.

Henrey depicts women who, while harassed by poverty and brutality, are graceful, strong and competent. This portrayal contrasts sharply with the critical presentations of women as graceless, weak and incompetent which would emerge in certain feminist writings later in the century. It was at this time that women became increasingly determined to penetrate historically masculine domains, and a traditional "woman's touch," it seemed, did not provide the corporeal techniques needed for success in a man's world. In her landmark essay, "Throwing Like a Girl," Iris Young stated that women are timid and uncertain in their physical engagement with the world. The result, she says, is that they are hampered in their movements and cannot throw, stride, run or hit with the ease and competence of men (Young 1980). It is evident that a new set of criteria has been put in place to judge women's corporeal skills and that deftness with a needle or broom no longer carries weight.

The final selections in this section deal with current Western reworkings of women's touch. In a world which offers a plethora of potential models – from contemporary crafty ladies creating mosaics and scrapbooks to businesswomen shaping the forces of industry to televised warrior women who can throw javelins and punches as well as and better than men – what new feminine tactics will emerge?

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Feminine Tactics

Crafting an Alternative Aesthetics in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

Constance Classen

An eighteenth-century gentlewoman in the drawing room working on a tapestry and her maid in the kitchen sweeping the floor might well seem worlds apart. Yet both, according to age-old beliefs, were engaged in "women's work," occupied in tasks that were basically more alike than different. Consider now the case of a gentleman painting a picture and a footman blacking boots. Here no underlying similarity presents itself: the gentleman is creating a work of art, the footman is performing manual labor. One can hardly say that both are engaged in "men's work" because there was no such special domain. Work in general was deemed to be men's work. Women's work, by contrast, *was* a specialized domain, a domain of feminine domestic labor that could encompass both craftwork and housework, so long as both were undertaken within the home for the home.

The craftwork produced in such quantities by artful gentlewomen in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was therefore considered a refined version of women's work: it was "ladies' work." No matter how refined ladies' work might be thought, however, it never rose above its shared sensory basis with housework. Both were linked with the supposedly lower, feminine senses of touch, taste and smell, rather than with the "higher," "masculine" senses of sight and hearing. Women were the ones who cooked and cleaned and sewed at home while men used their eyes and ears outside in the world (Classen 1998: 63–85). Although ladies' work might employ a sublimated taste, a delicate touch, and an intuitive flair, it nonetheless depended on the operations of senses of the second rank, and hence could never manifest the intellectual and aesthetic mastery of masculine vision (see Messer-Davidow 1988; Barker-Benfield 1992). This is one reason why it seems ridiculous to compare a gentleman painting a landscape to a footman blacking boots: the former is perceived as working within an exalted field of vision whereas the

latter is operating within the lowly field of touch. This sensory disjunction does not arise in the comparison of a lady creating a tapestry and a maid working at her household chores because both are understood to be engaged in different forms of manual labor, of handiwork.

"Ladies' work" can be seen as an artistic and sensory ghetto in which creative women were pressured by gender conventions to contain – and downgrade – their aesthetic aspirations. The very scarcity of writing on ladies' work testifies to the extent to which women who devoted themselves to its practice have been marginalized by Western history. Yet I believe such work can also be understood as providing a crucial space for the expression of feminine creativity. Through craftwork women could explore alternatives to the dominant masculine visual aesthetic and at the same time remain safely within the bounds of acceptable feminine practice. The handiwork that was so popular among eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women can be regarded as the site of a feminine tactics; both in its promotion of a tactually oriented aesthetic based on traditional women's work and in its manipulation of gender norms to allow women their own space for creative freedom.

The following pages are dedicated to exploring the aesthetic bases of ladies' work, that work which has occupied so many women but engaged the attention of so few scholars. The exploration begins with the work of Mary Delany, the celebrated eighteenth-century craftswoman, and then proceeds to the extraordinary interior design created by Jane and Mary Parminter at the turn of the nineteenth century. While the term "ladies' work" can potentially cover a wide range of practices, including the work of professionals, I will be using it here in its more restricted sense to refer to the craftwork created by upper class women primarily as a leisure activity. Furthermore, although such women might undertake ladies' work for many reasons, including as a feminine duty or a sign of social status,[1] I am especially interested in those craftswoman who found it a source of creative fulfillment.

