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Reviews Recensions

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In recent years, popular culture has exhibited a burgeoning interest in craft. The pressures of the economic recession combined with a concern for the environment and sustainable practices have encouraged new audiences to develop skills in knitting, embroidery, letterpress printing, and countless other handicrafts. This movement has been paralleled by an emerging interest in craft as an area of academic inquiry.¹ A scholarly examination of craft in the fields of visual and material culture can bring to recognition individuals and groups whose work has traditionally been marginalized in art historical discourses. Two recent collections of essays demonstrate this possibility, exploring the artistic contributions of women and of Indigenous and rural communities through craft objects and processes of making.

The editors of *Crafting the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century: Artistry and Industry in Britain*, Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi and Patricia Zakreski, seek to further our understanding of the challenges and opportunities encountered by women in the professional sphere during the nineteenth century. Specifically, the volume focuses on women who sought training and employment in the emerging arts industries. While art and industry, the domestic and the commercial, have often been framed as binaries in Victorian culture, *Crafting the Woman Professional* reveals that through desire and necessity women

were able to conflate these spheres of activity, challenging concepts of work and “reorient[ing] the popular perception of what art is” (8). The volume further challenges the notion of a defined trajectory from amateur to professional, and complicates the boundary between the two.² The word “crafting” in the title, then, not only signifies the material objects discussed, but the book’s overall approach: “what this volume traces is the state of being in process, ‘of always seeking yet never quite achieving secure professional status’” (3).

Featuring twelve essays in total, the volume is divided into three thematic sections, each following a loose chronological structure. The first section, “Industrious Amateuism,” provides a reassessment of the “polite accomplishments” of the Victorian woman, including the production of domestic handicrafts, musical education, and interior decoration. As the editors indicate, although such activities were conventionally performed within the domestic sphere, the four chapters included here demonstrate that in their development of women’s skills and abilities, amateur pursuits did share characteristics with professional and commercial occupations (12). Elizabeth Morgan, for instance, considers the piano etude, collections of which she likens to the conduct manual, in order to discover how women actively and critically consumed the materials intended to educate and discipline them. By examining the particular musical qualities of certain pieces and the demands they placed on the performer, Morgan argues that while etudes masqueraded as pleasing piano lessons, they actually resulted in the development of technical skills that approached those of the professional virtuoso. Broader in scope, Talia Schaffer’s contribution, reprinted from her recent volume *Novel Craft* (2011), traces the history of domestic handicraft in the nineteenth century. Schaffer demonstrates women’s skilful and industrious transformation of natural, foreign, industrially produced, and even waste materials into items that were prized for their uniqueness although they had little commercial value, simultaneously imbuing the domestic space in which they were displayed with orderliness and care.

John Plunkett and Alice Barnaby contribute essays that highlight the relationship between materiality and idealized visions of femininity, exploring the ways in which the qualities of many domestic handicrafts, their fragility and refined surfaces, furthered their association with women and women’s bodies. Plunkett focuses on the production of a particular form of domestic handicraft illustration, transparencies, which were worked on paper and fabric and then backlit, and which featured subject matter that would be enhanced by their positioning, including Gothic ruins and moonlit landscapes. Plunkett suggests that the creation and positioning of transparencies allowed women to creatively experiment with their

environment and, moreover, that the objects themselves contributed to the gendering of interior space: their material properties were felt to mirror the “radiant, ethereal, and passive” (56) attributes of the ideal early Victorian woman. In her exploration of the use of muslin in the first half of the nineteenth century, Barnaby similarly suggests that the qualities of this textile, such as delicacy and radiance, were likened in published writings on needlework to those associated with the Romantic conception of woman. In addition, she argues that the fashioning of muslin into items of dress and drapery through the gendered activities of sewing and embroidery was a process that transformed not only the fabric but also women’s bodies, developing both skill and gentility (95). Like Plunkett, Barnaby suggests that women’s use of muslin to manipulate light and to alter the qualities of the interior environment signifies an interest in interior design and decoration during “the pre-professional era when the status of amateurism had not yet come to denote lack of quality, but rather a plenitude of it in the possession and expression of personal, polite accomplishments” (90).

