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# Lydia at a Tapestry Frame: Recognizing Decorative Elements in Mary Cassatt's Art

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LYDIA AT A TAPESTRY FRAME: RECOGNIZING DECORATIVE  
ELEMENTS IN MARY CASSATT'S ART

By

Cortney Anderson

A Thesis Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
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ABSTRACT  
LYDIA AT A TAPESTRY FRAME: RECOGNIZING DECORATIVE  
ELEMENTS IN MARY CASSATT'S ART

by

Cortney Anderson

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2015  
Under the Supervision of Professor Katherine Wells

Mary Cassatt (b. 1844) painted her sister Lydia working at an embroidery frame while the two shared a home in Paris in 1881. Considering the painting's subject, needlecraft, *Lydia at a Tapestry Frame* presents the opportunity to investigate Cassatt's engagement with artistic movements associated with neo-medievalism and the Arts and Crafts Movement. In light of contemporary writings that explored the artistic potential of needlecraft and decoration, Lydia's hobby presented Cassatt with the opportunity to showcase the artistic and self-expressive potential of a gendered medium. The formerly unrecognized "art" had the potential to show that women and their decorative crafts could be both inventive and artistic.

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## Introduction

Mary Cassatt (1844 – 1926) painted her sister Lydia working at an embroidery frame while the two shared a home in Paris in 1881 (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> The colorful broad strokes of paint and Lydia's intensely focused gaze attract viewers and have earned the painting recognition as one of Cassatt's most popular works. Despite its popularity, scholarly recognition of the work – including the examination of its technical and artistic style and material culture implications - is far from exhaustive. The predominant dialogues concerning Cassatt and her contribution to art focus on her success as a female artist. They also consider her involvement in the Independents exhibitions—better known today as the Impressionists<sup>2</sup>, interest in Japanese woodblock prints, and compelling images of motherhood. However, scholarship neglects to consider Cassatt's relationship to other major artistic movements of the time.

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<sup>1</sup> *Lydia at a Tapestry Frame* is oil on canvas painted in 1881 for the *Indépendants* exhibition. The painting is 25 5/8” in height by 36 3/8” in length. It is signed in the lower right of the canvas.

<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I will refer to Cassatt as an Independent rather than as an Impressionist. Calling her an Independent is intended to avoid associating her too forcefully with the artistic philosophies of artists contemporaneously called Impressionists, such as Claude Monet. This differentiation is largely in response to letters written by Cassatt's friends and family members who vehemently distinguished Cassatt's figural works from the subjects and styles more strongly associated with Impressionism. For instance, Cassatt's closest friend and art collector, Louisine Havemeyer clarified Cassatt's relationship to the Impressionists in the *Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Museum*: “I must make two statements which will probably cause surprise. Miss Cassatt was not a pupil of Degas, nor did either of them belong to that group of painters known as the Impressionists. Unappreciated in that highly respectable institution known as the Salon, they exhibited with the Impressionists in their modest room on the Boulevard, but Degas and Miss Cassatt are not to be classified with Manet, Monet, Pissarro and the rest.” See Havemeyer, Louisine, W. “Mary Cassatt.” *Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Museum* 22, 113 (May, 1927): 377-382. At the same time, Cassatt knew the Impressionists, particularly Pissarro, very well. Also, she acted as an advisor to her friends and family in developing their art collections and was a liaison between collectors and artist friends such as Monet and Whistler. Therefore, we cannot ignore the influence that they had on Cassatt's technical and stylistic choices.

In scholarship, Cassatt's male counterparts maintain strong connections to far-reaching artistic ideologies associated with neo-medievalism and the Arts and Crafts movement. Being a female artist in a male dominated profession, Cassatt's abundant representations of modern women offer a unique perspective of these movements. *Lydia at a Tapestry Frame*, in particular, presents the opportunity to investigate Cassatt's engagement with neo-medievalism and the Arts and Crafts movement because of the important role needlecraft played within them.

During the late-nineteenth century, artists from all backgrounds were influenced by France's growing interest in the Middle Ages. Scholars have studied artists such as Pierre-Auguste Renoir of the Impressionists and Maurice Denis of the Nabis as examples of how artists were influenced by the popular and pervasive medievalism that surfaced with force after the Franco-Prussian war and continued to influence modern thought through the fin-de-siècle. In his book *Nature's Workshop: Renoir's Writings on the Decorative Arts*, Robert L. Herbert provides a selection of Renoir's writings showcasing his affinity for medieval arts and his advocacy for Arts and Crafts.<sup>3</sup> In *Consuming the Past: The Medieval Revival in fin-de-siècle France*, Elizabeth Emery and Laura Morowitz repeatedly reference Maurice Denis as representative of the neo-Impressionists' endeavor to invoke "primitive" styles of art including that of the Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup>

To the modern artist, such as Edgar Degas and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, "primitive" art included art works produced during and prior to the Early Renaissance

<sup>3</sup> Herbert, Robert L. *Nature's Workshop: Renoir's Writings on the Decorative Arts*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Emery, Elizabeth and Laura Morowitz. *Consuming the Past: The Medieval Revival in fin-de-siècle France*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003.



including artworks by Fra Angelico and Masaccio as well as archaic Greek art.<sup>5</sup> Many avant-garde artists' primitivism pursued the stylistic qualities of more exotic sources, such as Paul Gauguin's art from Tahiti and Pablo Picasso's Iberian and African art inspired figures. Modern artists perceived these periods' flat and abstract handling of figures and space as a pure form of artistic expression, unconstrained by the technical conventions taught by the Academies and championed by the Salon.<sup>6</sup>

Cassatt's artistic technique and style indicate that she drew inspiration from medieval and early renaissance sources and decorative art in a similar capacity to that of her contemporaries. First, I will show that Cassatt engaged with the modern artist's endeavor to invoke the then perceived decorative stylistic qualities of medieval art. Then, I will examine the appropriateness of her archaizing style to express the subject matter she portrayed, specifically women performing needlecraft.

The late-nineteenth century expansion of artistic space into the domestic realm – and accompanying inquiry into the aesthetic potential of home décor and personal adornment – encouraged women to consider the expressive potential of craft - in this case defined as aesthetic objects produced by hand, such as needlework, and excluding mediums designated as high art, such as painting and sculpture - and to appreciate it as an artistic pursuit. Cassatt's portrayal of her sister at her embroidery frame is a glimpse into the simultaneously artistic and domestic nature of women's needlecraft. The artistic

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<sup>5</sup> Herbert, Robert L. "Seurat and Puvis de Chavannes." *Yale Art Gallery Bulletin* 25 (October 1959): 25.

<sup>6</sup> Bateau, Juliet Wilson. "The Hidden Face of Manet. An Investigation of the Artist's Working Process." *The Burlington Magazine* 128 (April 1986): 2. John House wrote the first chapter of this exhibition catalog titled "Manet's Naïveté" where he describes the naïveté or purity that artists and writers such as Manet and Zola sought by purposely disregarding the technical rules of the high renaissance and classical Greece.

potential of needlecraft was explored by women's interest in what was called art needlework or art embroidery. This style of embroidery developed in the 1870's and was the popular form of needlecraft until the fin de siècle. It illustrates that women pursued greater artistic value from craft at a time when industrialization introduced a thriving middle class interested in incorporating art into their daily lives.

Throughout her career, needlecraft and embroidery were recurrent subjects in Cassatt's art. The 1875 oil painting *The Young Bride* (Fig. 2) is an early instance of this motif. The young bride, a servant girl, knits a sock while wearing what is presumably her wedding gown.<sup>7</sup> Cassatt likely drew inspiration for this work while studying in Spain where she admired Diego Velázquez's works, such as *The Tapestry Weavers* or *The Fable of Arachne* (Fig. 3). Cassatt wrote, "These Spaniards make a much greater impression at first. The men and women have a reality about them which exceed anything I ever supposed possible, Velázquez Spinners, good heavens, why you can walk into the picture. Such freedom of touch, to be sure he left plenty of things unfinished."<sup>8</sup> Cassatt's affinity for Velázquez translated into her portrait of the young servant bride as it possesses an uncanny resemblance to Velázquez's *Needlewoman* (Fig. 4) in its pose, coloration, and cropping. Both women are similarly cropped in three-quarter view, are seated, wear dresses with open square necklines, and bow their heads to their needlework. Both backdrops are essentially blank leading the viewer to focus their attention on the figures and their task. The lighting highlights their busts and hands, while their faces remain slightly shadowed as a result of their posture. These effects encourage the viewer

<sup>7</sup> Sirna, Gail. *In Praise of Needlewoman: Iconography of the Embroiderer in Western Art 1500-Present*. London; New York: Merrell, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Mowll Mathews, Nancy ed. *Cassatt and Her Circle: Selected Letters*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1984: 102-104.

to follow the direction of the figure's gaze and move between their focused eyes and busy hands. The lighting and simplified settings present the viewer with the same experience of absorption as the subjects, they are drawn in to the image and are intentionally made unaware of their surroundings just as a needlewoman might become unaware of her surroundings while she is intently focused on her work.<sup>9</sup>

Later in her career, Cassatt became a prolific portrait painter and repeatedly associated her upper-class patrons with needlecraft. Images such as *Augusta Sewing Before a Window* (Fig. 5) were clear statements about leisure, class, and femininity as they depict women dressed and performing tasks appropriate for middle-upper class women. The light and airy appearance of *Augusta Sewing Before a Window* emphasizes its feminine quality through soft brushstrokes that mimic Augusta's soft, flowing dress and highlight the then perceived delicacy required of needlework. Similar to *The Young Bride* and *The Needlewoman*, Augusta is presented in three-quarter view, is closely cropped, and is bent over her needlework. However, the sunny room executed in complementary pale blues and yellows and developed background open up the space in contrast to the focused lighting effects of *The Young Bride* and *The Needlewoman*. In turn, the viewer loses some sense of intellectual absorption.

In comparison to these portraits, *Lydia at a Tapestry Frame* displays a focused and thoughtful intensity that is not necessarily found elsewhere. In her book *Mary Cassatt: Reflections of Women's Lives*, Debra Mancoff briefly mentions Cassatt's disinterest in showing the product of Lydia's work, but rather her interest in Lydia's

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<sup>9</sup> Fried, Michael. *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1980.

intellectual engagement.<sup>10</sup> She suggests that Cassatt may have seen her sister's work as a counterpart to her own work. Cassatt depicted her sister as an artist in ways similar to Edgar Degas' depictions of milliners. Milliners exhaustively produced hats for wealthy ladies in return for a barely life-sustaining salary. Degas equated their never-ending labor to that of his own work as an artist.<sup>11</sup> I argue that Cassatt presents a similar parallel between herself and her sister. The painting recognizes the artistic potential of needlecraft and Cassatt's respect for her sister's work. Both artists in their own craft, dedicated to creating excellent works of art with their hands.

