

# NARRATIVE THREADS

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## Print Culture of Crochet and Knitting

### Cases 6 & 7 Introduction

The history of American book publishing is closely tied to the commercial and industrial development of the nation. In 1790 there were approximately 140 printing houses. This number grew to over three 3,000 by 1860. Technological advances, such as stereotype plating and the cylinder steam press, allowed printers to produce larger quantities of books at affordable prices for a wider audience. Reading as necessity gave way to reading as leisure, and children's literature, fiction, instructional books, magazines, and newspapers came to be preferred over the devotional literature and almanacs that dominated pre-industrial America. The inclusion of crochet and knitting as subjects of cartoons, poetry, music, and fiction provides evidence of their successful emergence into American popular culture.

The earliest American pattern publications emerged around 1840 in the genre of instructional literature, which included manuals of needlework and housewifery. Although these publications promoted the popularity of crochet and knitting, they were not always useful to the beginner. Published patterns often assumed the reader had a far broader knowledge of the craft than would be expected today and, because crochet and knitting standards were not established in the United States until the mid-twentieth century, authors used terms familiar within their spheres of family and friends. The majority of needlework authors were anonymous, calling themselves "an American Lady," "Lady of Philadelphia," or "Lady of New York." These authors often "revised and expanded" European editions, producing a repetition of patterns with varied instructions in different American publications.

## Case 6 Label Copy

*McGuffey's Pictorial Eclectic Primer*. New York: American Book Company, 1867.

This book provided everyday words and phrases to help young readers expand their vocabularies. The inclusion of an illustration and description of a workbasket clearly shows the importance of needlework in Victorian life.

Jesse Clement. *Noble Deeds of American Women: With Biographical Sketches of Some of the More Prominent*. Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1869.

The sketches, which portray the noble deeds of many otherwise obscure American women, repeatedly characterize knitting as a virtuous and industrious occupation: "*One of the models in activity and virtue, and one who doubtless secured thereby the prize of healthy and extreme old age, was Mrs. Lydia Gustin, a native of Lyme, Connecticut. A part of the labor performed during her hundredth year, was the knitting of twenty-four pairs of stockings.*"

Mary L. (Day) Arms. *Incidents in the Life of a Blind Girl: Mary L. Day, a Graduate of the Maryland Institution for the Blind*. Baltimore: J. Young, 1859.

Despite her blindness, Mary Arms learned to knit with enough skill to support herself financially. She offered her knitting services to family, friends, and neighbors who often found their abundance of "*winter knitting*" an overwhelming task: "*To employ my time, it was proposed I should learn to knit; at first I thought this impossible as I could not see, but they persuaded me to try...In about a year I learned to knit a pair of stockings.*"

Timothy Shay Arthur. *Lizzy Glenn, or The Trials of A Seamstress*. Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson and Brothers, 1859.

"The Sewing Bird." Written by Fitz James O'Brien. Illustrations by J. McLenan. *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, September 1860.

To broaden awareness of the problems surrounding the needlework trade, a proliferation of compelling tales portraying the hardships of needlewomen emerged in the nineteenth century.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. *The Courtship of Miles Standish, and Other Poems*. Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1858.

In this work, Longfellow pursued the idea of needlework as an alluring activity. The winding of yarn offered men an opportunity to participate in this sensual act of femininity: "*Sometimes touching his hands, as she disentangled expertly. Twist or knot in the yarn, unawares-for how could she help it? Sending electrical thrills through every nerve in his body.*"

Dinah Maria Mulock Craik. *A Woman's Thoughts About Women*. New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1858.

Craik poignantly expresses her belief that books fail to convey the realities of the lives of professional needleworkers: "*Of the individuals, of their modes of existence, feeling and thought*

*-- of their sorrows and pleasures, accomplishments and defects -- we 'ladies' of the middle and upper ranks, especially those who reside in great towns, know essentially nothing."*

***The Ladies' Repository: A Monthly Periodical, Devoted to Literature, Arts, and Religion.***  
**September 1868.**

Nineteenth-century devotional periodicals frequently described needlework in both literal and metaphorical terms. The children's story "Little Twinette," published by The Ladies' Repository in September 1868, portrays the life of young spider who by the end of the tale learns that making frequent social calls prevented useful industry. The young spider visited her mother's cousin "Old Grim" who remarked, "*Young folks were better off home, attending to their housework, than to be spinning so much useless street yarn.*" Ignoring him, she picked up her crochet and left to find a more sociable neighbor.