"She Worketh Willingly With Her Hands"

The ladies' work that was so popular in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England was nothing new in itself. Ladies in the seventeenth century and earlier had occupied themselves with "the making of Flowers, Boxes, Baskets with Beads, Shells, Silke and Strawe" (Margaret Cavendish, cited in Burton 1962: 317). As the Age of Taste as well as the Age of Enlightenment, however, the eighteenth century witnessed an expansion of interest in such ladies' work. While some upper class women, inspired by the aesthetic ferment of the day, tried their hand at poetry or painting, others devoted themselves with a new enthusiasm to needlework, shellwork and papercraft.[2]

The intrinsically tactile and intimate nature of ladies' work was manifested in a number of ways. First of all, the needlework that was the most characteristic occupation of women was understood to be a work of the hand, rather than

of the eye (see Classen 1998: 93–8). Indeed, as was known, it was possible even for women who were blind to sew, knit, or make lace. Much of the other craftwork practiced by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women, such as papercraft and beadwork, involved an extension of the manual skills developed through needlework.

Most of the handicrafts produced by women, furthermore, were made to be touched as well as seen. For example, intricately worked as they might be, the clothing, cushion covers and carpets produced by women were made to be worn, sat on, or trod upon. Embroidery added a further tactile dimension to textiles by creating designs in relief. One common needlework technique called knotting consisted of making knots at intervals on a thick thread and then using the knotted thread to produce a raised design on fabric. A particularly intimate tactile dimension was added to craftwork when human hair was used to weave bracelets, and other commemorative jewelry (see Pointon 1999: 53–4). Even those handiworks that were purely decorative often had a tactile appeal, as, for example, in the case of the shell mosaics and seaweed and sand pictures created by many women.

Mary Delany, an English gentlewoman, was a mistress of most of the decorative pursuits fashionable for ladies in the eighteenth century.[3] She embroidered, made lace, knotted, and created shell mosaics and paper collages, among much else. While one of a community of highly skilled craftswoman, Mrs Delany, as she was known, was notable for the exceptional quality and inventiveness of her work. She might deprecatingly refer to her handiwork as "frippery " but she nonetheless applied high standards to it. It was her opinion that the "ornamental work of gentlewomen ought to be superior to bought work in design and taste" (cited in Brimley-Johnson 1925: xxv).

At first glance, the oeuvre of Mary Delany might not seem like much: an embroidered dress, a knotted blanket, paper cut-outs of flowers... The artistry of such pieces lies not so much in their overall visual effect, as in their intricate detail. The dress is embroidered with a minute botanical garden of skillfully strewn flowers, which rise up from the black silk as if from a void. The blanket is decorated with a web of knotted patterns, all white on white, relying on relief for their effect. The paper flowers (which Delany, seeking a new field of endeavor, began at the age of seventy-two) are built up from hundreds of carefully cut pieces of colored paper pasted on a black background.

In the case of her paper flowers, which would come to number almost a thousand, the question arises of why Delany did not simply *paint* the flowers, and then, if she wished, cut them out and mount them on a black background? The general visual result in most cases would have been much the same and the effort involved would have been considerably less. One reason why Delany chose to work with scissors rather than with a paintbrush (in the use of which she was also adept) was because scissorwork was a

particularly feminine practice cultivated by many women in her circle. The highly skilled scissorwork manifested by Delany's flowers, therefore, made them a triumph of feminine craft, rather than merely a pretty set of paintings. Another reason was that Delany aimed for more than mere visual representation in her flowers. The model for her flowers was the *hortus sicus*, or dried flower collection, which many women, including Delany, created as another dimension of their craftwork (Hayden 1980: 132). The layering of leaves, petals, stamens, and so on in Mary Delany's "pressed" paper flowers, which were composed with botanical accuracy, mimicked the physical qualities of real pressed flowers. The result was a richly textured effect that would be readily accessible to the fingertips, but is less immediately apparent to the eye. After immersing oneself in the intricate patterns and textures of Mrs Delany's work, however, a conventional painting of a flower might by contrast seem rather flat and dull.