This argument is not to ignore the differences between the sisters' choice of occupation. While writing for the *Chicago Daily News* on the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, Henry Fuller recognized the novelty of Cassatt's professional achievement. He equated the boldness in which Cassatt painted her *Modern Woman Mural* (Fig 6) for the fair's Women's Building to the boldness of her personality. He wrote, "Miss Cassatt has a reputation for being strong and daring; she works with men in Paris on their own ground."<sup>12</sup> In contrast to Lydia, Mary forged a place for herself in a male dominated profession while Lydia was resigned to occupy her time with a feminized activity.

Though Cassatt recognized the creative potential of needlework, for many women needlework was a popular hobby as much as it was a symbol of belonging to the leisure class and the feminine gender. As pointed out by Clive Edwards, needlecraft was

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<sup>10</sup> Mancoff, Debra N. *Mary Cassatt: Reflections of Women's Lives*. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1998: 41.

<sup>11</sup> Groom, Gloria. *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity*. Chicago, IL and New Haven, Connecticut: The Art Institute of Chicago and Yale University Press, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Fuller, Henry. "The Chicago Record's History of the World's Fair." *Chicago Daily News* (1893): 106.

essentially a “do it yourself” or DIY activity that women favored for its entertainment, decorative, and expressive potential - not unlike today’s DIY culture.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, we cannot disregard that Cassatt may have chosen needlecraft as a recurrent subject matter in order to occupy her sitters while she prepared their portraits.

### Painting *Lydia at a Tapestry Frame*

Lydia Cassatt (b. 1837) was Mary Cassatt’s older sister by 7 years. In 1874, after traveling with her mother to Holland and Belgium, Cassatt settled in Paris. Three years later in 1877, Lydia joined her sister and became a welcome source of companionship. Lydia supported the domestic needs of the home, which additionally freed Cassatt to uninhibitedly pursue her professional ambitions.<sup>14</sup> This same year, Cassatt accepted the invitation to exhibit with the Independents, though the exhibition did not come to fruition until 1879.

Cassatt openly decided not to marry in order to pursue her career; however, little is known as to why Lydia never married. Her lifelong illness, a kidney disease then termed Bright’s disease, was the most likely reason. Throughout her lifetime, the disease left Lydia confined to home during periods of inflammation. When she was ill and couldn’t leave the house, she might have found comfort and pleasure from her needlework. Some viewers perceive Lydia’s “peaked complexion” in *Lydia at a Tapestry Frame* as indicative of her failing health.<sup>15</sup> *Lydia at a Tapestry Frame* is the

<sup>13</sup> Edwards, Clive. “Home is Where the Art is: Women, Handicrafts and Home Improvements 1750-1900.” *Journal of Design History* 19 (Spring 2006): 11-21.

<sup>14</sup> Breeskin, Adelyn Dohme. *Mary Cassatt: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Graphic Work*. Washington, DC.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979. See for Cassatt’s life chronology.

<sup>15</sup> Simpson, Fronia, ed. *American Art at the Flint Institute of Arts*. Manchester, Vt; New York: Flint Institute of Arts in association with Hudson Hills, 2003. However, I assert that this interpretation is speculative until technical art historical testing concludes that

last portrait Cassatt painted of her sister. After nearly three months of suffering, Lydia tragically succumbed to Bright's disease on November 7, 1882.

Cassatt undoubtedly expected Lydia to be her lifelong companion and her premature death had a terrible effect on her. While visiting Paris from her home in Pennsylvania, Cassatt's sister-in-law Lois wrote that Mary "has not had the heart to touch her painting for six months and will scarcely now be persuaded to begin."<sup>16</sup> Her parents were living with her by this time and she had a maid, but nonetheless, Mary, though still in mourning, had to take on many of the domestic roles that Lydia had performed as well as provide support for her aging and sometimes ailing parents.<sup>17</sup>

The sisters enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle while living in Paris. Letters indicate that Lydia often embroidered embellishments to the dresses they ordered from their dressmaker.<sup>18</sup> However, Cassatt did not choose to portray a simple collar decoration in *Lydia at a Tapestry Frame*. Lydia is constructing a large-scale, elaborate needlework design. The trestle-based embroidery frame, which is by namesake mistaken as a tapestry frame, is the most prominent object represented in *Lydia at a Tapestry Frame*.<sup>19</sup> These frames stretched the fabric, so the needle worker could comfortably and steadily

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the pigments have not discolored with time, or rather, that they are representative of the colors Cassatt originally painted and have not faded.

<sup>16</sup> Mancoff, Debra N. *Mary Cassatt: Reflections of Women's Lives*. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1998: 15.

<sup>17</sup> Mathews, Nancy Mowll ed. *Cassatt and Her Circle: Selected Letters*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1984: 154-156. Katherine Kelso Cassatt, Mary Cassatt's mother, repeatedly describes Robert Simpson Cassatt, Mary Cassatt's father, and Lydia Cassatt's ailing health in letters to son Alexander Cassatt.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid: 32.

<sup>19</sup> Burrows Swan, Susan. *Plain & Fancy: American Women and Their Needlework, 1700-1850*. New York: A Rutledge Book, 1977: 170. Burrow describes the structure and function of an embroidery frame.

guide the needle and thread with one hand above the fabric and one hand below.<sup>20</sup>

Considering contemporary needlework instructional books and articles, the embroidery frame is associated with complicated and advanced designs firmly associated with art needlework. The fact that Lydia owned an embroidery frame demonstrates not only her family's obvious wealth, which supported a comfortable and leisurely lifestyle for her, but also her dedication to her craft.

Additionally, Cassatt chose to portray Lydia in an intimate manner, dressed for a private space. Cassatt shows Lydia wearing an informal day dress, typically made of printed cotton or wool with a high neck and long sleeves.<sup>21</sup> Lydia's hair is pinned-back in the popular every-day chignon, a kind of twist or bun near the nape.

Despite the image's obvious intimacy, it was publically exhibited and placed for sale at the Independents' exhibition. In a letter regarding other family portraits, Cassatt's mother stated with certainty that Cassatt would never sell her family. When she became aware that Cassatt was exhibiting these pictures, she wrote, "Do you remember the one she painted of you and Rob and Elsie listening to me reading fairy tales? She finished it after you left and it is now at the exhibition – A gentleman wants to buy it but I don't think your Aunt Mary will sell it – she could hardly sell her mother and nieces and nephew I think."<sup>22</sup> But, in fact, Cassatt sold her paintings without any apparent sentimentality toward family portraits. The family opposed Cassatt's indifference to selling their portraits after she sold *Mrs. Cassatt Reading to Her Grandchildren*, also

<sup>20</sup> Burrows Swan, Susan. *Plain & Fancy: American Women and Their Needlework, 1700-1850*. New York: A Rutledge Book, 1977.

<sup>21</sup> Mancoff, Debra N. *Mary Cassatt: Reflections of Women's Lives*. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1998: 26.

<sup>22</sup> Katherine Cassatt to Katherine Cassatt, 15 April 1881, in Nancy Mowll Mathews, *Cassatt and Her Circle: Selected Letters*. New York: 1984, 159.

known as *La lecture*. Cassatt was forced to retrieve the painting for the family when they protested its sale.<sup>23</sup> This scenario indicates that although Cassatt painted seemingly intimate images of her closest family members within her own home, she approached them as indifferently as an artist might approach a landscape or still life. They were interesting, and conveniently available, artistic subjects.

This situation also relates to the limitations placed upon female artists in comparison to male artists. Cassatt's subjects often represent the private and public spaces accessible to nineteenth century leisure-class women. Though, she undoubtedly wanted to sell her work, and perhaps impersonal subjects from the public realm might possess less sentimentality for her family, she did not have full access to the public realm. For instance, it was inappropriate for a respectable woman to frequent the brothels and cafés visited by contemporaries Degas and Henri de Toulouse Lautrec. By default, personal subjects such as her family members, especially Lydia, frequent her oeuvre. That being said, female and male artists cannot be perfectly divided or defined by their subject matter. Male artists painted images of their family members and Cassatt hired models for her work.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Mathews, Nancy Mowll. *Cassatt and Her Circle: Selected Letters*. New York: 1984, 169-170. Mary Cassatt to Alexander Cassatt, 22 June 1883: Cassatt retrieved the letter from the buyer, Dreyfus, who refused to accept his money in exchange. He explained that he was happy to return the painting to the family. "Dreyfus told me finally that I might have the group of Mother and the children for you. I would rather keep it myself but I know he would not be pleased if I made him give it up to anyone but you. He won't take back the money for the picture..."

<sup>24</sup> Parker, Rozsika and Griselda Pollock. *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.



### The Archaism and Decorative Nature of Cassatt's Art

The public's preoccupation with the Middle Ages was inescapable in 1870s and 1880s France. Fustel de Coulanges, a professor of ancient history at Strasbourg emphasized the expansiveness of the medieval revival. In his 1871 essay for the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, he explained, "there is not one Frenchman, no matter how ignorant, who does not speak of the mid (sic) ages, who does not think he understands it, who does not pretend to judge it.... Yet the idea we make of it, true or false, has such a hold on our spirit, that nearly all the stream of our thoughts and opinions comes from it."<sup>25</sup>

Modern artists similarly looked to the medieval past to guide their stylistic development and to inform their artistic ideologies. Elizabeth Emery and Laura Morowitz examine the romantic perception nineteenth century artists had of medieval artists, specifically the medieval monk, who presented a point of contrast to the modern artist. According to nineteenth century artists, the medieval artist-monk was free from the concerns that impeded the artistic freedoms of modern art. He lived in a community that provided for every necessity and thus freed him from economic worries.<sup>26</sup>

Unfortunately, few of Cassatt's writings have survived. However, Renoir's extensive writings showcasing his affinity for decorative art and medieval art have been preserved. Though Renoir's artistic intentions have rarely been compared to Cassatt's

<sup>25</sup> Coulanges, Fustel de "L'Organisation de la Justice dans l'Antiquite et les temps modernes. III. La Justice royale au Moyen Age," (1 Aug 1871): 536-57.