***Peterson's Magazine.*** Philadelphia: April 1855, vol.27, no. 4.

In the mid-nineteenth century subscriptions to Peterson's Magazine, an informative and entertaining resource for women, outnumbered all other monthlies published in the United States. In 1866 Peterson's Magazine began to feature double-sized color fashion plates engraved on steel, woodcuts of the newest clothing, and colored patterns for all varieties of needlework.

**"Death of President Lincoln."** Currier & Ives, publishers. Lithograph. 1865.

This print of the room in which Abraham Lincoln spent his last hours includes a beautifully detailed crochet cover on the bedside table. In *The Pictorial Book of Anecdotes and Incidents of the War of the Rebellion*, published in 1866, Frazer Kirkland describes this same crochet doily: "*The furniture of the apartment consisted of a bureau covered in crochet, a table, several chairs of simple construction, adapted for sleeping rooms, and the bed upon which Mr. Lincoln lay when his spirit took its flight.*"

**"The Sewing Machine as Mr. Sanguine Imagined It."** *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper.*  
New York: April 17, 1858.

This series of cartoons depicts the short-lived effort by Mr. Sanguine to use the "newly invented" sewing machine.

**"Little Lessons for Little Ladies."** *Harper's Weekly Magazine.* August 1851.

This cartoon attempts to dissuade women from spending too many hours at leisure. "*Fanny Fallal, although she was not rich, nor person of rank, was a very fine lady. She would pass all her time reading novels and working crochet, but would neglect her household duties; so her husband who was a very nice man, and fond of a very nice dinner, became a member of a Club, and used to stop out very late at night, which led to many quarrels. How foolish it was of Fanny to neglect her household duties and not make her Albert happy at home.*"

**Thomas Hood.** "Song of the Shirt." New York: J. Andrews, printer. [Ca. 1850].

In the 1840s government reports on the plight of seamstresses in London, resulted in an outpouring of literature demanding reform, including Thomas Hood's famous "Song of the Shirt." Parallel problems in the American needle trades made the song popular here as well.

"Mr. Pogers." *Harper's Weekly Magazine*. July 1857.

This humorous cartoon depicts a reversal of nineteenth-century stereotypes: "*Augustus, darling. I wish you would put up that silly Tambour Work, and help me mend your mother's and sister's dresses. You know they will want them this evening.*"

## Case 7 Label Copy

*Six Lithographed Plates From: Ann Sophia Stephens. The Ladies' Complete Guide to Crochet, Fancy Knitting, and Needlework.* New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, [1854].

Ann Sophia Stephens. *The Ladies' Complete Guide to Crochet, Fancy Knitting, and Needlework.* New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, [1854].

This book is an exact reprint of an anonymous English work called *The Lady's Own Book*. The publishers claimed it was written by the popular American novelist Ann Stephens in order to obtain U.S. copyright. When identical plates began to appear in *Godey's Lady's Book*, the magazine was suspected of piracy, but its editors replied that their plates were copied from the English original. In the absence of international copyright, both parties were acting within the law, but neither was entirely honest.

*The Ladies' Guide to Needlework: A Gift for the Industrious.* Philadelphia: J.&J. L. Gihon, 1850.

*The Ladies' Self Instructor in Millinery and Mantua Making, Embroidery and Appliqué, Canvas-work, Knitting, Netting and Crochet-work.* Philadelphia: Leary & Getz, [1855].

To make old publications appeal to new audiences, printers often changed book titles and bindings, or added plates of illustrations. Five years after the publication of *The Ladies' Guide to Needlework*, the book reappeared as *The Ladies' Self Instructor*.

*Patterns for Crochet Work, Original and Selected, By a Lady.* Philadelphia: Hyman L. Lipman, [ca. 1846].

*A Winter Gift for Ladies.* Philadelphia: G.B. Zieber & Co., 1848.

*The Ladies' Hand-book of Knitting, Netting, and Crochet.* Edited by an American Lady. New York: J.S. Redfield, [1844].

Perfectly designed to slip into a pocket or workbasket, these popular soft covered pattern books combined convenience with a large variety of fashionable patterns.