Mary Delany pursued her artistic enterprises with remarkable determination and independence. Yet, the decorously feminine nature of most of her activities, along with her own cheerful social conformity, led her to be apotheosized as an ideal of womanhood. She was charming, correct and modest, and she was always working with her hands. No doubt, if her passion had been for ancient languages and astronomy instead of for embroidery and paper flowers, she would not have left the same impression. Her contemporary, the brilliant but disparaged Anglo-Saxon scholar, Elizabeth Elstob, felt less than competent as a woman because of her deficiencies in "the two Accomplishments of a good House-wife, Spinning and Knitting:"

> I w'd [not] be thought to be above doing any commendable Work proper for my sex, for I have continually in my thoughts, the Glorious Character of a Virtuous Woman (Prov. xxxi. 13), "She seeketh wool and Flax and worketh willingly with her hands." (cited by Wallas, 1929: 173).

As she was governess to the children of Mrs Delany's great friend, the Duchess of Portland, Elizabeth Elstob would frequently have had before her eyes a living embodiment of that biblical paragon in the person of Mary Delany.

At a time when "learned ladies," or "bluestockings" as they were also called, threatened to invade many traditionally masculine social and intellectual territories, Mary Delany, in fact, served as a model of an intelligent, talented upper class woman who was comfortably conventional. Her admirer, Jonathan Swift, wrote that she was living proof that a woman could be well-educated and yet not pedantic: "I will carry you about among our adversaries and dare them to produce one instance in which your want of ignorance makes you ... speak like a scholar" (cited in Brimley-Johnson 1925: xxiii).

Such perceptions were of the utmost utility to Mary Delany as they won her the highly placed support of which she stood in great need in her later

years. They also meant that she could carry on with her artistic projects not only free from reproach, but actively encouraged. The "inspiring touch" with which Mrs Delany was credited (Hayden 1980: 153) appeared in no way to threaten the sublime vision that was the prerogative of men. Yet it enabled her to forward within her own sphere an aesthetic counterpractice to the male-dominated visual arts.

All-Around Art

Women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were generally expected to add a decorative "touch" to a home, rather than completely transform it. Yet crafty ladies were not always satisfied with embroidering cushions and making shellwork frames for seaweed pictures. Many ambitious women undertook large-scale projects of interior design, adorning whole rooms with their embroidery or paper collage, and decorating cavernous grottoes with their shellwork (Arnold 1998). When several industrious women – mothers, daughters, and friends – worked together on projects the results could be dramatic. One wonders whether occasionally a paterfamilias, startled to find his home transformed into a workplace and showcase of feminine handicrafts, might not have wished that his womenfolk had instead chosen to spend their time unobtrusively writing poetry or studying Greek.

The most striking examples of interior decoration by women came when the women themselves owned the site of their decorative labors. The best-known instance from this period is the home created by the so-called ladies of Llangollen, a pair of friends who ran away from their families and established themselves in the Welsh village of Llangollen. A Rousseau-inspired system of self-improvement kept the ladies, Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, occupied every day in craftwork, educational activities and projects of home and garden design. While we have diaries and letters relating to their lives, however, we lack a good description of their home, Plas Newydd, which has not survived in its original state (Mavor 1971).

Another female-run residence of the late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth centuries, "A la Ronde" in Exmouth, provides a better-preserved example of a house transformed by accomplished craftswomen. A la Ronde was created by Jane Parminter and her cousin, Mary Parminter. Their parents dead, the two women – together with Jane's infirm sister, Elizabeth – spent ten years living abroad in Southern Europe, visiting churches, palaces, galleries and gardens. When Elizabeth died in 1794, Jane and Mary decided to build a home for themselves close to the small seaport of Exmouth in England. Jane is said to have based the unusual sixteen-sided design of the house on the basilica of San Vitale at Ravenna. The house itself, however, looked less like a church, than a cottage, with whitewashed walls and a thatched roof. Inside the house a central octagonal hall rose up sixty feet and was encircled within by an upper gallery. On the grounds outside the cousins created an

innovative garden of exotic plants, an aromatic "bee garden" and a romantic "wild walk" (Hussey 1938; Tudor 1970).