<sup>26</sup> Emery, Elizabeth and Laura Morowitz. *Consuming the Past: The Medieval Revival in fin-de-siecle France*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003: 47.

intentions, his writings reveal the ideas circulating amongst the Independents concerning their attraction to and imitation of decorative and medieval arts.<sup>27</sup>

Renoir voiced the modern artists' preoccupation with the medieval craftsman monk. He encouraged artists and artisans, whom he considered one and the same, to "imitate the good monks or obscure laymen who spent their lives working for their religion and were happy when they'd made an exquisite virgin or manipulated a cabbage leaf to their liking."<sup>28</sup> He explained that artistic satisfaction was gained by working in conditions freed from monetary constraints and ambitions. "For them the glory of having produced a beautiful work took the place of a salary; they worked to gain entrance to heaven, not to get rich."<sup>29</sup> Renoir was not the only modern artist with this perspective. Even neo-impressionists such as Maurice Denis idealized the medieval monk. In 1885, Denis wrote, "the moment the artist thinks of money, he loses his sense of Beauty."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Japan was seen as a contemporary society that possessed all the naturalness and craftsmanship that artists and artisans desired from medieval art. Herbert, Robert L. *Nature's Workshop: Renoir's Writings on the Decorative Arts*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000: 15. Renoir's romantic perception of Japan caused him to believe that it was the only modern society that had not been tainted by modern consumerism, but their craftsman still led a simple existence.

Breeskin, Adelyn Dohme. *Mary Cassatt: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Graphic Work*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979, 21. When discussing Cassatt's interest in medieval art or the *primitif*, her mastery of Japanese prints cannot be ignored. The idea of primitive flatness valued in Japanese art paralleled that of medieval art. In her catalogue raisonné of Cassatt's work, Adelyn Breeskin stresses the enormous influence Japanese prints had on Cassatt's style and technique. Artists perceived these early artistic styles as the product of uncorrupted artistic freedom. While the Salon enforced a strict set of technical and critical rules in their hierarchy of art, modern artists looked to primitive styles as the embodiment of pure artistic expression.

<sup>28</sup> Herbert, Robert L. *Nature's Workshop: Renoir's Writings on the Decorative Arts*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000: 17.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid: 191.

<sup>30</sup> Denis, Maurice. *Journal I Paris: Editions du Vieux Colombier* (Sept 5 1885). Quoted in Emery, Elizabeth and Laura Morowitz. *Consuming the Past: The Medieval Revival in*

Renoir stressed the purity of the monks' artistic practice at a time when artists felt inhibited by the strict regulations of the Salon and by the emphasis on the monetary rather than the purely aesthetic value of their work. The organization of the Independents' exhibitions was a response to such strict guidelines; the Independents sought autonomy from the Salon and its jury. They pursued the artistic freedom to expand the subjects and styles of art to modern and everyday topics portrayed with expressive lines and brilliant colors. To participants, such as Renoir, the Independents' exhibitions represented the opportunity to return to the artistic freedoms experienced and exemplified by the medieval artist-monk.

Mary Cassatt participated in and actively contributed to the organization of the Independents' exhibitions beginning with the group's fourth exhibition in 1879. Cassatt voiced her eagerness to exhibit her works with the Independents: "I accepted with joy. At last I could work with complete independence without concerning myself with the eventual judgment of a jury."<sup>31</sup> Cassatt's description of her acceptance to join the Independents aligned with modern artists' philosophy concerning ideal creative conditions. Cassatt valued the opportunity to produce works in an environment that facilitated artistic freedom.

For much of her career up until this point, Cassatt perceived the Salon as the means by which to obtain renown within the artistic community. However, after a mixed experience of acceptances and rejections from the Salon, she recognized that the works she wished to produce, those that were truly modern – a stylistic tendency typified by

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*fin-de-siecle France*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003: 40. "Au moment ou l'artiste pense a l'argent il perd le sentiment du beaux."

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Pollock, Griselda. *Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1998: 9.

flattened perspective and broad fields of bold color – would not be readily accepted based upon the Salon’s qualifications. The fact that Cassatt chose to exhibit with the Independents emphasizes the drive she had to work within a community of greater artistic freedom, so much so that her desire to produce modern works triumphed over her desire for the prestige provided by and associated with the Salon.

As scholars have argued, the art works valued by the Salon were often biblical or classical in subject matter. They frequently included religious and classical characters suspended in recognizable narrative moments. While viewing the scene, viewers were encouraged to ponder the story, its characters, and ultimately its moral lesson. In contrast, the Independents’ works were criticized for failing to inspire the same intellectual introspection that the Salon equated with fine art. Instead, critics referenced the Independents’ works as mere decoration. Phillippe Burty’s critiques of the Independents’ exhibitions pointed out the ways in which the Independents’ decorative qualities diverged from the Salon’s traditional qualities. Burty wrote, “[Their art] considerably narrows the domain of painting. It scarcely leaves room for any but decorative motives, it forbids itself the stirring representation of those complex situations in which the mind collects its forces and takes possession by analysis of places, situations, sentiments.”<sup>32</sup> In his critique, Burty noted the didactic nature of art works commended by the Salon and concluded that the Independents’ works failed to stir equal intellectual engagement.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Burty, Phillippe. “The Paris Exhibitions: Les Impressionnistes-Chintreuil.” *The Academy* (May 30, 1874): 616.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Herbert and Martha Ward both acknowledge this distinction. Herbert, Robert L. *Nature’s Workshop: Renoir’s Writings on the Decorative Arts*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000.

Additionally, critics pointed out the inferior artistic techniques practiced by the artists. The Salon and contemporary critics, such as Burty, found that the Independents' works "offend as paintings because of their sketchy appearance and indications of stumbling. Seen in place and as decors, they have a brightness and frankness which are undeniable."<sup>34</sup> Claude Monet explained the desirable emotive nature of sketchy works when he praised the sketch-like quality of Eugène Delacroix's paintings: "They are only indications, sketches [ébauches]; but as usual, he has verve and movement."<sup>35</sup> Like Monet, many modern artists, including Cassatt and Degas, were inspired by Delacroix's expressive application of color and line.

However, unlike the Independents, Delacroix's artistic style was expressive while maintaining the requisite narrative. In her book *Impressionism A Feminist Reading: The Gendering of Art, Science, and Nature in the Nineteenth Century*, Norma Broude employs Delacroix as an example of the delicate balance between feminine – decorative and expressive – and masculine – intellectual and inventive - art.<sup>36</sup> His work possessed a sketchy appearance with expressive color combinations while the subject matter and compositions were decidedly intellectual and thus masculine. The Independents were inspired by Delacroix's expressive painterly brushstroke and colors, but disregarded

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Ward, Martha. "Impressionist Installations and Private Exhibitions." *The Art Bulletin* 73 (December 1991): 599-622.

<sup>34</sup> Phillippe. Burty, "Exposition des impressionnistes." *La Republique francaise* 25 (April 25, 1877). Translated in Ward, Martha. "Impressionist Installations and Private Exhibitions." *The Art Bulletin* 73 (December 1991): 599-622.

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Monet to Boudin June 3, 1859 quoted in Broude, Norma. *Impressionism A Feminist Reading: The Gendering of Art, Science, and Nature in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1991: 41.

<sup>36</sup> Broude, Norma. *Impressionism A Feminist Reading: The Gendering of Art, Science, and Nature in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1991: 149.

masculine subject matter in favor of everyday subjects and landscapes. As a result, contemporary viewers perceived the Independents' works as comparatively decorative and thus feminine.

Interestingly, Broude found that contemporary critics praised such emotive qualities in the works of Berthe Morisot. Broude claims that critics' positive opinions were a result of Morisot's gender. They believed women were capable of creating a different quality of art than their male counterparts. Women's art excelled at expressing feeling and decoration rather than communicating intellectual and moral sentiments. Thus, Morisot's decorative works fell within the acceptable parameters of femininity.

Cassatt's work received similar praise. In his review of Cassatt's exposition at the gallery Durand-Ruel, critic Andre Mellerio praised Cassatt's ennobled portrayals of maternity, her "primeval vision," and "free and fresh" execution that culminated in a decorative scene executed as masterfully as that by Pierre Puvis de Chavannes.<sup>37</sup> In contrast to the praise Cassatt and Morisot's art received for possessing decorative tendencies, their male counterparts degraded their works by succumbing to feminine styles and subjects and by abandoning reason and moral themes in their work.<sup>38</sup>

Alternatively, James Rubin attributes the Independents' negative critiques to their performative tendencies.<sup>39</sup> The paintings valued by the Salon were refined and blended

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<sup>37</sup> Mellerio, Andre. "Exposition Mary Cassatt. Gallery Durandrue, Paris. November-December, MDCCCXCIII." *Modern Art* 3 (Winter 1895): 4-5, 2. Translated by Eleanor B. Caldwell for *Modern Art*.

<sup>38</sup> Broude, Norma. *Impressionism A Feminist Reading: The Gendering of Art, Science, and Nature in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1991: 151.

<sup>39</sup> Rubin, James H. *Impressionism and the Modern Landscape: Productivity, Technology, and Urbanization from Manet to Van Gogh*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008: 192.

to the point that viewers could barely distinguish the artists' brush strokes. The finished look concealed the physical labor invested in painting's production and separated the finished product from the body that created it. The deliberate distance from bodily labor prevented the viewer from being distracted from the more important intellectual merit of the work. These efforts firmly associated the painting with the mind or intellect rather than the body and emotion. The Independents, on the other hand, constructed works that emphasized the physical painting process by dissolving the paint at the edges, boldly daubing bright color, and applying dramatic brushstrokes. They did not hide their labor, but created works in which their labor could be traced. The physicality of their technique went against the masculine intellectual preferences of the salon. As a consequence, their works were reduced to lower artistic status negatively associated with the feminine treatment of art. As Broude would agree, the lower status of such an expressive or decorative art was acceptable and even expected from female artists such as Cassatt and Morisot. However, the same artistic style performed by a male artist was perceived as degenerate because he abandoned his intellect for lesser forms of expression.

