Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction

Emily Simmons

Concordia University, Montreal

Published online: 31 Oct 2012.

To cite this article: Emily Simmons (2013) Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Women's Writing, 20:3, 415-417, DOI: 10.1080/09699082.2012.738030

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2012.738030

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
in the arts expands our understanding of nineteenth-century culture. Wettlaufer’s critical attention to the first half of the nineteenth century demonstrates the integral role of women in cultural construction and will reframe ongoing conversations about gender, representation and the woman artist.

Note


**Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction**

TALIA SCHAFFER

New York, Oxford University Press, 2011


*Novel Craft* does two equally valuable things. First, it documents and assesses a wealth of material that constitutes the mid-Victorian domestic handicraft movement. This movement flourished for a relatively short time, such that by the 1870s it was already starting to plateau and give way to the aesthetically alternative doctrines of the Arts and Crafts movement. However, in its peak years, domestic handicraft was a “thriving urban experience” (28) that made use of modern industrial technologies and enabled mid-Victorian women to assert their taste, skill and thrift. Schaffer clearly and carefully articulates the multiple aspects of the handicraft’s meaning, as well as convincingly explains how it was the central aesthetic establishment against which the Arts and Crafts movement developed and defined itself. Here, Schaffer builds on previous work in the field of Victorian thing theory, and *Novel Craft* is a welcome addition to this body of literature.

Second, Schaffer argues that fictional representations of domestic handicraft in four Victorian novels function primarily in relation to the new credit economy, which was still a vaguely threatening and unknown set of abstractions between the 1850s and 1870s. Here, Schaffer builds on previous work to explore the hypothesis that handicraft fiction could “reinforce” readers’ inclinations to hold on to a fully tangible and visible worth “instead of training them to believe
in immaterial value” (20). In this respect, Novel Craft marks a significant
departure from much of the extant work on literary representations of the credit
economy in nineteenth-century studies.

Novel Craft is remarkable for the material abundance of its first two chapters
(the introduction and a historical framework), which are rich with lists and
descriptions of a variety of simultaneously bizarre and delightful Victorian
objects. The domestic handicap movement encompassed crafts as diverse as
knitting, papier mâché and taxidermy, as well as activities that do not fall into a
recognizable craft tradition, such as shaping wire to resemble a branch of coral,
wrapping it in wool and dipping it into paraffin wax (thus producing the
mystifying “wax coral” which works so well to anchor Schaffer’s introduc-
tion). What holds these diverse activities together is their adherence to the
“craft paradigm” as Schaffer identifies it: a set of beliefs about “representation,
production, consumption, value, and beauty” (4) that undergirds much mid-
Victorian creative work, and which would otherwise be invisible to
contemporary readers attempting to decipher the crises of valuation that
often occur in these novels. The alterity of the craft paradigm is what charges
the body chapters with their explanatory power. Here are four novels that have
been read in one way, but which actually function in very different ways once
we understand the meanings of domestic handicraft. In this manner, Novel Craft
usefully delineates the otherwise invisible architecture of the domestic
handicraft movement.

The experience of reading Novel Craft is somewhat bifurcated. The first two
chapters contrast with the discussions of the novels, which may feature only
one craft each, and which sometimes depart from materiality to discuss
economics and paper currency. The four novels being read (Cranford [1851–
1853], The Daisy Chain [1856], Our Mutual Friend [1864–1865] and Phoebe Junior
[1876]) are not only about craft, but they are also about finance and the
abstraction of the credit economy, as Schaffer reads these things in opposition
to the tangible solidity of the handicraft world. In the chapters on Dickens and
Oliphant, the treatment of paper as object, as circulating waste in the air and as
forged banknote, exists alongside the treatment of crafts like salvage and hair
jewelry. From here, the analysis moves to the economic register, exploring the
mid-Victorian uncertainty with a symbolic currency replacing a literal,
material register of money. Novel Craft’s argument traces the height of the
domestic handicraft movement through characters who must negotiate
between the solid and the abstract, the worthwhile and the worthless: at
first, there is relief to be found in the tangible world of craft, but this solidity
soon gives way to the pervasive credit economy, such that Dickens’s plot fails
and Oliphant satirizes the possibility of a redemptive materiality.

Schaffer’s book is an important first undertaking in a field that will
hopefully generate much more scholarship. Moreover, Novel Craft makes the
experience of encountering mid-Victorian domestic handicraft a great pleasure. Clear descriptions and plentiful illustrations enable the reader to appreciate the contours and plenitude of this material sphere. At the end of the book, one wants to find and experience more domestic handicraft in Victorian novels, to read Gaskell and Oliphant and others to discover and decode these fascinating objects oneself. Novel Craft provides a sophisticated and absorbing account of domestic handicraft and its relationship to the better-known Arts and Crafts movement, offering readers interested in women’s history, materiality, aesthetics and the credit economy not only a rich source of archival material and detailed analysis, but also inspiration for further research.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2012.738030

Emily Simmons
Concordia University, Montreal
© 2013 Emily Simmons

The Brontës in the World of the Arts
SANDRA HAGAN AND JULIETTE WELLS, eds.
Aldershot, Ashgate, 2008
270 pp., ISBN 974 0 75465 752 1, £60

Branwell Brontë’s famous portrait of his sisters was, up until the publication of Christine Alexander and Jane Sellars’ The Art of the Brontës in 1995, for many people the only visual or mental link between the Brontë sisters and the world of art. The Art of the Brontës changed this by demonstrating with admirable thoroughness the extent to which not only Branwell, but Emily, Anne and, especially, Charlotte studied and practiced drawing. The Brontës in the World of the Arts builds on Alexander and Sellars’ work by assembling a collection of essays in which knowledge of the Brontës’ art is applied to new readings of their novels. Alexander, in fact, leads off the collection with her essay “Educating ‘The Artist’s Eye’: Charlotte Brontë and the Pictorial Image”, which details the ways in which Charlotte’s ideas about visual art influenced not only her portrayal of Jane Eyre’s drawings, but also her definition of realism. Antonia Losano’s excellent essay “Anne Brontë’s Aesthetics: Painting in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall” extends her earlier work on the same subject to demonstrate that Anne’s depiction of Helen Graham as a professional painter constituted a challenge to Charlotte’s more conservative views regarding the relationship of art and professionalism to gender, as well as a way for Anne to argue for a more representational form of realism. Losano’s essay, in fact, opens up new directions for the appreciation of the least-appreciated Brontë sister, and is thus perhaps the highlight of the collection. Most of the