In their creation of A la Ronde, the Parminters were influenced by the contemporary interest in pastoral life and in the picturesque. A la Ronde, however, is not simply a cottage orné, a gentrified simulacra of a rustic residence for the recreation of the well-to-do. It is a large-scale example of feminine craftwork – an embroidered house, as it were. The conversion of an ecclesiastical architectural model into a thatched cottage by the Parminters alerts us to the aesthetic transformations found in the interior of A la Ronde. As in the church of San Vitale, the upper walls of the house are covered in mosaics, but the mosaics here are made out of shells, feathers and porcelain fragments. Between the eight upper windows are sixteen representations, not of saints, but of birds, executed in feathers, twigs and lichens. The narrow staircase leading up to the gallery has been transformed into a grotto, with its walls and vaulted ceiling encrusted with shells, rocks, and sparkling pieces of mirror.

The main floor of the house also manifests the transformative effect of the Parminters' craftwork. The drawing room is decorated with an elaborate featherwork frieze, seaweed and sand landscapes, and contains a table inlaid with pieces of marble, mosaic, shells and cameos. The library is dominated by the cousins' shell collection while other rooms display examples of their embroidery and related craftwork.

The interior of A la Ronde has astonishing tactile and kinesthetic qualities. These are produced first of all by the many-sided design of the house. Situated between the hexadecagon of the exterior walls and the octagon of the interior hall, the rooms are all of odd shapes, with furniture made to fit. Each room had a narrow sliding panel leading into the next, making it possible to complete a circuit of A la Ronde by walking from room to room. Having rooms facing all directions ensured that the cousins would always have a sunny spot in which to sit. This novel configuration of interior space produces heightened sensations of self-positioning within the house. Looking down into the central octagon from the gallery far above, in turn, is a vertiginous experience.

The extensive use of shells, feathers, and other materials on the walls, particularly in the staircase and gallery, creates texturally rich surfaces that invite tactile exploration and which impinge on the interior space of the house. This ambience of textural diversity is enhanced by the numerous handicrafts displayed within the house. In fact, the use of similar materials for a variety of purposes produces a sensation of continuous transformation as collections become walls, walls become tables, and tables become pictures. In this context the surfaces in the house which remain flat and smooth become themselves texturally interesting by way of contrast.

Another tactually interesting characteristic of A la Ronde is its intimate relationship with the external environment. Situated on high ground, the

house's gallery windows command an imposing view of the countryside in all directions. However, the countryside is also brought within the house, through the use of natural materials such as feathers, twigs, lichens, rocks, shells, sand and seaweed. This makes it possible not only to look out onto the landscape but to enter into an intimate haptic relationship with it through its aesthetic reconstruction within the house. The visual is given a tactile presence. The fracturing of unified visual perspectives into a sensuous multiplicity is further enhanced by the fact that eight of A la Ronde's windows are placed on the angles of the house, creating two-sided vistas rather than flat "pictures" of the exterior.

In A la Ronde we find craftswomen working at creating a total environment. The Parminters did not just adorn a house with their handiwork, the house itself was their handiwork. They lived within their art. The importance of this total environment is suggested by the name of the house itself – A la Ronde, "in the round."

"We Make Our Potts With What We Are"

A yellow and brown pitcher made by Mary Parminter in 1820, some nine years after Jane's death, bears the inscription: "None with the potters can compare, we make/our potts with what we/potters are./Our great creator formed us/of dust./And to the same return/we shortly must" (Jackson-Stops 1991: 1158). The comparison that Mary Parminter makes between the "clay" of human flesh and the clay of pottery could also be made between the "stuff" of female bodies and the stuff of feminine craft. Women were symbolically associated with the natural world and many of the materials they used in their craftwork, such as shells, feathers, hair and flowers, came from the natural world. They made their crafts with what they were.

Like spiders spinning webs from their own bodies, or birds feathering their nests, women also adorned their homes with what they were – with natural materials associated with their own feminine nature. This is particularly striking in the case of A la Ronde, where the Parminters lined their home with organic materials and literally feathered their nest. The grottoes many women delighted in decorating with shells similarly mimicked the imagined characteristics of the female body, with their cold, damp interiors. A woman's home, in fact, was often portrayed as being like her shell, protecting her from the world outside. In their carefully crafted grottoes, women actually made a home for themselves out of shells.