The Independents' decorative artistic style also resulted from an interest in what they perceived as "primitive" art. When contemporary critics viewed and discussed Cassatt's artwork, they naturally perceived the flat or matte appearance as an artistic device meant to evoke historical frescos and modern decorative art. One such critic recognized this connection. "Although painted in oil on canvas, it has the clean and matte quality of a fresco; one would like to see such a great talent exercised, in this manner, as

a decoration for a school or town hall.”<sup>40</sup> Cassatt confirmed, in her own words, that the flat appearance of her oils was an intentional device meant to evoke an archaic fresco. Charles Moffet likened Cassatt’s interest in archaizing technical practices to that of Renoir: “Cassatt too, then, was seeking a new form of expression, seeking, as Renoir was doing at this time, the assurance of the past.”<sup>41</sup> Likewise, artists such as Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, Edgar Degas, and Henri de Toulouse Lautrec all practiced and experimented with painting techniques that produced a distinctly matte finish.<sup>42</sup> They invoked the stylistic qualities they perceived as associated with early renaissance and medieval art – flatness, relationship to the interior, and matteness - in their portrayals of modernity.

<sup>40</sup> *Havard Review* 23 (Apr 1881): 134. quoted in Moffett, Charles. *The New Painting: Impressionism 1874-1886*. San Francisco: The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1986. “Quoique peinte à l’huile la toile a l’aspect clair et mat de la fresque; on voudrait voir un talent sé sérieux s’execer, dans cette manière, à la décoration de quelque salle d’école ou de quelque mairie.” This quote also shows that some critics thought Cassatt’s work was worthy of public support. For a discussion on modern public murals, see Shaw, Jennifer. *Dream States: Dream States: Puvis de Chavannes, Modernism and the Fantasy of France*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes produced murals that were well received by both Salon and avant garde because of their modern, flat and decorative, quality while preserving moral themes.

<sup>41</sup> Moffett, Charles. *The New Painting: Impressionism 1874-1886*. San Francisco: The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1986, 350.

<sup>42</sup> Vellekoop, Marije, Muriel Geldof, ella Hendricks, Leo Jansen, and Alberto de Tagle, eds. *Van Gogh’s Studio Practice*. S.I.: Mercatorfonds, 2013: 330-349. While conducting their Van Gogh’s Studio Practice Project, the Van Gogh Museum examined modern artists’ techniques used to achieve a matte finish. This finish is called *peinture a l’essence*. Puvis de Chavannes was found to mix chalk and glue with his paint in order to achieve the desired matteness. See Hensick, Teri, Kate Olivier and Gianfranco Pocobene. “Puvis de Chavannes’s Allegorical Murals in the Boston Public Library: History, Technique, and Conservation.” *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 36 (1997): 59-81. Henri de Toulouse Lautrec was found to have experimented with beeswax mixed with paint. See Wrubel, Faye and Francesca Casadio. “Conservation/Revelation: Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec’s Ballet Dancers Finds Renewed Harmony.” *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 31 (2005): 46-53, 108. I have not discovered a conservation report detailing how Cassatt achieved matteness in her paintings.



While writing to her brother Alexander, Cassatt explained the intentional flatness of her painting, writing, “it is painted to look as much like frescoe (sic) as possible so that it would be appropriate over a door as Italian painters used to do.”<sup>43</sup> This instance indicates Cassatt’s interest in both producing archaizing works, such as the decorative flatness of the picture and application of bright bold colors, and her interest in decorative art. She envisioned the work as an integral part of a specific interior space and not independent of it. This artistic philosophy strongly contradicted the circumscribed nature of works valued by the Salon. Instead, Cassatt applied decorative theories in the construction of her art. British design reformers such as the designer Christopher Dresser wrote numerous treatises outlining decorative principles and repeatedly recommended that ornamental work for flat objects, be it a cabinet or wall, ought to be equally flat. Dresser even argued that figures painted on the flat surface were improved by avoiding any sense of three-dimensionality.<sup>44</sup> As Dresser recommended for decorative art, Cassatt explored the flatness of her material - the canvas - and considered the space it was intended to occupy.

The Independents’ alleged decorative qualities were not limited to their paintings, but extended into the exhibition space. They concerned themselves with how each work might relate to the space in which it was presented and in turn, the audience that viewed it.<sup>45</sup> While identifying the connection between the decorative and medieval art, Renoir argued “only Delacroix has understood decoration in our era; he even went so far as to

<sup>43</sup> Mary to Alexander Cassatt 22, June 1883. Quoted in Mathews, Nancy Mowll, ed. *Cassatt and Her Circle: Selected Letters*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1984: 170.

<sup>44</sup> Dresser, Christopher. *Principles of Decorative Design*. London: Cassell, Petter, & Galpin, 1873: 63.

<sup>45</sup> Ward, Martha. “Impressionist Installations and Private Exhibitions.” *The Art Bulletin* 73 (December 1991): 602.

change its harmonic conditions... Medieval stained glass windows are beautiful because they are in harmony with the buildings that house them and because they are beautifully colored.”<sup>46</sup> He emphasized the harmony of space by considering how art, its color and style, ought to be considered in relation to the space in which it is presented.<sup>47</sup>

Lydia’s tapestry frame boldly extends beyond the frame in the same way that the modern artists pushed and expanded art into a relationship with its space. As Martha Ward has shown, beginning in 1877, the Independents began to exhibit in domestic spaces, specifically in apartments.<sup>48</sup> The art’s domestic presentation further drove the decorative perception of the works. In the 1880 exhibition, each artist had his or her own room. They considered how their room’s arrangement and coloration might enhance their works. Their approach resonated with domestic models of decoration and with the feminine endeavor to create a self-expressive space through interior arrangement with an emphasis on color theory.<sup>49</sup>

Ward also mentions the decorative framing techniques Camille Pissarro, Degas, and Cassatt employed in their exhibition spaces. Cassatt not only considered the color of the room and its arrangement in order to enhance her work, but she also customized her frames according to complementary color theory in order to enhance each individual work. This sort of decorative device was not entirely different from the framing devices

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<sup>46</sup> Renoir, Pierre Auguste. “L’Art decorative et contemporain,” *L’Impressionniste* 3 (April 21, 1877): 3-6.

<sup>47</sup> Reff, Theodore. “Degas: A Master Among Masters.” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 34 (Spring 1977): 2-48. Cassatt was equally inspired by the work of Delacroix as was her closest artistic companion, Degas. Degas copied and drew inspiration from Delacroix’s complementary color technique and composition.

<sup>48</sup> Ward, Martha. “Impressionist Installations and Private Exhibitions.” *The Art Bulletin* 73 (December 1991): 602.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*: 611.

of the later neo-Impressionists, who like Denis were concerned with reviving what they considered primitive and thus pure qualities of art.<sup>50</sup> The neo-Impressionists based their color theory largely upon the work of chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul, the director of the dyeing department of Manufacture des Gobelins. Though published in 1839, Chevreul's book *De La Loi Du Contraste Simultané Des Couleurs* became a cornerstone to neo-Impressionist color theory championed by Paul Signac and Georges Seurat. However, Chevreul's influence did not occur in a pointillist vacuum. In 1996, Georges Roque interrogated the notion that the Independents were impervious to the same color theories that informed neo-Impressionist works.<sup>51</sup> Roque claims that the differences between Independent and neo-Impressionist color theories have been exaggerated. Monet, Pissarro and even Renoir clearly painted with the vocabulary of complementary colors. Likewise Cassatt's thoughtful complementary framing devices demonstrate her consideration of color theory and its ability to enhance her art.

Contemporary critics found the variety of Cassatt's frames worthy of mention. Some writers criticized her frames as in reviews of the 1879 Impressionist exhibition. Others saw the complimentary nature of the frames as a device that might enhance the works. In his 1875 review of the Independent exhibition, Huysmans praised the

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<sup>50</sup> Vellekoop, Marije, Muriel Geldof, ella Hendricks, Leo Jansen, and Alberto de Tagle, eds. *Van Gogh's Studio Practice*. S.I.: Mercatorfonds, 2013. Van Gogh left instructions on how to frame his paintings. He emphasized the ability color and size of the frame had to enhance a work of art. Pointillist Georges Seurat was a close adherent to the color theories abounding in the late 1880s and 1890s. He went as far as to paint borders on his canvases of varying colors in order to not only enhance the work but also protect it from the influence of the surrounding environment. Their methods ensured that though the wall the painting was mounted on might not have been ideal for the viewing of the image; the framing allowed the painting to be viewed in its ideal state.

<sup>51</sup> Roque, Georges. "Chevreul and Impressionism: A Reappraisal." *The Art Bulletin* 78 (March 1996): 26-39.

Independents' complementary framing devices saying, "what variety in the frames, which carry varied tones of gold and which are bordered with margins painted with the color complementary to the frames!... and, even though the frame can't add anything to the talent of a work, it's still a necessary complement, an addition that brings out value. It's the same thing as the beauty of a woman which requires certain surroundings."<sup>52</sup> During this time, women were encouraged to decorate their homes in colors and patterns that would enhance their own physical beauty. Huysmans' reference toward feminine beauty in relation to decorative space ought to be understood in this way. Household decoration was considered a feminine occupation that connoted arrangements of colors and patterns in the creation of a decorative space.<sup>53</sup> Rather than adhering to the philosophy of the Salon, that a painting is an autonomous object that does not rely upon its immediate environment,<sup>54</sup> Cassatt tapped into a line of thinking that was feminine in its association with the arrangement of objects in a domestic space and in line with the developing Arts and Crafts movement ideologies concerning the holistic creation of aesthetic space.

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<sup>52</sup> Huysmans, Joris-Karl. "L'Exposition des independants," *L'Art moderne / Certains*, repr., Paris (1975): 251. Translated in Ward, Martha. "Impressionist Installations and Private Exhibitions." *The Art Bulletin* 73 (December 1991).

<sup>53</sup> Herbert, Robert L. *Nature's Workshop: Renoir's Writings on the Decorative Arts*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000: 63.

<sup>54</sup> Ward, Martha. "Impressionist Installations and Private Exhibitions." *The Art Bulletin* 73 (December 1991): 604. The Salon considered that each work was autonomous and thusly the consideration and adjustment of external space was not relevant in order to improve the reception of the work. All works were organized by artist, size, and topic. They were squeezed onto the wall, one on top of another. The wall was always painted in the same burnt red paint regardless of the colors of the works. The frames were standard as well, not adjusted in order to enhance the work. The presentation of works at the impressionist exhibition was in opposition to the presentation methods of the salon. "Here lack of autonomy or self-sufficiency and apparent intellectual complexity became a virtue, allowing the successful integration into the interior of a work that appeared decorative without becoming (mere) decoration."