The second section of Hadjiafxendi and Zakreski’s volume, “The Artistic Career,” explores women’s engagement with professional art institutions, including exhibition spaces and design schools, and with emerging industries. The four chapters in this section illuminate women’s attempts to balance the desire for legitimacy and recognition with the need to guard their reputations against charges of active participation in the commercial sphere. In her examination of the careers of Florence and Adelaide Claxton, for example, Catherine Flood demonstrates that the sisters took advantage of the emerging acceptance of women in the realm of the periodical press to pursue activities previously gendered masculine. Unlike the majority of women in the industry, the Claxtons engaged in the practice of drawing illustrations on wood, a more active and creative process than the imitative technique of wood engraving. In addition, Flood analyzes the Claxtons’ production of satirical illustrations that provided commentary on the unique social position of middle-class women and the challenges they faced. Anne Anderson also considers women’s employment in the growing art industries. As the Aesthetic Movement flourished in the second half of the nineteenth century, so too did opportunities for women in china painting. In an essay reinforced with primary accounts, Anderson outlines how women were able to demonstrate their skills through the popular exhibitions sponsored by retailers Howell and James, playfully dubbed the “Royal Academy of China Painting.” At the “Academy” women not only exhibited their work, they competed for recognition in amateur and professional categories.

Patricia Zakreski’s contribution analyzes the work of a number of women writers in order to demonstrate that the massive push for design education for both men and women

following the design reform movement also raised questions about women’s participation in the professional aspects of the design industries. Particularly interesting is her consideration of the training itself and her suggestion that an education in the principles of design—an understanding of the tensions between structure and ornament, between imitation and expression—offered women the possibility to view the world differently, and consequently “to imagine how a different kind of society could be designed” (163). In the final essay of the section, Pamela Gerish Nunn revisits a landmark moment in feminist art history: the admittance of women into life drawing classes at the Royal Academy in 1894. Cautioning against the view that the event represented a sea change in academic attitudes toward women artists, Nunn argues that despite the relative success of a number of women within the professional sphere, artistry at the end of the nineteenth century was still regarded as acceptable for women, provided it was confined to the domestic sphere and did not interfere with their roles as wives and mothers. Moreover, women were still thought to be unable to achieve “greatness” in the fine arts. According to Nunn, the Academy’s shift in policy, then, should not be regarded as a shift in ideology, but rather as a gesture toward maintaining relevancy within the art world. The ultimate mark of professional status, membership within the Academy itself, would remain barred to women until 1922. As Nunn writes, “Thus the Academy still invested in male privilege as a defining sign in the achievement of professionalism, even though it might have appeared in 1894 to be encouraging women to participate in the aspiration toward professional status” (182–83).

The third and final section, “The Craft of Self-Fashioning,” highlights the volume’s concern with craft as a process of becoming, and considers the ways in which women constructed and managed their public identities and artistic personas through a series of case studies of individual authors and artists. Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi examines the public furor caused by the employment of pseudonyms by George Eliot (Marian Evans) and M. E. Braddon (Mary Elizabeth) amid the increasing interest in literary celebrity and authors’ private lives. In particular, she traces both women’s use of a Romantic model of authorship, that of the “gentlemanly” reviewer, in order to counter speculation regarding their true identities. While Eliot utilized the construct to defend the author’s right to privacy, Braddon adopted a masculine persona to chastise her critics’ “ungentlemanly” conduct and assert her right to multiple authorial and editorial identities. Regarded as another method of publicity seeking, such self-fashioning ultimately proved unsuccessful for Eliot. For Braddon, who sought fame, the attempt further reveals the complexities of creating a public persona. Andrew King’s consideration of Ouida (Maria Louise Ramé) similarly explores the challenges women faced in managing a professional authorial

identity. Although Ouida has often been dismissed by literary scholars for her popular appeal and commercial success, King sets out “to think about how a new portrait of Ouida herself might be crafted” (208) by considering the parallels between the author and the female protagonist in her novel *Ariadne: The Story of a Dream* (1877). *Ariadne*, King argues, demonstrates that despite what her reputation suggests, Ouida did engage in critical debates and was particularly concerned with determining the social role of art.

