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**Silent Needles, Speaking Flowers: The Language of Flowers as a Tool for Communication
in Women's Embroidery in Victorian Britain**

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The Secret Flower Language, Women and Expression

In the romantic minds of the Victorian's with their interest in medieval chivalry and sentimental symbolism, an obligation to social etiquette caused extreme censorship of what was considered appropriate conversation.¹ This combination created a society that utilized and applied symbolic meanings of objects to express what otherwise could not be spoken.² The Victorians followed upon the interest in botany and the natural world developed by the educated and leisure classes of England in the mid-18th century. They continued this interest, which developed into a fascination with the study of horticulture, botany and gardening.³ The increased importation of exotic plants and flowers along with a renewed interest in 16th century herbals created an overall appreciation for flowers in society, which additionally became a common subject in Victorian artwork.⁴

Beginning in the 18th century, rumors spread across Europe of a secret flower language being practiced in Turkey.⁵ This is largely a result of the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who, while writing home to England from the Turkish Embassy, discussed "a mysterious language of love and gallantry". In a letter to a friend, she described the use of objects to communicate, calling it a "Turkish love letter"⁶. She wrote of this language:

"There is no colour, no flower, no weed, no fruit, herb, pebble, or feather that has not a verse belonging to it: and you may quarrel, reproach, or send letters of passion, friendship, or civility, or even of news, without ever inking your fingers".⁷ Over the course of the century, the rumors became interest, and then practice. Until, by the early 19th century, the development of a formalized Language of Flowers had occurred. This took the form of a dictionary of symbolic meanings assigned to individual flowers, which thus became generally known to society as a method of silent communication.⁸

1. Judith Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home: A Portrait of Domestic Life in Victorian England* (New York & London: W. W. Norton, 2003); Marina Heilmeyer, *The Language of Flowers: Symbols and Myths*, trans. Stephen Telfer, rev. ed. (Munich, Berlin, London & New York: Prestel Verlag, 2006)

2. Jack Goody, *The Culture of Flowers* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 232-253; Heilmeyer.

3. Ibid.

4. Linda Parry, *William Morris and the Art & Crafts Movement: A Design Source Book*, (London: Studio Editions, 1989); See also works by the Pre-Raphaelite painters; See also Emily Farmer, *In Doubt*, London: Victoria and Albert Museum Collection, 1881, watercolor. This portrait is an excellent example where the painter assumed the viewers were aware of the meaning behind the forget-me-nots that the woman is wearing. Without this knowledge, the implied meaning of the painting and title are lost.

5. Goody, 232-253; Heilmeyer, 17.

6. Goody, 233.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., 232-253; Heilmeyer.

Victorian middle and upper class women, isolated within their assigned domestic sphere⁹, and charged by society with the task of acting as “spiritual guardian[s] of the home”¹⁰, had a limited number of acceptable activities available for them. With the restrictions placed upon them by society regarding appropriate behavior, the possibility that some women sought methods of covert communication and expression exists. Embroidery, so inextricably linked to the Victorians’ definition of femininity was considered a socially acceptable task for women.¹¹ And so, for some, embroidery could have provided a means of artistic and personal expression, creating an avenue through which to communicate what otherwise could not be said.¹² The prolific amount of publications on the Language of Flowers¹³ and the popularity of flowers as a subject in embroidery designs throughout the Victorian era¹⁴ combine to create the possibility that flower symbolism was used in floral embroidery designs as a method through which women could silently express themselves.

Aims and Methodology

The connection between flower symbolism and women’s embroidery requires clarification. The social and cultural background, the existence of the Language of Flowers and the place of embroidery in women’s lives allow a conception, to be evaluated in the course of this essay, of Victorian women’s attitudes and uses of this Language in order to create meaning and messages in the floral designs of their embroideries. An object-based research method has been used to perform the evaluation. This essay is based on a larger body of work; the primary focus here is on the embroideries: six extant examples; three designs by Morris and Company, and three by the Leek Embroidery Society.¹⁵ The additional support of contemporaneous literature includes a selection of eleven books on the Language of Flowers, published in Britain between 1827 and 1898.¹⁶ Also included is a nearly contiguous monthly magazine series entitled the *Ladies’*

9. Flanders; Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, rev. ed. (London: The Women's Press, 1996); Whitworth Art Gallery, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery in Women's Lives 1300-1900; Women and Textiles Today*, eds. Whitworth Art Gallery and Cornerhouse, Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery and Cornerhouse, 1988, exhibition.

10. Whitworth Art Gallery, 18-19. For a Victorian definition of the ideal woman see, John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, 7th ed. (Sunnyside, Orpington, Kent: George Allen, 1886), 110-180. See also Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (London, Paris & Melbourne: Cassell & Company, 1891), 39-41. For the middle class Victorian woman in the context of home and society see, Flanders.