### Art Needlework and the Argument for its Artistic Potential

Just as modern artists idealized medieval artists, women idealized the artistry of medieval crafts, particularly needlecrafts. Medieval tapestries were consistently referenced in women's writings of this period. Modern women compared and contrasted their own needlework to that of the Middle Ages. In such essays, women were exhorted to aspire to produce works of equal or comparable artistic merit.<sup>55</sup>

Women's debates regarding the relevance or irrelevance of needlework<sup>56</sup> are frequently referenced by contemporary women's periodicals such as *Harper's Bazaar* and *Godey's Lady's Book* throughout the 1870's and leading up to Cassatt's production of *Lydia at a Tapestry Frame*.<sup>57</sup> Needlecraft was entangled with the nineteenth century's romantic idealization of the Middle Ages and chivalric values; it was a symbol of ideal female character and behavior, and yet it presented women with the opportunity to reclaim needlecraft as an expressive and artistic medium. *Lydia at a Tapestry Frame* can be understood as promoting the artistic value of needlecraft. It shows that women

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<sup>55</sup> *Elegant Arts for Ladies: Comprising Bead Work, Bead and Bugle Work, Calisthenic Exercise...* London: Ward and Lock, 1856. The book was written more than 20 years prior to *Lydia at a Tapestry Frame*, however it is an excellent example of how women looked to medieval examples for inspiration. They also used medieval models to trace the rich and noble history of their craft. The emphasis on medieval craft is even more prominent in the 1877 book Garrett, Rhoda and Agnes Garrett. *Suggestions for House Decoration in Painting, Woodwork, and Furniture*. Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1877.

<sup>56</sup> For detailed histories on 19<sup>th</sup> century needlecraft see Gordon, Sarah A. "Make it Yourself": *Home Sewing, Gender, and Culture, 1890-1930*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.; Burrows Swan, Susan. *Plain & Fancy: American Women and Their Needlework, 1700-1850*. New York: A Rutledge Book, 1977.; Whiting, Gertrude. *Old-Time Tools and Toys of Needlework*. New York: Dover Publications, inc., 1971. [This dover edition, first published in 1971, is an unabridged and unaltered republication of the work originally published by Columbia University Press, new York, in 1928 under the title *Tools and Toys of Stitchery*]; Bausum, Dolores. *Threading Time: A Cultural History of Threadwork*. Fort Worth, Texas: TCU Press, 2001.

<sup>57</sup> Hawthorne, Julian. "True Art-Needle-Work: No 1." *Harper's Bazaar* 14, 44 (October 29, 1881): 694.

perceived the artistic merit of their decorative craft in correlation to the emerging philosophies of the Arts and Crafts movement championed by John Ruskin and William Morris, and of course Cassatt's fellow Independent and colleague Renoir. Reading the painting in this way helps establish how Cassatt, and women in general, related to the ideologies that cultivated the Arts and Crafts movement of the fin de siècle.

Needlecraft played an important role in a woman's life no matter her social station. Whether she chose to produce needlecraft or not, she made a statement. If she participated, she submitted to social norms that leisure-class women invest their hours producing pretty home adornments or lower class women invest their time in a task that produced goods or income for the household. Scholars of women's studies, literature, and art history have dedicated a great deal of research to understanding the role of needlecraft in women's lives. In a recent essay, Mary Donaldson-Evans examined the potential for needlecraft to be both submissive and subversive. When women participated they submitted to expectations of feminine behavior. When they did not participate, they subverted expectations and risked being perceived as peculiar or immoral.<sup>58</sup>

Scholars have written about the ways in which the industrial revolution changed the gender-defined roles of the middle-class family unit, often emphasizing the empowerment of the husband as the breadwinner in the public sphere and the relegation of the wife to domestic duties in the private sphere.<sup>59</sup> It is equally recognized that the

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<sup>58</sup> Donaldson-Evans, Mary. "Pricking the Male Ego: Pins and Needles in Flaubert, Maupassant, and Zola." *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 30 (Spring-Summer 2002): 255.

<sup>59</sup> Lown, Judy. *Women and Industrialization: Gender at Work in Nineteenth Century England*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990.  
Creighton, Colin. "The Rise of the Male Breadwinner Family: A Reappraisal." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 38 (April 1996): 310-337.

industrial revolution altered the domestic responsibilities of nineteenth-century women. Women felt threatened by and responded to such changes. For instance, according to mid-to late-nineteenth-century women, the invention and gradual refinement of the sewing machine threatened to make their needlecraft passé.<sup>60</sup> By the early 1860's, roughly three decades after its invention, sewing machines were widely used in factories and homes alike.<sup>61</sup> The invention of the sewing machine contributed to the development of clothing factories that employed lower-class seamstresses to produce ready-made clothing at efficient and inexpensive rates.<sup>62</sup> Nineteenth century writers identified the sewing machine as the locus of change in domestic needlecraft practices. One female contributor from *Harper's Bazaar* concluded, "the sewing machine, indeed, threatens to interfere with the practice [of sewing], to render it passé and unnecessary."<sup>63</sup> Yet, throughout the 1870s and until the fin de siècle, the sewing machine failed to displace all forms of needlework. Needlecrafts survived and even grew in popularity during industrialization because its value was rooted in its symbolic attachment to femininity.

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Bradley, H. "Work, Home and the Restructuring of Jobs." In K. Purcell, S. Wood, A. Waton and S. Allen eds. *The Changing Experience of Employment: Restructuring and Recession*. London: Macmillan, 1986.

<sup>60</sup> Vincent, Margaret. *The Ladies' Worktable: Domestic Needlework in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America*. Allentown, PA: Allentown Art Museum, 1988: 49. The sewing machine was invented in 1831; however, it did not become widely available for sale until after Singer's machine was exhibited in France in 1855.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid: 52.

<sup>62</sup> Bausum, Dolores. *Threading Time: A Cultural History of Threadwork*. Fort Worth, Texas: TCU Press, 2001. Dolores Bausum contrasts middle and upper-class women to the lower-class women that sewed there clothing. She discusses these seamstresses terrible working conditions and the cases in which writers advocated for improved working conditions. Sewing factories capitalized on the machine by putting women to work at sewing machines in their factories.

<sup>63</sup> "The Pleasures of Needlework." *Harper's Bazaar* 11, 3 (January 19, 1878): 42.

Gustave Caillebotte's painting *Group Portraits in the Country* (Fig. 7)

exemplifies Bonnie Smith's 1981 argument that needlework was a symbolic task. Smith explained, "She [woman] spoke through mending of her attachment to being female. Domestic symbolism was the only imperative underlying these activities as factories and workshops produced clothing" women could easily afford. Smith continued, the "appearance of busy hands speak (sic) about a woman's daintiness and generosity."<sup>64</sup> Caillebotte's women, representing ages from young adult to elderly, are shown staggered sitting opposite to one another around small round café tables in a presumably public outdoor space, additionally indicated by the presence of the park bench. Three of the women perform needlecraft, while the third, and furthest to the back, reads a book. Although the women are together in a seemingly social environment, they are entirely absorbed in their own work and do not appear to be communicating with one another. Their bodies emphasize perspective as they recede into the background, an effect made more prominent by the gradation of their dresses from light blue to dark navy and by a path in the background that travels through a garden and disappears over a hill leading to a country house. Caillebotte's four silent women and the stitches growing within their busy hands perfectly visualize Smith's statement. The stitches are an illusion of busyness despite the women's leisure lifestyle.

Three years after Smith's book, Roszika Parker built upon this observation when she wrote *The Subversive Stitch*. She recognized that in regards to needlecraft the act of embroidery was a symbol of femininity. "When women embroider, it is seen not as art,

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<sup>64</sup> Smith, Bonnie G. *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoises of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981: 68.



but entirely as the expression of femininity. And, crucially, it is categorized as craft.”<sup>65</sup> Embroidery’s associations with delicacy and selflessness were synonymous with the expectations for female behavior. Had Caillebotte painted four men in the same space, their actions and occupations would have been completely different from these four women. Men might have been portrayed drinking, conversing, and reading the newspaper. These actions, particularly reading the newspaper, connected men to their public realm and its goings on. Women’s embroidery, on the other hand, connected them to the home their objects might adorn and the bodies they might selflessly clothe.

Leisure-class women employed needlecraft in an effort to battle persistent boredom and idleness. In the 1878 section on philosophy in *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, an anonymous author recognized that modernity freed women from many productive tasks that occupied women in the past. In effect, children were raised within a leisurely space and were not exposed to the same types of character building work they had practiced in the past. The writer warned against idleness by asserting, “it is very easy to spoil children by rearing them in idleness. A girl who is never allowed to sew, all of whose clothes are made for her, and put on her, till she is twelve, fifteen, or eighteen years of age, is spoiled.”<sup>66</sup> The anonymous author advocated for the moral protection and character development that needlecraft provided.<sup>67</sup>

John Ruskin pointed out the same vices of idleness when he wrote *Sesame and Lilies*: “You may see continually girls who have never been taught to do a single useful

<sup>65</sup> Parker, Rozsika. *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. London: The Women’s Press, Ltd., 1984: 5.

<sup>66</sup> “Hints on Home Adornment: Number Eleven.” *Godey’s Lady’s Book* (November 1878): 436.

<sup>67</sup> Ruskin, John. *Sesame and Lilies*. New York: Wiley and Sons, 1871.

thing thoroughly; who cannot sew, who cannot cook, who cannot cast an account, nor prepare a medicine, whose whole life has been passed either in play or in pride.” Ruskin continues by saying, “all the instinctive wisdom and mercy of their womanhood made vain, and the glory of their pure consciences warped into fruitless agony.” According to Ruskin, modern women were brought up without being taught moralizing, character building, and productive feminine tasks. He perceived the renewal of tasks such as sewing as a necessary solution for this moral failure.

It is interesting to consider Cassatt’s oeuvre in light of this perspective. Cassatt not only depicted women performing needlecraft, but also teaching their children to sew,<sup>68</sup> play instruments and read. The 1908 oil on canvas *Girl in Green* (Fig. 8) shows a young girl focused on her needlework. The pastel on paper *Crochet Lesson* (Fig. 9) from 1913 depicts a mother guiding her daughter’s hand as she learns to crochet. Cassatt’s portraits suggest that she might agree with this contributor and even Ruskin in this instance. The images suggest that needlecraft in particular was worth passing on to younger generations.

