

# V I C T O R I A N I D E A L S O F G E N D E R

---

## Useful Leisure, Charity, & Profit

### **Case 1 Introduction: Early American Needlework**

Prior to 1840, plain sewing, or sewing for practical purposes, dominated the average lady's workbasket. Housewives by necessity had to be both frugal and creative: weaving cloth took an immense amount of time and purchasing it required a considerable investment. While the wealthy hired seamstresses, most women spent countless hours assembling, mending, and altering garments to extend the life of the fabrics. They often added decorative needlework to clothing and household linens to conceal multiple alterations or age. The demand upon women to maintain their families' wardrobes made needlework an essential skill. Most women learned to sew, whether for practical or ornamental purposes, at a very young age.

A young girl in the nineteenth century would have completed her first sampler by age six under the direction of a family member or school instructor. As her skills improved she would soon be included in the daily chore of sewing for her family. Girls from affluent families without such obligations would apply their skills to fine embroideries of silk or wool. Examples of ornamental work can be found in the form of bible covers, samplers, and pictorial needlework.

## Case 1 Label Copy

**Charles Butler. *The American Lady*. Philadelphia: Hogan and Thompson, 1836.**

The frontispiece of this instructional text of female duties "to be regarded imperative and inevitable" is the earliest known image of a woman knitting in the Library Company's collection. Heralding the need to elevate the standard of American women, the author suggests that idle hours should be filled with "the useful and elegant arts of female industry."

**Crochet Sampler, [c. 1880]. From the collection of Gwen Blakley Kinsler, founder of the Crochet Guild of America.**

Before pattern books became widely available, crochet samplers provided an alternative source of instruction and inspiration. Passed down through generations and added to year after year, samplers were stitched together or placed in albums such as this.

**Thomas Gisborne. *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*. [Philadelphia]: James Humphreys, 1798.**

Intended for women "*placed in the higher or in the middle classes of society*" this treatise proposes to guide the moral activity and vigilance of the female mind away from temptation. At the turn of the nineteenth century leisure began to emerge as the subject of instructional literature on a grand scale. The economic prosperity and convenience of manufactured goods, resulting from the industrial revolution, provided hours of leisure for more women.

**"Homework Sampler." Moravian Schoolwork of Emily Bell, [c. 1830s].**

Emily Bell probably attended the Bethlehem Female Seminary in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Moravian boarding schools offered a broad curriculum including arithmetic, language, knitting, and plain needlework. By the turn of the nineteenth century many Moravian schools had opened their doors to students of all religious denominations.

**Jane Cunningham Croley. *Jennie Juniana: Talks on Women's Topics, By Jennie June*. Boston, Lee and Shepard, 1864.**

In a chapter entitled *The Spinning-Wheel*, the author comments on the temporary resurgence of this device among elderly New England women due to a scarcity of cotton during the Civil War. "*Modern young ladies who find it impossible to occupy themselves long enough at a time to accomplish, in months, a piece of crochet, will doubtless contemplate the idea of the spinning-wheel with horror.*"

**Needlework Sampler, [n.d.].**

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries samplers were a part of a young girl's early education that allowed her to showcase her recently acquired knowledge of both needlework and the alphabet.

## BERLIN WORK

Wool embroidery, or Berlin work, was a popular pastime during the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries. The craft began to fall out of favor in the mid-nineteenth century as crochet and fancy knitting became more fashionable.

*Book of Common Prayer.* Oxford: [n.p.], 1719. Lent by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Stereotype edition, signed "Sidney Stevenson presented by her friend George Malin, 1834." *Embroidered cover with spine that reads "Holy Bible 1867."*

*The Holy Bible.* [Oxford: T. Baskett], [ca. 1755?]

This Bible includes manuscript records of the Lewis, McWilliams, King, and related families and a newspaper obituary of Hetty Taylor King, great-great-grandmother of the donor. "*The Bible, Rebecca Lewis, 1757*" is embroidered on the spine.