Art historians will be particularly interested in Valerie Sanders’s analysis of the artistic reputation of Marian Huxley Collier and in Ana Parejo Vadillo’s study of the use of aesthetic clothing by Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, the poets better known by their joint pseudonym Michael Field. Sanders illuminates the difficulties Huxley Collier encountered in crafting a public identity as an artist independent of her relationship to two well-known men (her father, the scientist Thomas Henry Huxley, and her husband, the painter John Collier). While Huxley Collier’s connections did help raise her profile in the art world, her own contributions were typically overshadowed by or suffered in comparison to those of her famous male relations. In addition, Sanders suggests that Huxley Collier’s artistic choices often challenged social and aesthetic expectations, complicating her relationship to professional status. The near absence of Huxley Collier from contemporary scholarship, Sanders argues, illustrates the paradoxical position of the nineteenth-century woman artist. By contrast, Vadillo contends that Bradley and Cooper crafted a distinctive artistic persona through the use of aesthetic attire. Drawing upon the authors’ correspondence and diaries, Vadillo demonstrates that dress provided the women with a form of individual artistic expression, conveying their interest in the tenets of aestheticism, yet also helping to define their relationship to one another. Although Vadillo draws little upon scholarship from the fields of dress history and fashion studies, her chapter adds an important perspective to the growing body of literature on women’s use of aesthetic dress.

Crafting the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century significantly expands our understanding of middle-class women’s roles in nineteenth-century Britain. It considers a range of objects and handicrafts as evidence of women’s skills and industriousness, and demonstrates that through their developed sense of design and artistry, women were able to fashion their own identities and reputations. The majority of the contributors are scholars of English literature and literary criticism; however, the volume also contains essays by curators and by art, design, and music historians, contributing to its wide scope and disciplinary range. As this collection as a whole emphasizes process over end product, it is perhaps understandable that the chapters are not extensively illustrated, but the rich descriptions of images and objects will occasionally make the reader long

for additional illustrations. Several essays in *Crafting the Woman Professional* end on a negative note—women abandoned successful careers for marriage, lost employment due to declining industries, or were excluded from particular activities as they were professionalized—demonstrating that there was indeed no linear path from the amateur to the professional. However, as this volume also attests, although women’s participation in the artistic professions of the nineteenth century was marred by setbacks and limitations, it was also marked by women’s inventive attempts to meet these challenges.

Craft, Community and the Material Culture of Place and Politics, 19th–20th Century, edited by Janice Helland, Beverly Lemire, and Alena Buis, contributes significantly to the growing field of material culture studies. As the title suggests, the book sets out to investigate the role of craft in community identity and considers the act of making as a process that binds individuals together and the objects produced as material expressions of shared values and ideals. Conscious that communities are not static entities, the authors of the essays in this volume explore the potential of craft to sustain “communities while negotiating cultures with local or international contexts” (1). The volume’s ten contributors are primarily established international scholars in the fields of visual and material culture, and the majority of this collection examines craft production in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, covering communities on several continents, from Canada’s and New Zealand’s Indigenous communities to the simulated villages that existed inside the elaborate nineteenth-century exhibitions staged in Britain and the United States. The collection is not organized chronologically or by geographic region, but thematically, in order to draw parallels across cultures and time periods. While the volume demonstrates a sustained consideration of the relationships among gender, class, and communities of craft production, one of the central themes to emerge is the potential for objects created in contact zones to register the complexities of cultural change.

Anne de Stecher traces the development and use of souvenir crafts, including the moosehair embroidery produced by the Wendat of Quebec in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Where previous studies have stressed the hybridity of objects developed through transcultural encounters, de Stecher explores the continuous use of Wendat craft objects in community rituals and diplomatic relations, even as the emphasis on production shifted to souvenir objects for the commercial market under British colonization.³ Careful to acknowledge the complex power dynamics at work within the region, de Stecher nevertheless suggests that the “contact zone could also be a site for the assertion of Indigenous autonomy, agency and distinct identity, while at the same time building harmonious relations between communities” (51).

Although, remarkably, de Stecher has been able to link specific objects to individual makers, she emphasizes that in attesting to the “transmission of traditional knowledge,” these objects also serve as reminders of the unnamed communities of women who practised such work for generations (41).