Women’s writings about the relevance of needlecrafts underscore its complex relationship to gender, class and codes of conduct. As elder, traditional women raised young women accustomed to the immediate convenience of the sewing machine, department stores, and ready-made wares the generations sometimes disagreed about the relevance of needlework as a productive pastime.<sup>69</sup> Women recognized that the role

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<sup>68</sup> See Cassatt’s drypoint “The Crocheting Lesson” of 1902 which depicts a mother teaching her daughter to crochet. Breeskin, Adelyn Dohme. *Mary Cassatt: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Graphic Work*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979: 178.

<sup>69</sup> “Will It Pay?” *Harper’s Bazaar* 4, 22 (June 3, 1871): 343.

sewing played in their lives was changing. They foresaw generations of middle-class women that would no longer experience the pleasure and comfort that they had found in sewing.

...and we may yet see the phenomenon of a woman unacquainted with the “one-eyed servant” of the fairy tale, and ignorant how to take a stitch in time, of “seem and gusset and band;” to whom hemming, felling, whipping, and kindred words will be but the technicalities of a lesser art. We feel sorry for this woman of the future, in advance; she has our sincere condolences... The needle is truly the heir-loom of the weaker vessel, her weapon of defense against ennui and blue devils. What a charm there is in seeing the stitches grow under one’s hand! There is always the temptation to take one stitch more and there is always the satisfaction of accomplishment.<sup>70</sup>

Other women felt that modernity led to slipping morals and were compelled to maintain the tradition of needlecraft for moral purposes. Nineteenth century female writers, such as Victorian feminist Frances Cobbe, attempted to navigate the challenges introduced by modernity and the ensuing Women’s Movement<sup>71</sup> by advocating for traditional ideologies and gender roles despite threats to those roles by modern thinking. The common lesson woman like Cobbe taught was equality, but difference; women were correct to assert that they were not the lesser sex, but were equal with men. However, Cobbe warned against the belief that women were the same as men or that they could perform the same duties and activities as men.

According to Cobbe, and the popular belief at the time, the difference between the sexes was that women possessed a delicacy that required male protection. Such was the

<sup>70</sup> “The Pleasures of Needlework.” *Harper’s Bazaar* 11, 3 (January 19, 1878): 42.

<sup>71</sup> Cobbe, Frances Power. *The Duties of Women: A Course of Lectures*. London: Williams & Norgate, 1881: 5. For more on Frances Cobbe, see her autobiography Cobbe, Frances. *Life of Frances Power Cobbe*. Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1895.

chivalric ideology expressed through contemporary medieval revival writings such as those by Tennyson.<sup>72</sup> The home was the protected space where women might perform their domestic duties, faithfully submit to their husbands, and raise moral children. This philosophy was reiterated in contemporary writings on needlecraft likely because it was so strongly associated with feminine delicacy and daintiness. The anonymous author of “The Pleasures of Needlework” discussed sewing as a delicate, feminine task that men were not privy to because of their fundamentally different character.<sup>73</sup> Cobbe taught that these tasks were no less important than man’s public tasks and must be protected.

Both Renoir and the British Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti used needlework to visually indicate male and female ideal character and to designate the sexes’ appropriate spheres. Renoir clearly communicates the differences in intellects and activities appropriate for men and women in the painting *Christine Lerolle Embroidering* (Fig. 10). The painting depicts a woman bent over her lap top embroidery frame, while, in the background, two men scrutinize a series of paintings. Christine is protected from view by a curtain, which also separates her from the men in the background. She is entirely absorbed in her work and is seemingly undistracted by the men’s activity. Her posture and arms echo the angle of the embroidery frame while her fingers are suspended in a moment when the needle passes through the fabric. Her stiff dress and pinned hair mimic the tightness of the fabric, stretched across its frame. She is altogether presented in a different manner than the men in the background. Even her erect posture and sharply

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<sup>72</sup> Cochran, Elizabeth. “Tennyson’s Hierarchy of Women in ‘Idylls of the King.’” Published in Boos, Florence S. *History and Community: Essays in Victorian Medievalism*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992: 39-57. Medieval characters embodied and exemplified ideal and corrupt female characteristics.

<sup>73</sup> “The Pleasures of Needlework.” *Harper’s Bazaar* 11, 3 (Jan 19 1878): 42.

bent neck appear tense in comparison to the men with their loosely fitted jackets and casual stance. The men are depicted in an open, likely public space in which they contemplate art hung from a wall. Unlike Christine, the two men are encouraged to look around, to observe art and to discuss it with one another, while Christine is comparatively secluded. The painting presents a contrast in gendered character and creativity. The men participate in a social and intellectual exchange about artwork, while Christine quietly labors over her craft.

Like Renoir, Rossetti literally separated men and women into appropriate spheres and activities in his painting *The Girlhood of the Virgin* (Fig. 11). The Virgin Mary sits at an embroidery frame while her mother watches over her. In contrast, Joachim, Mary's father, labors in the garden outside of the home. Rossetti made a clear contrast between the sexes by associating women, in this case the virtuous Virgin Mary, with craft and the private sphere, and associating man with physical and mental labor in the public sphere.

Additionally, Rossetti's painting highlights one strand of nineteenth century medieval ideals associated with Christianity and the pursued revival of Christian values; the girl Virgin Mary exemplified Ruskin's argument that women look to Mary as exemplar of feminine behavior. Ruskin equated activities such as weaving with ideal female behavior and character in the same way that Rossetti associated the Virgin Mary, an ideal female archetype, with embroidery. In one instance, Ruskin referenced a biblical quote by the "wisest king" Solomon, "Weaving, the art of queens, honoured of all noble Heathen women, in the person of their virgin goddess – honoured of all Hebrew women, by the word of their wisest king – 'She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff; she stretcheth out her hand to the poor. She is not afraid of the snow for

her household, for all her household are clothed with scarlet. She maketh herself covering of tapestry; her clothing is silk and purple.” Ruskin responds to the quoted text by asking, “What have we done in all these thousands of years with this bright art of Greek maid and Christian matron?” To Ruskin, the Bible established that weaving, or more broadly needlework, was synonymous with ideal and noble female behaviors that had been forsaken by modernity. They forsook needlework for idleness and had thus forsaken pure character for depravity.

Contrary to Ruskin’s belief, some women believed sewing or embroidery was becoming archaic. An article in *Harper’s Bazaar* illustrates the debate between what older and younger women viewed as the optimal use of their time. The anonymous author described a conversation she had with her niece, Maud, when they happened upon an exhibition of embroidery. The young niece exclaimed her loathing for what she perceived as a “waste of time”.

I was quite desirous that Maud should see what needle-women can still do in this age of machines...

“Well,” I said to Maud, as she stood with the heel of a black stocking spread smoothly upon her palm, and contemplating it with a perplexity made up of despair and disdain, “needle-work isn’t a lost art yet, it seems.”

“What an awful waste of time!” she answered. “I should think it was a sin.”

The aunt argued that in spite of “the age of machines” the task of hand sewing was still important and relevant. She defended the beauty and artistry of the “lost art” by showing Maud around the exhibition of fancy work. After seeing the impressive exhibition, the niece became convinced that the art of needlecraft was worth preserving.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>74</sup> “Will It Pay?” *Harper’s Bazaar* 4, 22 (June 3, 1871): 343.

Similar to the craftswomen of the needlework exhibition, Cassatt presented Lydia with dignity and artistic intelligence. The anonymous aunt told Maud, “the best lesson I have learned at Rag Fair. It always pays to do one’s work well.” Not only were the revitalized “rags” restored and put on exhibition and sale, but they also referenced a deep pride women held in their needlecraft and the desire they had to dedicate themselves to the betterment and mastery of their work.

Both *Lydia at a Tapestry Frame* and the story of Maud and her aunt reveal the emerging practice of art embroidery. Women’s periodicals began to exhort readers to improve the artistic quality of their needlework and to abandon the unoriginal pattern copying associated with Berlin work. Berlin work was the fashionable style of embroidery until the 1870’s, when it was replaced by art embroidery. Berlin work was a form of needlework similar to today’s cross-stitch. Designs were composed of a single repeated stitch, such as a cross-stitch, arranged in various colors in order to compose the image or design.

The Women’s pavilion at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia exhibited works by the recently founded Royal School of Art Needlework in London.<sup>75</sup> The exhibition led to a “craze” in American needlework. Women perceived the Royal School’s needlework as an example of the artistic potential of their craft. They were inspired to abandon their outdated “Berlin work” for “art needlework.” Art needlework,

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<sup>75</sup> Hawthorne, Julian. “South Kensington Royal School of Art Needle-Work: No 1.” *Harper’s Bazaar* 14, 3 (January 15, 1881): 38. “The school was first established in 1872 under the presidency of the Princess Christian, one of the Queen Victoria’s daughters, for the twofold purpose of supplying suitable employment for the gentlewomen and restoring ornamental needle-work to the high place it once held among the decorative arts.” For a contemporary report on the exhibition of needlework in the Women’s Pavilion, see “Godey’s Arm-Chair: July, 1876. The Great Exhibition: The Display of Needlework and Embroidery.” *Godey’s Lady’s Book* (July 1876): 94.

championed by William Morris, emphasized the importance of artistic individuality and encouraged women to create works independent from a pattern, or to deviate from patterns in order to employ their own creative agency.

Prior to 1876, new embroidery pattern books were merely republished in different formats. After the exhibition, the Royal School of Art Needlework in London became the hub of new needlecraft designs in the United States and Europe.<sup>76</sup> Candace Wheeler, the organizer of the Society of Decorative Art in New York published a biweekly publication *Journal Art Interchange*.<sup>77</sup> This publication provided the American needlework consumer with new patterns produced by the Royal School of Art Needlework.<sup>78</sup>

Publications produced by and about the Royal School of Art Needlework repeatedly referenced the Middle Ages and medieval needlecrafts in comparison to nineteenth-century practice. Women's publications noted exhibitions of medieval tapestries at the South Kensington Museum.<sup>79</sup> Pattern writers frequently cited medieval tapestries as inspiration for their designs, which utilized a variety of stitches and delicate

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<sup>76</sup> Wheeler, Candace. *The Development of Embroidery in America*. New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1921:107-108. Wheeler describes the turning point in nineteenth century American art embroidery: "This exhibit of Kensington Embroidery all unwittingly sowed the seed not only of great results, but in decorative art worked in many other directions. The exhibits of art needlework from the New Kensington School of Art in London, their beauty, novelty and easy adaptiveness, exactly fitted it to experiment by all the dreaming forces of the American woman. They were good needlewomen by inheritance and sensitive to art influences by nature, and the initiative capacity which belongs to power and feeling enabled them at once to seize upon this mode of expression and make it their own. It was the means of inaugurating another era of true decorative needlework, perfectly adapted to the capacity of all women, and destined to be developed on lines peculiarly national in character."