## Case 2 Introduction: Useful Leisure

In 1856 Catharine Beecher advised her readers to "have some regular plan for employment of your time, and in this plan have a chief reference to making home pleasant to your husband and children." At that time the expectations of female domesticity had changed considerably from those of the eighteenth century. Leisure had become an integral part of nineteenth-century culture as advances of the industrial age influenced American lifestyle. Families began to move to urban centers, where men found work outside the home and women maintained household affairs with greater convenience. The average urban housewife often supervised one or more domestic servants and could purchase many of the necessities that earlier generations labored to produce within the home. She often used the hours remaining after completion of domestic duties for ornamental needlework, reading, social calls, and charity work.

Useful leisure became a predominant theme of nineteenth-century literature for both adults and children. Activity books for young boys included games of skill and lessons in a variety of sciences, while books for girls provided needlework patterns, poems, and fictional tales promoting female domesticity. For young adult and older audiences, anecdotal literature offered moral direction for a variety of circumstances. These sketches often included characters who defeated the odds through industry and moral fortitude. Periodicals promoted useful leisure by incorporating needlework patterns with fashion and home décor advice into pages previously dominated by poetry and short stories. Instructional texts focusing on domestic economy were popular as well. These manuals provided recipes, medical advice, basic needlework instruction, gardening tips, and lessons in home economy for the frugal housewife.

## Case 2 Label Copy

*The Gift for Good Girls, Containing the Good Girl's Book, and The Spring Flowers, edited by Mrs. S. J. Hale.* New York: Edward Dunigan and Brother, [1845].

This guide to female domesticity illustrates the lives of over a dozen young girls. Chapters include "The Good-natured Little Girl," "The Persevering Little Girl," and "The Orderly Little Girl."

*Letters to a Very Young Lady.* Philadelphia: American Sunday School Union, 1843.

A "Minister of the Gospel" provides sage advice to a "Very Young Lady" in this collection of fictional correspondence: "I do not forbid you to spend some of your time on ornamental work in lace, embroidery, and the like. In every age and country, this has been the entertainment and occupation of your sex. It takes up many a spare moment, enlivens company, enables one to gratify friends, furnishes cheap presents, and prepares for more solid and useful labours."

Harvey Newcomb. *Anecdotes for Girls.* Boston: Gould, Kendall, and Lincoln, 1848.

Newcomb professes that a failure to comply with Victorian ideals of womanhood will result in loneliness, poverty, and immorality: "Poor and helpless will that woman be, who does not learn, when a girl, to employ her hands in useful labor."

Olive Logan. *Get Thee Behind Me Satan!* New York: Adams, Victor, & Co., 1872.

Deemed a "woman-book" by the author, this progressive and liberal series of lectures challenged traditional gender roles for women, and also for children: "I should very much like to be abolished the absurd notion that athletics should be confined to boys... On the other hand, if a boy feels like learning to crochet, or do worsted work, let not these tastes be interfered with."

E. Landells. *The Girl's Own Toymaker and Book of Recreation.* Boston: Cyrus G. Cooke, 1861.

Filled with numerous activities for young girls, this book offers hours of enjoyment. Projects include paper toys, puzzles, doll clothes, doll furniture, and ornamental fancywork.

William A. Alcott. *The Young Woman's Guide to Excellence.* Boston: Waite, Peirce, & Company, 1845.

In an effort to encourage women to exercise, Alcott offers this suggestion: "Spinning is so far out of date, that it might be useless for me to recommend it to the young wife to betake herself to the wheel any part of the day. And yet very few kinds of exercise within doors, are better for many of the class of females for whom I am writing, than spinning wool, &c., on an old fashioned wheel."

Catharine E. Beecher. *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School.* Boston: Marsh, Lyon, and Webb, 1841.

Practical instructions on cooking, childcare, family health, education, and overall household management made this one of the most popular books of the nineteenth century. A revision entitled *The American Woman's Home* was published in 1869.