**Miss [Frances] Lambert. *My Crochet Sampler*. New York: D.M. Peyser, 1846.**

This copy of *My Crochet Sampler* contains samples of crochet and knitting carefully sewn into the pages. These samples offer a rare view of the materials used for lace crochet and knitting.

Plain Crochet Purses. Modern reproductions made from DMC Pearl Cotton, with silk ribbon, by Nicole H. Scalessa and Kristin Balmer. Patterns from Miss Lambert's *My Crochet Sampler*, 1846.

**Miss [Frances] Lambert. *My Crochet Sampler*. [New York?: ca. 1846].**

The many graphs included in *My Crochet Sampler* provide a wide variety of designs for purses, slippers, table covers, and shawls. These patterns show the influence of eighteenth-century needle-arts, such as embroidery, with their elaborate use of color. Most require more than four colors in multiple shades to complete the pattern.

**Sun and Moon Purse. Modern reproduction made from DMC Pearl Cotton, with gold drapery cord, by Nicole H. Scalessa. Pattern from Miss Lambert's *My Crochet Sampler*, 1846.**

**Manuscript Pattern for Crochet Edging. [ca. 1850].**

**Linen Towel With Cotton Crochet Edging. Modern reproduction by Nicole H. Scalessa. Pattern from manuscript.**

**Miss [Frances] Lambert. *The Hand-book of Needlework*. New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1842.**

The Hand-book of Needlework, the earliest American pattern book in the Library Company's collection, provides a detailed analysis of needlework history, materials, and implements. The book also includes a wide variety of illustrated patterns for knitting, crochet, netting, braiding, appliqué, and embroidery.

The English woman Frances Lambert was the most popular needlework writer in nineteenth century America. She also wrote *The Ladies' Complete Guide to Needlework and Embroidery*, *My Crochet Sampler*, *My Knitting Book*, *Instructions for Making Miss Lambert's Registered Crochet Flowers*, *Practical Hints on Decorative Needlework*, and *Church Needlework With Practical Remarks on its Arrangement and Preparation*, all of which were reprinted over and over again.

**Brioche. Modern reproduction made from Mountain Colors and Rowan brand wool, by Nicole H. Scalessa. Pattern from Miss Lambert's *Handbook of Needlework*, 1842.**

The brioche, named for the French pastry, is a decorative pillow intended for a parlor. Needlework books and periodicals between 1840 and 1875 frequently featured patterns for brioches.

S. Anne Frost. *The Ladies' Guide to Needle Work, Embroidery, Etc. Being a Complete Guide to All Kinds of Ladies Fancy Work*. New York: Henry T. Williams, 1877.

Alexander V. Hamilton. *The Household Cyclopedia of Practical Receipts and Daily Wants*. Springfield Massachusetts: W.J. Holland & Co., 1874.

In the 1870s, illustrations such as these provided a welcome change from the confusing textual instruction given earlier in the century that assumed a prior knowledge of stitches. As urban migration pulled families apart, women increasingly depended on pattern books for rudimentary instruction. Advances in engraving, such as the electrotype process, made illustrated books easier and cheaper to produce. As a result, crochet and knitting reached a pinnacle of popularity in the last quarter of the century.

Joseph P. Lyman. *The Philosophy of Housekeeping*. Hartford: Goodwin and Betts, 1867. The cover of this instructional guide features a detailed image of a woman knitting and reading. The design was engraved on brass and then stamped in gold leaf onto the cloth. Cover designs depicting the subject of the book began to appear around 1840.

Elizabeth Nicholson. *What I Know, or Hints on the Daily Duties of a Housekeeper*. Philadelphia: Willis P. Hazard, 1856.

Knitting, netting, and crochet patterns appear as supplements in a number of mid-nineteenth century cookbooks. The popularity of crochet and knitting may have made the addition of patterns a sales advantage.

*The Ladies' Work-table Book*. Philadelphia: G.B. Zeiber & Co., 1845.

Florence Hartley. *The Ladies' Hand Book of Fancy and Ornamental Work*. Philadelphia: G.G. Evans, 1859.

Miser's Purse. Crocheted silk with steel beads. Late 19th Century. Lent by the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Purse patterns of all shapes and sizes appear in many nineteenth-century needlework guides. These elaborate patterns incorporating beads, metallic threads, and silk required hours of work. Crochet and knit purses, symbols of both skill and leisure, fashionably accessorized the Victorian woman's wardrobe during social calls and shopping.