<sup>77</sup> Vincent, Margaret. *The Ladies' Worktable: Domestic Needlework in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America*: 56.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid: 60.

<sup>79</sup> Hawthorne, Julian. "South Kensington Royal School of Art Needle-Work: No 1." *Harper's Bazaar* 14, 3 (January 15, 1881): 38.



shading. For instance, in the *Harper's Bazaar* article "Stitches Used in Frame Embroidery," author Julian Hawthorne identified the needlework on display at the South Kensington Museum as the inspiration for her embroidery designs.<sup>80</sup> Such references provided the craft with legitimacy; medieval tapestries established a rich history for needlecraft and promoted its artistic potential.

The *Godey's Lady's Book* article "Household Decorative Art" of March 1872 traced art embroidery from Eleanor of Castile to upper-class ladies and then to the contemporary interest in art embroidery. The reference to upper class historical figures highlighted the fact that needlework, or rather art needlework, had class implications. In a response to upward mobility, middle-class ladies adopted practices such as art embroidery as a means to elevate themselves as well as introduce artistic elements into their homes. Women were encouraged to emulate the inventive artistic powers exercised by upper-class medieval female archetypes, to "return to the graceful and beautiful occupation of their ancestors."<sup>81</sup>

The same article exemplifies how women looked to the Middle Ages when discussing the purposes and designs of their craft. Most notable in this excerpt is the way in which medieval women were regarded to possess inventive and artistic capabilities. "Throughout the Middle Ages needlework embroidery...formed the great occupation of ladies when not engaged in domestic or other duties; and the beauty of their work,

<sup>80</sup> Hawthorne, Julian. "Stitches Used in Frame Embroidery." *Harper's Bazaar* 14,30 (July 23, 1881): 474.

<sup>81</sup> "Household Decorative Art: Embroidery." *Godey's Lady's Book* (March 1872): 252.

together with the invention and design which they displayed in it, are such as might as well raise the admiration of ladies of the present day”<sup>82</sup>

The insistence that women had inventive powers ran counter to popular opinion. The dominant ideology was that women were incapable of original thought and were thus incapable of producing artistic works.<sup>83</sup> Ruskin voiced this belief when he wrote, “the woman’s power is not for rule, not for battle – and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, management and decision.”<sup>84</sup> Ruskin was a major figure in founding the Arts and Crafts movement. His writings and work centered on the romantic idealization of the Middle Ages.<sup>85</sup> He perceived the period as a time when art and craft were one and the same and in which workers happily produced their craft free from the materialism introduced by modernity. In addition to his view on medieval craftsmanship, he was an advocate for chivalric ideals. Although Ruskin, and later William Morris, was a major figure in elevating the artistic value of textile craft based on medieval models,<sup>86</sup> and though he encouraged the moral development associated with female needlecrafts, he set limitations on the artistic intellect of women who produced needlecrafts in their homes. The belief that women could not imagine and invent unique works was accepted and perpetuated by the emphasis placed on copying by needlecraft

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid: 252.

<sup>83</sup> Edwards, Clive. “Home is Where the Art is: Women, Handicrafts and Home Improvements 1750-1900.” *Journal of Design History* 19 (Spring 2006): 12.

<sup>84</sup> Ruskin, John. *Sesame and Lilies*. New York: Wiley and Sons, 1871: 99.

<sup>85</sup> Ruskin similarly wrote on female character based upon medieval examples. See “Editors Table.” *Godey’s Lady’s Book* (February 1867). “Women’s fame must be founded on goodness... when the wife of Lord William Russell stood by her husband’s side, cheering and assisting him in his dark hour of trial before his unjust and cruel judges, were not her devoted love, her firm faithfulness and pious fortitude a beautiful realization of the purest and noblest feminine character.”

<sup>86</sup> Boos, Florence S. *History and Community: Essays in Victorian Medievalism*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992.

“how to” books and articles; needlework instructional books were filled with patterns that women could simply copy and arrange according to their taste.<sup>87</sup> The patterns demanded little if any imagination or invention, which led to the criticism of Berlin work pattern copying and mimicry.

An anonymous contributor made one such exhortation against mimicry in an 1872 publication of *Godey's Lady's Book*. “The modern lady, instead of exercising her inventive powers, simply copies a pattern set before her, stitch by stitch, without the slightest idea of deviating from it if its forms are bad, or of developing any new forms of beauty for herself.”<sup>88</sup> The author recognized the desire for women to create from their own faculty. “There is at the present time much desire for this shown among the upper classes, and legitimate embroidery is again rapidly becoming a fashionable employment.”<sup>89</sup>

These instances demonstrate that while Ruskin used medieval models to define modern feminine ideals, women used medieval models to promote their own artistic potential. An anonymous author for *Godey's Lady's Book* opposed Ruskin's stance that women were incapable of invention.<sup>90</sup> Instead, she explained that medieval women

<sup>87</sup> “Work Department: Art Needlework.” *Godey's Lady's Book* 98, 588 (Jun 1879): 556. The article provides three patterns for the embroidery frame that women might use for adornments in their home.

<sup>88</sup> “Household Decorative Art: Embroidery.” *Godey's Lady's Book* (March 1872): 252.

<sup>89</sup> “Household Decorative Art: Embroidery.” *Godey's Lady's Book* (March 1872): 252.

<sup>90</sup> Hawthorne, Julian. “True Art-Needle-Work: No 1.” *Harper's Bazaar* 14, 44 (October 29, 1881): 694. “She should be ambitious of producing something that could not only be cherished in this generation, but handed down to the next; and if she have such ambition, she will wish to have some true basis to work on, and not to trust to an imitation, more or less successful, of work done in former ages, such as most of the so-called art of the Royal and a few other schools of needle-work is most of it done on true art principles; and we do not refer to this, but to the brainless imitations of it be those who are satisfied with a mere superficial resemblance, and who think such work artistic because done in

excelled at producing artistic needlework and used this point to prove that modern women were not only capable of invention and artistry, but that the modern woman should aspire to possess the same inventiveness of the medieval model in her own needlework.

The argument of the artistic potential of women's needlecraft restricts the problem of artistic creativity to a single aesthetic object. However, decoration, or the arrangement of such objects in a space, was a debated form of artistic expression as well. Jo Turney argues that the artistic merit and self-expressive quality of crafts did not necessarily reside in each individual craft as an autonomous art object, but rather that creativity and self-expression were also achieved by the selection and arrangement of objects.<sup>91</sup> Arrangement had the potential to express class, gender, and race. Home decoration and crafting were common subjects in women's books because the reader, considered incompatible with producing high art as an expressive medium, might arrange objects as a more suitable form of self-expression.

In her essay "Interior Decoration as a Profession for Women", designer Candace Wheeler countered popular disregard for the intelligence required for design. She argued for the artistry and skill demanded by decorative art at a time when interior decoration

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crewels, or on crash, or in dull coloring. These things do not make "art" work, any more than a stiff eccentric arrangement in flowers or blue china, or nursery tales illustrated by badly drawn, oddly dressed children; these things may be fashionable, but they are not necessarily artistic. Art needlework...must be governed by the rules that guide all art. Form, tone, color, and finally composition...these four points are the great essentials, and that no good work is possible without them...must be applied to needle-work to make it truly artistic....A little study of them will give us greater and more comprehending pleasure in works of art, and will help us, even if we do not design our own work, to choose what is good, and to distinguish what is based on art principles from that which is only an intelligent imitation of a fashion."

<sup>91</sup> Turney, Jo. "Making and Living with Home Craft in Contemporary Britain." *Journal of Design History* 17 (2004): 276.

was evolving into a new, predominately male, profession. First, she emphasized the difference between home decoration and decorative art.<sup>92</sup> Wheeler accepted that any untrained eye could arrange pretty objects within a space and call it decoration. However, it took training, intelligent planning and skill to become an interior decorator. Wheeler compared the amount and types of study and skill required of an interior decorator to that required of a painter or architect. She repeatedly returned to the importance of color theory in creating an artistic space. The notion that the color is of central importance echoed modern artists' preoccupation with color theory in their palette, framing, and exhibition spaces. Also central to her argument, Wheeler acknowledged the unique capacity women had to excel in the decorative arts due to their intimate understanding of the domestic space and how it might be enhanced.

Women, particularly those belonging to the middle classes, began to recognize that craft in the home had the potential to be artistic and the arrangement of crafts could produce a self-expressive, morally uplifting space. Martha Crabill McClaugherty recognized the middle-class's preoccupation with artistic interiors as a movement unto itself contributed by author Charles L. Eastlake in England and decorative artist Candace Wheeler in America.<sup>93</sup> Hudson Holly explained that possessing an artistic home was attainable as long as one took the time to learn and cultivate artistic crafts. "Desire for artistic surroundings will lead them to master the arts for themselves and produce with their own hands objects that rival in attraction any for which the rich man ignorantly and

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<sup>92</sup> Wheeler, Candace. "Interior Decoration as a Profession for Women." *The Decorator and Furnisher* 26 (June 1895): 87-89.

<sup>93</sup> Crabill McClaugherty, Martha. "Household Art: Creating the Artistic Home, 1868-1893." *Winterthur Portfolio* 18 (Spring 1983): 1.

carelessly exchanges his money.”<sup>94</sup> Women, as masters of the domestic sphere, would have readily identified with such writings. Like the story of Maud and her aunt, they encouraged women, including Lydia, that their crafts had the potential to be viewed as artistic objects if they devoted the time and energy to master them.

#### Mary’s Canvas and Lydia’s Cloth

The question then arises, was Cassatt promoting the chivalric ideals of Ruskin and Rossetti through *Lydia at a Tapestry Frame* or was she subverting them? According to Roszika Parker, the development of art needlework coincided with the feminist challenge to the constraints of femininity.<sup>95</sup> Despite being encouraged to simply copy stitches to handbags and collars, women reclaimed the creative potential of their craft. They were emboldened to create from their own intuition using the needles to which they were relegated. In light of contemporary writings that explored the artistic potential of needlecraft and decoration, Lydia’s hobby presented Cassatt with the opportunity to showcase the artistic and self-expressive potential of a gendered medium. The formerly unrecognized “art” had the potential to show that women could be both inventive and artistic.