Even when women did not directly employ natural materials in their craftwork, they frequently embellished their work with representations of nature, pre-eminently flowers. Floral motifs were so common in needlework, in fact, that "to flower" meant "to embroider" (Parker 1984: 119). While there was a particular connection between embroidery and floral design, there was scarcely a material that came into craftswomen's hands, whether

hair, shells, or feathers, that they did not turn into representations of flowers. This is amply evidenced in the work of Mary Delany. As women themselves were conventionally idealized as flowers, by depicting flowers they again symbolically represented themselves in their work.

The reinforcement of the traditional association of women with nature that often occurred in ladies' work might seem to have served to support the notion of women as lacking in personal identity and self direction. Yet craftswomen themselves saw the matter differently. Far from mindlessly reproducing standardized representations of femininity, they felt very much in charge of their creations. As Mary Parminter wrote, "*We* make our potts with what we potters are." If the materials and motifs employed in ladies' work were often generically feminine in their symbolism, they nonetheless had a strong personal appeal for many craftswomen, who made use of them according to their own preferences and skills.

Significantly, it was not only Mother Nature that women understood themselves to be emulating through their craftwork, but God. Mary Parminter presented herself as God-like in her creation of vessels out of "dust." Mary Delany believed her paper flowers reproduced the handiwork of God (Brimley Johnson 1925: xxxix). Creative inspiration was conceptualized as passing from the hand of the Deity straight to the hand of the craftswoman, enabling women occupied at home on their ladies' work to come into touch with God. And God himself, as portrayed in Scripture, sometimes sounded very much like a hardworking craftswoman. Addressing the Deity, Job asked: "Did you not pour me out like milk and curdle me like cheese, clothe me with skin and flesh, and knit me together with bones and sinews?" (Job 10: 8–11). Here indeed was confirmation of the creative potential of homely woman's work.

A Feminine Aesthetics

In what ways might the ladies' work engaged in by eighteenth and nineteenth-century women be said to embody a feminine aesthetic? The claim could be made that it did not constitute a distinctively feminine field as it was influenced by developments in the visual arts and as male artesans also produced craftwork. As regards the first point, it is evident that, while influenced by the visual arts, ladies' work was not simply a feminized version of art; it had its own repertoire of techniques, media and products and its own set of values. The similarities with masculine craftwork are stronger but crucial differences still remain. As described above, feminine craftwork often made use of idiosyncratic, natural products – plants from the garden, seaweed and shells from the beach. It was also customarily tessellated, or mosaic-like in its construction. Embroidery was composed of mosaics of stitches, patchwork quilts of mosaics of cloth, shellwork of mosaics of shells,

and Mary Delany's famous flowers were made up of mosaics of paper (she, in fact, referred to them as paper mosaics). In this regard ladies' work was like the sense of touch, which apprehends objects bit by bit rather than as a seamless whole.

Another distinctive trait of ladies' work, as compared to most masculine craftwork, was that it was private and uncommercial (except when sold for charitable purposes). If it sometimes left the home it was as a present, passed from hand to hand as part of a feminine gift economy through which women would solicit and dispense favors. Moreover, as an informal, domestic practice, ladies' work was not imagined to require a professional workspace. It could be carried out in a lady's closet or on a dining room table (which might have to be quickly tidied in time for dinner). This emphasized its intimate nature and its integration with domestic life.

Although working at home, the practitioners of ladies' work were part of a feminine community of craftswomen. They shared techniques and resources with each other and often collaborated on projects (in contrast to the fine art ideal of the artist as a solitary man of genius). Presumably on the grounds that only other women could properly appreciate it, craftswomen often passed on the finest examples of their work to female relatives and friends. In the case of A la Ronde, for example, Jane Parminter stipulated in her will that the house could only be inherited by unmarried kinswomen.