**Edwin Hubbell Chapin. *Duties of Young Women*. Boston: George W. Briggs, 1848.**  
Chapin warns his readers that idleness will lead to immorality, and ultimately the degradation of society. He suggests women fill idle hours producing decorative art, in particular needlework, which is indicative of a civilized and moral culture: "*The difference between civilization and barbarism is indicated not only by the increase of intellectual and moral power, and of all those useful elements which build up and consolidate society, but by those ornamental accessories, those beautiful productions of art, which evince a refined and luxuriant culture.*"

**Lydia Maria Child. *The Frugal Housewife*. Boston: Carter and Hender, 1838.**  
Lydia Maria Child shares her knowledge of thrift and home management in *The Frugal Housewife*. In 1832, after seven editions, the book was renamed *The American Frugal Housewife* for European distribution. Regarding useful leisure, Child recommends that "*nothing be lost. I mean fragments of time, as well as materials. Nothing should be thrown away so long as it is possible to make any use of it, however trifling that use may be; and whatever be the size of a family, every member should be employed either in earning or saving money.*"

Crochet Needlecase. Mid to Late 19th Century. Lent by the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Needlecases were often the first item a child would sew, knit, or crochet. They served as appropriate gifts to family and close friends.

Casper Souder and Wife. 1861. John E. Browne, photographer. Modern print of stereograph.

Library of Ferdinand Dreer. February 1861. John Moran, photographer. Modern prints of stereographs.

## DOLL CLOTHES

The making of doll's clothes prepared young girls for the inevitable task of fashioning their own wardrobe. Popular periodicals, such as *Godey's Lady's Book* and *Peterson's Magazine*, provided a wide variety of patterns for doll clothes. Using the patterns as a guide, Mothers taught their daughters how to draw paper patterns, cut material, and assemble each garment. Gowns, undergarments, stockings, muffs, shoes, and hats completed the doll's ensemble.

"Work Department, Fashionably Dressed Doll." *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine*, July 1868.

Doll Socks, late 1860-70's. Knitted wool. Lent by the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Doll's Fanchon (headscarf), late 1860-70s. Crocheted wool. Lent by the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Julianna Wood with doll. Sixth-Plate. Daguerreotype. [Ca. 1850].

"The Sick Doll." [Ca. 1870]. Carte-de-visite.

## WORKTABLE

Many Victorian women owned worktables and workbaskets to store needlework supplies. In *The American Woman's Home*, published in 1869, Catharine Beecher provides a detailed description of the contents required for a proper workbasket.

*“It is very important to neatness, comfort, and success in sewing, that a lady's work-basket should be properly fitted up. The following articles are needful to the mistress of a family: a large basket to hold work; having it fastened to a smaller basket or box, containing a needle-book in which are needles of every size, both blunts and sharps, with a larger number of those sizes most used; also small and large darning-needles, for woolen, cotton, and silk; two tape needles, large and small; nice scissors for fine work, button-hole scissors; an emery bag; two balls of white and yellow wax; and two thimbles, in case one should be mislaid. When a person is troubled with damp fingers, a lump of soft chalk in a paper is useful to rub on the ends of the fingers.”*

*“Besides this box, keep in the basket common scissors; small shears; a bag containing spools of white and another of colored cotton thread, and another for silks wound on spools or papers; a box or bag for nice buttons, and another for more common ones; a bag containing silk braid, welting cords, and galloon binding. Small rolls of pieces of white and brown linen and cotton are also often needed. A brick pin cushion is a great convenience in sewing and better than screw cushions. It is made by covering half a brick with cloth, putting a cushion on top, and covering it tastefully. It is very useful to hold pins and needles while sewing, and to fasten long seams when basting and sewing.”*

Spool holder with pincushion, tape measure with pincushion, needle case, thread winder, Coats & Clark spool of thread, and skeins of silk on Duncan Phyfe style worktable, ca. 1840. From the Collection of the Atwater Kent Museum.

Bone crochet hook, steel crochet rug hook with wooden handle, pearl tatting shuttle, and silver tatting shuttle, [n.d.] From the Collection of Nicole H. Scalessa.

Woman at worktable with child in bassinet. Modern print of stereograph.