In contrast to Renoir’s *Christine Lerolle Embroidering*, Lydia and her craft were empowered by Cassatt’s composition. Lydia’s embroidery frame is propped up so that she looks at it straight on, rather than bowing to her work. The embroidery frame boldly bisects the horizontal canvas and projects out toward the viewer. Despite its large size, the embroidery frame is shaped in broad free brushstrokes that suggest, rather than trace

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<sup>94</sup> Holly, Hudson. *Modern Dwelling in Town and Country*. Harper and Bros: New York, 1878: 210.

<sup>95</sup> Parker, Roszika. *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. London: The Women’s Press, Ltd., 1984: 185.

the contours and textures of the frame and canvas. The canvas itself and the pattern Lydia stitches are as indistinguishable as her busy hands. Lydia's fingers blur together as if in a quiet frenzy as she pulls the needle and thread back and forth through the canvas. In most places the ground and canvas are clearly visible especially toward the edges of the canvas, which are, in many places along the perimeter, left unfinished. The intentionally elevated awareness of the painting's canvas provides an additional connection between material involved in needlecraft and the material involved in painting. As Lydia adds stitches to her stretched canvas to produce art needlework, Cassatt adds paint to her canvas.

The loose handling of Lydia's body, the frame, and the background imbues the image with a kind of movement or activity. The viewer can perceive Cassatt's artistic labor and trace her process. As Rubin argued, Cassatt's loose and sketch-like style emphasizes the process of artistic production. Just as Lydia is suspended in the process of constructing her needlework design, Cassatt presents her painting to the viewer as though it is still in the process of its own making.

Lydia and her frame are set in what could be her private bedroom as suggested by the apparently ebonized chest of drawers in the upper right background. Lydia is seated close to the window, likely so that the sunlight would improve her view of her work. Although these situational elements appear to be accoutrements to a private room, they are still flat, loosely handled and are ultimately mere suggestions. Lydia is depicted in a setting similar to *Augusta Sewing Before a Window* and yet the effects of the coloration, horizontal bisecting frame, and Lydia's quiet, yet serious expression allow the viewer to perceive a similar sense of absorption as the *Young Bride*.

Though the entire image is painted with a frenzy of color and variety of brushstrokes, Lydia is completely undistracted from her work. Lydia's face is the only part of the painting that is fully developed in feathery strokes of paint that powerfully contrast the broad, expressive strokes applied throughout the rest of the painting. It's as though her face and expression possess a calm in comparison, which further suggests that Lydia's intellectual activity is more important to Cassatt than the actual product of her labor and intellect, her needlework.

Ultimately, Lydia's needlecraft and the debates of its artistic potential were synonymous to Cassatt's struggle as a female artist. Cassatt was excluded from the opportunities to obtain professional training and recognition equal to that of her male contemporaries, particularly in America. Female artists encountered academic and professional limitations because they were deemed incapable of artistic invention and belonged to a separate sphere in society, the private or domestic sphere. Cassatt struggled with the expectation that men and women occupy and stay within their separate spheres. She revealed this frustration when she sarcastically wrote, "It seems that Mr S[tillman] says, so Joseph D[urand-] R[uel] tells me as he told him, that women and men have different spheres and each must stay in their own. I would like him to define these spheres. Nothing he enjoys more than offering clothes for his daughter, I should say that was their sphere."<sup>96</sup> Cassatt's work demonstrates that such creative and artistic achievement did not belong exclusively to the sphere of men. She might have seen the elevation of Lydia's needlecraft, diminished in the eyes of man from possessing true

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<sup>96</sup> Mathews, Nancy Mowll, ed. *Cassatt and Her Circle: Selected Letters*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1984: 309.



artistic potential, as representative of the capacity for women to be as equally artistic as men despite their subjected differences.

Figures

Figure 1. Mary Cassatt, *Lydia at a Tapestry Frame*. ca. 1881. Flint Institute of Arts, Flint, Michigan.

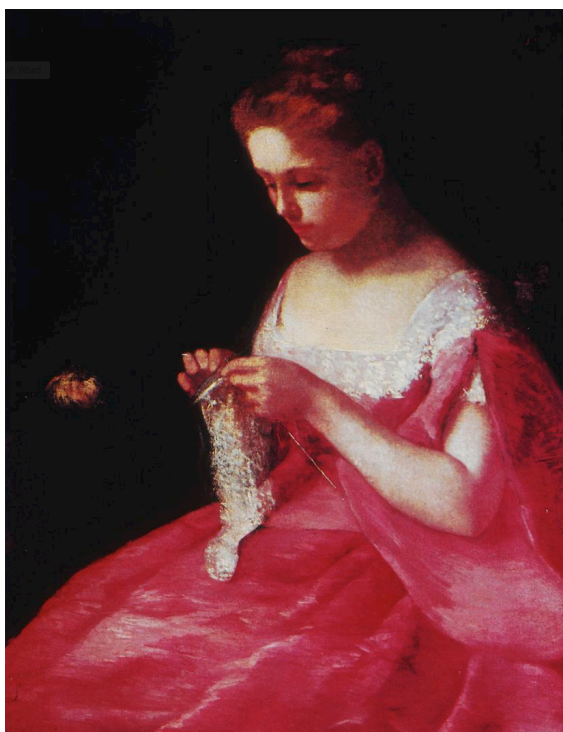


Figure 2. Mary Cassatt, *Young Bride*. ca. 1875. Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, New Jersey.



Figure 3. Diego Velázquez, *The Tapestry Weavers* or *The Fable of Arachne*. 1657. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain.

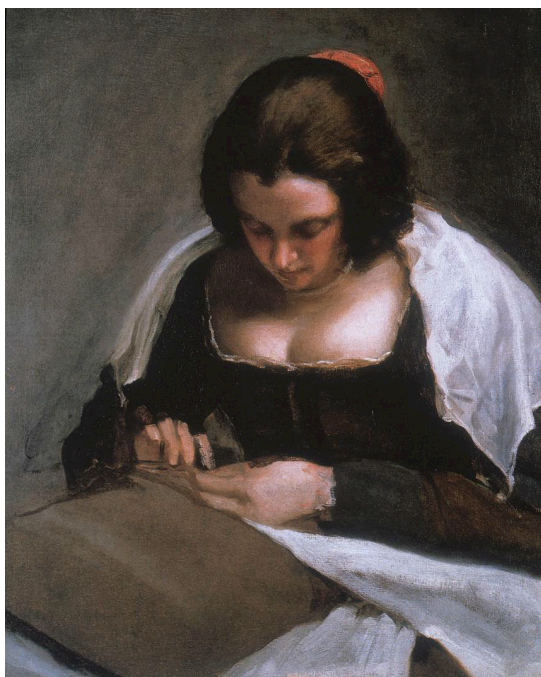


Figure 4. Diego Velázquez, *The Needlewoman*. 1640. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.



Figure 5. Mary Cassatt, *Augusta Sewing Before a Window*. ca. 1905-1910. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 6. Mary Cassatt, *Modern Woman Mural*. 1893.



Figure 7. Gustave Caillebotte, *Group Portraits in the County*. 1876. Musée Baron Gérard, Bayeux, France.



Figure 8. Mary Cassatt, *Girl in Green*. 1908. Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, Alabama.

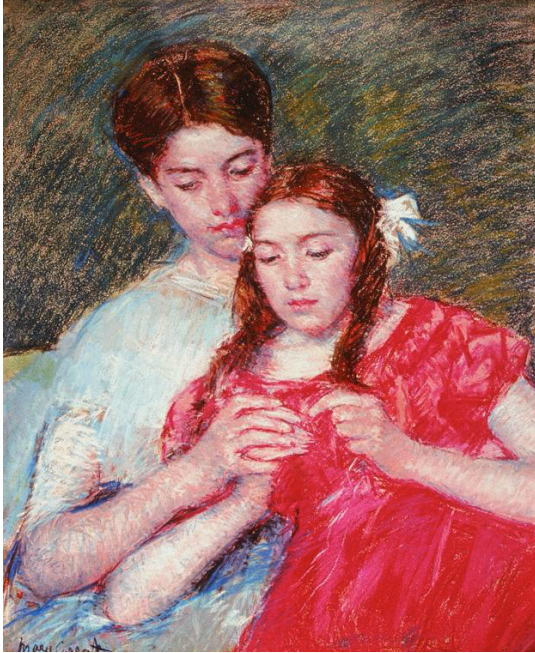


Figure 9. Mary Cassatt, *Crochet Lesson*. 1913. Private Collection.



Figure 10. Auguste Renoir, *Mlle. Lerolle Sewing*, 1896

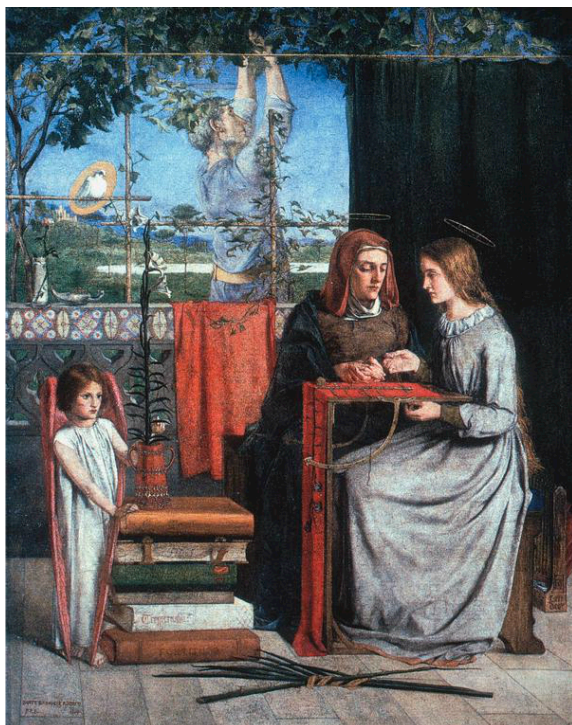


Figure 11. Dante Gabriel Rossetti,  
*Girlhood of Mary Virgin*. 1848-9. Tate  
Gallery, London, United Kingdom.

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