While ladies' work was undoubtedly considered distinctively feminine in nature, its aesthetic value was not so widely acknowledged. Even the work of a celebrated craftswoman such as Mary Delany was not generally recognized to be art. After her death much of her work was stored away in drawers and chests by her family, just as any grandmother's handiwork might have been. With reason, the seventeenth-century writer Margaret Cavendish saw women's textile productions as constituting their burial shrouds, while men's textual creations provided them with immortal fame (Classen 1998: 98–101).

One might have expected that the broadening of the boundaries of art in modernity and the rise of the feminist movement would have brought about a greater recognition of the aesthetic value of feminine craftwork. Despite certain efforts to breathe new artistic life into old feminine practices (see Parker 1986: 189–215), this has not generally occurred. In fact, due to the widespread deprecation of the traditional pursuits of women (and especially of "ladies") in the twentieth century, the "ornamental work of gentlewomen" is in many ways taken *less* seriously today than it was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For example, art historians Charlotte Gere and Marina Vaizey wrote in 1999 of the prominent nineteenth-century collector and craftswoman, Dorothy Nevill:

> She added [to her collection] endless examples of her own fancy-work, silk painting, shellwork, paper filigree, armorial illumination and embroidery.

> There was hardly one useless Victorian skill of which she was not a master.
> (Gere and Vaizey 1999: 91)

It is telling that Dorothy Nevill's craftwork is criticized, not for being unattractive or poorly executed but for not being useful. While no one expects art to be useful, women's work can still be condemned as frivolous if it has no practical function. Particularly ironic is the fact that, while Nevill is presented as a "master" of her craft, her mastery turns out to be worthless as her craft is deemed to be useless. Indeed to be a "master" of "fancywork" appears ridiculous as it unites the notion of masculine artistic dominion with the practice of a trivial feminine pastime.

If one accepts that craftswomen were actually artists *manquées,* forced by gender conventions to spend their time in useless fancywork, then one feels a great loss of creative potential. The paper collages and embroidered hangings become sorry substitutes for the "serious" works of art that might have been produced by at least some of these women in a more egalitarian society.

Whereas some women undoubtedly felt disengaged or stifled by ladies' work, the evidence indicates that many women found it stimulating and fulfilling and that they employed it as a means for developing their own aesthetic sensibilities. Mary Delany was an accomplished painter and, enthusiastically supported as she was by her husband, Dr Delany, she could have decided to concentrate her energies on painting. She chose instead to put an enormous amount of time and effort into craftwork. The Parminters, who had complete control over their household, could have decided to decorate their home with imitations of the fine artworks they'd seen in Europe. They chose instead to decorate it with shells and feathers. Such cases indicate that women's craftwork was not just the result of an oppressive redirection of feminine creativity into trivial pastimes, but, in many cases, a considered elaboration of a feminine aesthetic. The by-now hoary question of why there have not been more women artists in Western history perhaps merits a different answer than the usual ones of feminine incapacity or subordination. The women artists were there. We have just not been looking in the right place.

The time has now come to re-evaluate traditional feminine realms of creativity. In order to do so, however, it is essential not to employ criteria derived from the visual art tradition that marginalized women's work in the first place. Such works must be understood within their own cultural contexts and on their own aesthetic terms. We need a new sensibility and a new approach – in short, a new tactic – to appreciate the accomplishments of the crafty ladies of previous centuries and to valorize the qualities of intricacy, intimacy, tactility, and communality they embodied.

Notes

1. Rozsika Parker (1980) offers an excellent summary of the various cultural values linked to embroidery in Western history in *The Subversive Stitch*, and many of the points she makes could also be applied to women's craftwork in general.

2. Drawing and painting might form part of the artistic repertoire of gentlewomen, yet there were certain understood limitations on their practice. Pastels provided a more ladylike medium than oil paints, small-scale paintings or miniatures were more appropriate than large-scale works, and as for subject matter, works of sweeping vision or dramatic scope were to be eschewed in favor of "foliage, fruits, flowers and drapery" (Rousseau, cited in Parker 1986: 124). In any case, whatever the medium or subject matter, any artistic (or literary) effort by a woman might be deemed to manifest the defining traits of ladies' work: delicacy and daintiness – or flimsiness and fussiness. Apparently, no matter what women did, they ended up producing ladies' work.

3. The best primary sources of information on Mary Delany are her autobiography and correspondence (Delany 1974).

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