This exploration of craft as evidence of the maker’s presence, particularly in the absence of other documentation, is a thread that is picked up repeatedly in the volume. Conal McCarthy’s analysis of Māori arts and crafts in colonial New Zealand demonstrates the survival and adaptability of Indigenous craft practices through changing circumstances. McCarthy suggests that amid the popularity of the arts and crafts movement in New Zealand at the end of the nineteenth century, Māori arts and crafts came to be viewed by those of European descent not as objects of ethnographic curiosity, but as works of decorative art that contributed to a national design heritage. He further argues that the Māori themselves were invested in this transformation on a political level, advocating for numerous cultural projects, including the creation in 1926 of the School of Māori Arts and Crafts. With its focus on carving, the school sought to ensure the survival of traditional craft techniques, yet it also revived and reinforced knowledge of broader cultural practices, particularly those linked to the objects produced. Thus in contributing to the redefinition of their heritage, McCarthy claims, the Māori should not “be seen as ‘collaborators’ or the victims of manipulative Europeans;” rather, their “arts and crafts must be understood as part of a reconstructed identity of indigenous nationhood forged within the colonial nation” (67).

Claire Wintle further develops this theme of self-agency in an elegantly articulated chapter that weaves together a consideration of craft objects made for commercial sale by the Andamanese following British colonization of the Andaman Islands, with a critique of previous discussions of Andamanese crafts and postcolonial approaches to material culture more broadly. Like de Stecher and McCarthy, Wintle argues for a complex view of the objects produced in contact zones: “the manufacture and sale of Andamanese material objects to a non-indigenous market can be recognized as a creative and positive response to new requirements, requests and impositions from external sources” (146). In particular, she focuses on the production of bodily adornments made from pandanus leaves and worn daily by the Andamanese. By comparing photographs of these everyday objects with those produced for the souvenir trade, Wintle identifies similarities in the objects’ stylistic and technical qualities, regardless of the items’ intended audience, yet also points to differences and to the incorporation of new materials following European encounters. Wintle argues that such adaptation does not erase the individual creativity and communal traditions inherent in making. She rejects the view that objects made under colonial coercion are “unnatural” or “inauthen-

tic,” claiming that to perpetuate such notions is “to continue to place the Andamanese in the state of arrested development devised by nineteenth-century anthropology” (152–53). This emphasis on more nuanced readings of history is one of the volume’s strengths.

The contributions by Alena Buis and Anne Whitelaw further enrich the discussion of women’s professionalization that is the focus of Hadjiafxendi and Zakreski’s volume. Buis investigates the involvement of the collector and philanthropist Louise du Pont Crowninshield in the furnishing of the historic Dutch House in New Castle, Delaware. Her essay succinctly balances an examination of the materiality of the Dutch House and its furnishings as contributing to an idealized interpretation of the country’s colonial past, with a consideration of “the gendered politics of early twentieth-century professionalization of cultural institutions” (88). Buis argues that Crowninshield’s involvement with philanthropic collecting activities, particularly those centred on recreating domestic spaces, was within contemporary gender expectations, but that these expectations simultaneously obscured her contributions, as well as those of the legion of volunteer women who participated in this and other preservation projects. Whitelaw similarly seeks to draw attention to a group of women whose efforts have often been overlooked: the women’s volunteer associations of museums and art galleries. Building upon earlier research into the roles of women volunteers at the Edmonton Art Gallery, Whitelaw explains the central role these women played in developing the market for Inuit carving and prints in the mid-twentieth century through their management of museum-owned gift shops.⁴ By promoting and displaying Inuit arts in the museum shop, a space associated with refinement and cultural authority, women volunteers helped raise the status of Inuit objects, contributing to their eventual recognition as fine art within contemporary institutions.