## Case 3 Introduction: Charity & Profit

The ideology of domesticity pervaded all forms of literature by the early nineteenth century. Femininity became synonymous with piety, charity, and industry. The moral salvation of the country, as proclaimed from the pulpit to the parlor, was dependent on the virtues of women and their ability to apply those qualities to the domestic sphere. However, women were compelled to assert their moral influence outside the home for the sake of the home itself. The unprecedented growth of cities due to industrialization and immigration led to inadequacies in housing, sanitation, and employment. The resulting poverty, intemperance, and immorality threatened the sanctity of the home.

The middle class became the most influential moral authority of the industrial age and set the standards for organized female benevolence. Public speaking by women to mixed audiences was condemned, and any involvement in issues considered radical or political was to be avoided. To finance charitable endeavors, women needed either to have men manage their financial affairs or to incorporate their organizations, creating a legally recognized body. The latter step was commonly preferred and required women to manage their fundraising efforts with the utmost propriety. The most accepted methods included subscriptions, fairs, and bazaars. Profits fed, clothed, and housed the poor, preserved historic landmarks, built monuments, and supported troops during the Civil War. In 1876 women proudly exhibited their accomplishments at the nation's centennial celebration.

## Case 3 Label Copy

*The Useful and the Beautiful.* Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, & Co., 1850.

This book depicts the life of a young middle-class woman who initially scorns those less fortunate than her. She learns the benefits of charity and hard work after hearing stories about the injustices of the piecework trade.

**Ella Rodman Church.** *Money-Making for Ladies.* New York: Harper and Brothers, 1882.

Ella Church believed the precarious position of women as dependents was a preventable evil. She detailed an array of opportunities for middle-class housewives to increase their income without entering the ranks of wage-earning women.

*The First Annual Report, of the Managers of the Ladies' Depository.* Philadelphia: Lydia R. Bailey, 1834.

Elizabeth Stott and sixteen of her friends founded the Philadelphia Ladies' Depository Association in 1832. The depository provided distressed gentle women a venue for the sale of fancywork on a confidential consignment basis. A small percentage of the profits went to operational expenses, while the remainder was given to the artist. This proved an ideal situation for women not suited for jobs in business or industry. Similar depositories emerged in many major cities across the country. Members paid annual dues, as a charitable contribution, ranging from one to five dollars. Members also offered their services as shop managers and bookkeepers. After the Civil War, these organizations became better known as exchanges. Exchanges raised public consciousness regarding the working conditions and exploitation of wage-earning women, particularly those in needlework trades.

**Mathew Carey.** *Essays on the Public Charities of Philadelphia.* Philadelphia, 1828.

Long hours and inadequate wages led many workingwomen to poverty and vice. Charities fought to end this exploitation by educating consumers. Carey includes in this collection of essays a letter from a woman concerned with the plight of needlewomen and the need for wage regulation. "There is no subject that has more painfully occupied my mind, than the very inadequate return, for I will not call it compensation, made to females who depend on their needles for support...I allude to persons who have been delicately brought up, but have all there prospects blasted, and who have not strength for any other employment than the needle. ...Let a few ladies for high standing unite and ascertain from personal inspection what amount of wages can be earned by an industrious woman at sewing, washing, spooling, &c. &c. and then recommend such an increase of wages in all these branches."

"Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts." George Strickland, artist. Wash and ink drawing. Commissioned for C. G. Child's *Views in Philadelphia, and Its Vicinity*, 1827-30.

On June 11, 1845, the original building of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts was partially destroyed by fire. The blaze consumed many valuable paintings and sculptures. Sarah Hale planned a "Grand Bazaar," as a fund-raiser to rebuild the Academy.

Contributions were requested from all ladies of Philadelphia asking them to send "*products of*

*pencil or pen; needle, spindle or shuttle; knitting or netting needles; braiding or bead work; embroidery, feathers or shell work."*

### **An Appeal for the Future Preservation of the Home and Grave of Washington.**

**Philadelphia: T.K. and P.G. Collins, 1855.**

The extraordinary success of the Bunker Hill Monument Association's Ladies' Fair encouraged similar efforts to preserve the nation's history. To raise money for the purchase of Mount Vernon, women around the country held small town fairs, selling fancywork. The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association formally took possession of the historic residence in February 1860.