11. Parker.

12. Ibid. An excellent first-hand example of this relationship is poignantly described in the poem “To A Needle” which I have excluded here for want of space. Grace Maberly-Jordon, “To A Needle”, *Lady's World Fancy Work Book* (n.d.): frontis piece.

13. Goody, 232-253. See also the collection at Kew Library.

14. Barbara Morris, *Victorian Embroidery* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1962);

This is also evident from the *The Ladies' Treasury* embroidery patterns analyzed in this research: *The Ladies' Treasury: A Household Magazine*, ed. Mrs. Warren (1-47, January-December, 1878); Ibid. (1-48, 1880); Ibid., 1885; Ibid., 1886; Ibid., 1887; Ibid., 1888.

15. For the sake of brevity, only six embroideries are analyzed.

16. *The Wild Garland or Prose and Poetry Connected with English Wild Flowers* (London: Harvey and Darton 1827); *The Language of Flowers: An Alphabet of Floral Emblems* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1857); *The Illustrated Language of Flowers*, ed. Mrs. L. Burke (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1866); *Floral Poetry and the Language of Flowers* (London: Marcus Ward & Co., 1877); Robert Tyas. *The Language of Flowers; or Floral Emblems of Thoughts, Feelings and Sentiments*. (London: George Routledge and Sons, c. 1878); *Flower Lore: The Teachings of Flowers: Historical, Legendary, Poetical, and Symbolical* (Belfast: McCaw, Stevenson & Orr, 1879); *The Language of Flowers including Floral Poetry* (London and New York: Frederick Warne and Co., c.

Treasury, ranging between 1878 and 1888.¹⁷ This essay begins with a brief discussion of the Language of Flowers publications followed by a summary of the key findings from the *Ladies' Treasury* texts and embroidery patterns. A comparison of the extant embroideries with these patterns is made in order to reinforce their historic relevance, as well as to provide a supporting source of the potential use of the Language of Flowers in their creation. Application of the meanings assigned to the flowers in the embroideries is performed using a version of the original Language of Flowers dictionary.¹⁸ In this way, the use of the Language in Victorian embroidery is tested by considering the meanings determined by the combination of flowers in each design.

Dictionaries and Publications

The first publication of a formalized version of the Language of Flowers was printed in 1819, written by Charlotte de Latour.¹⁹ Entitled *Langage des fleurs*, it was the first to include an A to Z list of flowers and their assigned symbolic meaning, giving them according to the season and the month of their blooming.²⁰ The popularity of de Latour's book is evident; in London alone the 9th edition of the English translation came out in 1843, only twenty-seven years after the original was published. Other authors also used her symbolic meanings list in their own varied versions.²¹ Out of the eleven Language of Flowers books that were studied for this research, four used de Latour's list. These books represent an existence of the growing acceptance and popular knowledge on the subject over the course of the 19th century. The earliest of the research group, *The Wild Garland or Prose and Poetry Connected with English Wild Flowers* from 1827, includes short stories and poetry about flowers and traditional plant folklore, but emphasizes botany and "announces itself... as an intellectual embellishment to the science".²² A peak in the publications of these dictionaries occurred in the middle of the 19th century as is represented by the, *The Language of Flowers: An Alphabet of Floral Emblems* from 1857.²³ The title and the symbolic meanings list included in this book are indications of a shift in the focus of flower symbolism books from an emphasis on scientific relevance, as in *The Wild Garland*, to the straightforward publication of a symbolic dictionary. In Britain, by the last quarter of the century, the definitions from these dictionaries had been absorbed into the social beliefs and culture, appearing as an aspect of daily life and thought: In 1884, a copy of de Latour's list was published with the inclusion of illustrations by the popular children's illustrator Kate Greenaway.²⁴ As Ada Levenson reminisced, in *Letters to the Sphinx from Oscar Wilde*,

1880); Kate Greenaway, *Language of Flowers* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1884); Rev. Hilderic Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore*, 3rd ed. (London: Swan Sonnenschein, Le Bas & Lowrey, 1886); *The Language of Flowers* (London: Ward, Lock, & Co., c.1890); Lizzie Deas, *Flowers Favorites: Their Legends, Symbolism and Significance* (London: Jarrold and Sons, 1898).

17. *The Ladies' Treasury* (1-47, January-December, 1878); *Ibid.* (1-48, 1880); *Ibid.*, 1885; *Ibid.*, 1886; *Ibid.*, 1887; *Ibid.*, 1888.