Through specific case studies, Lily Crowther and Janice Helland each propose new methodological approaches to craft objects and communities. Crowther argues that entire communities might be repositioned as “craft objects” through an examination of the development of London’s suburbs at the turn of the century. She suggests that “to consider the whole neighbourhood as in some senses a single collaborative craftwork is a useful strategy, as it allows us to frame questions about community values, which may be unconscious but are still shared between fellow residents” (187). Drawing upon archival materials from London’s art and design colleges, Crowther further traces the development of craft skills in the building trades in a selection of London’s emerging communities, demonstrating how these shared values and ideals were in part the result of a new program of education. Helland’s approach is to explore the possibilities and problems of considering nineteenth-century

philanthropic organizations as early fair trade networks, and she tests this method with an analysis of the Donegal Industrial Fund. Established by wealthy Londoner Alice Hart in the 1880s, this fund sought to alleviate poverty in the rural Irish region through the promotion of cottage industries, particularly textiles. While previous studies of the home arts industries have emphasized their links to the craft revival movement or the roles of their beneficent patrons, Helland argues that viewing the fund as a fair trade network offers new possibilities for interpretation. Framed in this way, the objects made at Donegal can be read as evidence not only of a craft revival, but of a bid for financial independence and autonomy by their makers; they can be seen as material reminders of the place in which they were made, even as they participated in popular conceptions of Irish design and artistic heritage.

Together, the essays in *Craft, Community and the Material Culture of Place and Politics* challenge a number of established ways of thinking about craft and offer new insights into well-documented craft movements. Typically framed as anti-modern, craft could also be the means through which a community “forged its way towards modern life” (210), as Alla Myzelev’s examination of Toronto’s Guild of All Arts illustrates. Both Janice Helland and Vivienne Richmond broaden narratives of women’s participation in the home arts industries. While Helland suggests that Alice Hart’s support of Irish Home Rule extends her involvement in the Donegal Industrial Fund from the philanthropic to the political, Vivienne Richmond’s study of the employment offered to “invalid” women by the Girls’ Friendly Society central needlework depot provides a new perspective on the home arts, at the same time that it broadens our understanding of women’s experiences of disability. And through the series of chapters that address craft in contact zones, this volume complicates the rhetoric that has sought to define the sites of craft production as rural, isolated, and unchanging.

Although *Crafting the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century* and *Craft, Community and the Material Culture of Place and Politics* differ in scope, context, and methodology, similarities emerge. Both volumes demonstrate a concern with the relationship between artistry and industry, with blurring the distinction between art and craft, and an interest in the effects of industrialization on craft production and the meanings of objects worked by hand. Both also comment on craft’s ability

to articulate and record identities as they shift and change, although *Crafting the Woman Professional* is more concerned with the individual, and *Craft, Community and the Material Culture* emphasizes the role of craft in sustaining community identities. Both volumes move back and forth between a consideration of craft as object and craft as process, acknowledging the potential of craft to transform not only the material world, but also its maker. Taken together they further our understanding of the historical role of craft and gesture toward future possibilities.

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Notes

- ¹ See, for instance, Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford, 2007); Glenn Adamson, ed., *The Craft Reader* (Oxford, 2010); Sandra Alföldy, ed., *NeoCraft: Modernity and the Crafts* (Halifax, 2007); Sandra Alföldy and Janice Helland, eds, *Craft, Space and Interior Design, 1855–2005* (Burlington, 2008); Tanya Harrod, *The Crafts in Britain in the 20th Century* (New Haven, 1999); and *The Journal of Modern Craft* (2008–). These texts also further the exploration of craft in feminist art historical scholarship, which has challenged the art/craft divide.
- ² For a discussion of this issue in the Canadian context, see Kristina Huneault and Janice Anderson, eds., *Rethinking Professionalism: Women and Art in Canada, 1850–1970* (Montreal, 2012).
- ³ See, for instance, Ruth B. Phillips, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700–1900* (Montreal, 1998); Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner, eds., *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Post-colonial Worlds* (Berkeley, 1999); and Tusa Shea, “‘The Fabric of the Nation’s Art’: Women’s Appropriation of Aboriginal Textile Motifs During the Interwar Period in British Columbia,” *Essays on Women’s Artistic and Cultural Contributions, 1919–1939: Expanded Social Roles for the New Woman Following the First World War*, ed. Paula Burnbaum and Anna Novakov (Lewistown, 2009), 169–84.
- ⁴ Anne Whitelaw, “Professional/Volunteer: Women at the Edmonton Art Gallery, 1923–70,” *Rethinking Professionalism*, ed. Huneault and Anderson, 357–79. For a further consideration of the role of women volunteers in Canadian museum culture, see Lianne McTavish, *Defining the Modern Museum: A Case Study of the Challenges of Exchange* (Toronto, 2013).