## THE CIVIL WAR

When the Civil War broke out the need for everything from socks to nurses was immediately evident. Church groups, sewing circles, and similar organizations quickly re-established themselves as soldiers' aid societies. These societies joined forces under the auspices of the United States Sanitary Commission. Town fairs and local benefits initially supplied the funds necessary for clothing, medical supplies, and the training of nurses. When this proved inadequate, major cities held "Sanitary Fairs" incorporating the efforts of many communities.

**"Chester County Soldiers' Socks."** Philadelphia: Bryson & Son Printers, [1863].

**Great Central Fair. *Catalogue of Valuable Illustrated German Books, Needlework, Autographs, Relics, and Curiosities, Guns...December 21, 1864...Thomas Birch & Son Auctioneers.*** [Philadelphia]: Sherman and Co., 1864.(Left)

**Great Central Fair. Benevolent Institutions Booth.** [1876]. Modern print of stereograph by A. Watson.

## THE BUNKER HILL MONUMENT

In February 1830, Sarah Hale suggested in Godey's that women come to the aid of the financially troubled Bunker Hill Monument Association. For the next ten years, women in the New England states collected funds through voluntary subscriptions. This proved inadequate so in 1840 the Association granted the women permission to hold a fair. To ensure attendance, the fair opened in September, the same week as the National Whig Convention in nearby Boston. The women earned \$33,066 in seven days, more than enough to complete the obelisk. Of the items sold, Warren writes: *"The young sought to rival the expertness of the aged; delicate hands that rarely worked, -and then in ornamental finery, -joined with those which daily toiled; those who plied crochet in worsted of various colors with those who knit the stocking; those who skilled in embroidered work, and those practiced in plain sewing,-all combined to make something useful or attractive, that could be sold for the purpose of building the monument. That was the glorious busy summer of 1840."*

Warren, George Washington. *The History of the Bunker Hill Monument Association*. Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1877.

Bunker Hill Monument Association. *Act of Incorporation*. Boston: Samuel N. Dickinson, 1830.

## THE CENTENNIAL EXHIBITION

**"Women's Pavilion". Albumen photograph. Centennial Photographic Co., 1876.**

There would have been no Women's Pavilion at the Centennial Exhibition without the tireless efforts of Benjamin Franklin's granddaughter, Elizabeth Duane Gillespie. The original space allotted by the Centennial Commission for the use of the Women's Centennial Committee was inadequate. The women requested a building of their own devoted to the arts of female industry. The Commission, for financial reasons, denied this request. Gillespie responded with a national fundraising effort, which included concerts, art shows, benefits, bazaars, and "Martha Washington Tea Parties," where tea was served in commemorative cups. Many of these activities relied on the profit of needlework sales and other donated items from women across the country. Successfully built at a cost of \$30,000, the Women's Pavilion was an exhibit of female ingenuity in itself.

Exhibits and activities in the building were required to highlight female capacities outside the nursery and household that attributed to the progress of the nation. The exhibition building housed paintings, sculptures, and 75 inventions patented by women. Demonstrations included the operation of sewing and knitting machines, a Jacquard loom, a telegraph office, a cylinder printing press, and a spooling machine. In 1860 the federal census reported 25,000 women working in manufacturing, a quarter of the entire workforce. Needlework displays included examples of crochet, knitting, tatting, quilting, and embroidery. The use of needlework to raise funds for the building of the Pavilion exemplified its capacity outside the domestic sphere.

**"Bird's Eye View, Centennial Buildings." Tinted lithograph, H.J. Toudy & Co., publishers, 1875.**

The philanthropic efforts of women throughout the nineteenth century educated them in skills such as business management, fundraising, and organization, which in turn helped their political crusade for equality and suffrage. Victorian volunteerism also gave women the self-confidence necessary to become inventors, writers, educators, and doctors. The Centennial Exhibition provided an ideal venue for women to highlight these achievements.