18. Charlotte de Latour, *Langage des Fleurs* (Paris: Audot, 1819) sourced from Goody, 235. Although a translation into Italian has recently been published: *Il Linguaggio dei Fiori*, trans. Giuseppina Garufi (Firenze: L.S. Olschki, 2008), I have been unable to find an English translation.

19. Goody, 235.

20. *Ibid.*, 237. This is clearly a format designed for use as a reference tool.

21. *Ibid.*, 239.

22. *The Wild Garland*, iv.

23. *The Language of Flowers: An Alphabet of Floral Emblems*.

24. Greenaway. The popularity of Greenaway's edition, and ergo de Latour's, is perhaps proven by the fact that it is one of the few Language of Flowers publications still in print today. Owing to this, Greenaway's publication of the original dictionary is the one I have

“[f]lowers meant so much in those days”.²⁵ She recalled the audience at the opening night of *The Importance of Being Ernest* in 1894:

“[H]ad not the word gone forth from Oscar that the lily-of-the-valley was to be the flower of the evening, as a souvenir of an absent friend?... [N]early all the pretty women wore sprays of lilies against their large puffed sleeves, while rows and rows of young elegants had buttonholes of the delicate bloom”.²⁶

According to Greenaway’s *Language of Flowers* lily of the valley symbolizes a “return of happiness”²⁷, perhaps such as the happiness granted by the returning “of an absent friend”. The image of an entire theater filled with audience members who were not only familiar with flower symbolism, but wore flowers as a signification of this knowledge, is indeed striking. With such an abundance of members of Victorian high society utilizing the Language of Flowers to silently express particular meaning, this example further supports the possibility that flower symbolism could have also been used in other modes of expression.

The Orange Blossom

The *Ladies’ Treasury*, like many other Victorian ladies’ magazines, included regular color plates of the latest fashions and embroidery patterns. From these prints, as well as from the text, multiple traces of flower symbolism were found. One flower in particular, the orange blossom, was mentioned several times in the editions. This was a flower of symbolic importance in Victorian society as it was frequently used in the bridal costume. Out of the eleven fashion plates depicting a wedding toilette, ten included an adornment of the orange blossom in either a spray upon the dress or as a wreath in the hair. The most intriguing evidence for the symbolic meaning of the orange blossom was found in the “Queries” section. In a correspondence between two readers, one lady asked, “When were orange blossoms first worn by brides and what symbol is attached to the flower?” The other reader, replied, that their symbolism began in Arabia as “an emblem of ‘fecundity’”, and was brought to England during the Crusades. She went on to say that they were eventually adopted “as a necessary decoration for a bride’s costume”.²⁸ This answer seems well researched. However, there is no way of knowing what source the replying reader used to extract her or his information. It must also be considered that the editors in their need to fill space in the pages of the magazine created this correspondence. Nonetheless, the reply is likely to be based on a certain level of popular knowledge. The origins of the Victorian tradition for wearing orange blossoms in the wedding costume are uncertain, although, Queen Victoria herself wore a crown of the flowers for her own wedding in 1840²⁹, which was likely to be widely copied by brides during the entirety of her reign. This example provides evidence of the general knowledge of flower symbolism within the readers of the *Ladies’ Treasury* as well as the general populous of the Victorian people.

chosen to apply meaning to the flowers discussed in the course of this essay.

25. Ada Levenson *Letters to the Sphinx from Oscar Wilde* (1930), quoted in Violet Wyndham, *The Sphinx and Her Circle: A Biographical Sketch of Ada Levenson, 1862- 1933*, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1963) 109.

26. Ibid.

27. Greenaway, 27.

28. *The Ladies’ Treasury*, vol. 32 (October 1880), 476.

29. Queen Victoria’s wedding dress and crown are held by the Royal Collection.

Embroidery Patterns

The *Ladies' Treasury* embroidery patterns were overwhelmingly floral in subject: sixteen patterns were printed, and of this, fourteen depicted flowers.³⁰ By comparing the type of flowers in the patterns to their assigned meaning, an understanding of their potential symbolism can be determined. Several of the flowers appear to have meanings that are representative of moral lessons or indicators of appropriate behavior for women³¹: “purity of heart” is implied by the water lilies³², the field lilacs (Fig. 1) represent “humility”³³, a wreath of roses express a “reward of virtue”.³⁴ A group of yellow irises along the bank of a pond (Fig. 2) symbolize a “message”, perhaps reminding the embroiderer of the humbleness of nature and therefore her own virtuous humility.³⁵



Figure 1 (left): Field Lilacs Pattern, representing “humility”.³⁶

Artist Unknown, “Untitled”, *Ladies' Treasury*. (January 1888), print.

Reproduced with kind permission of the Winchester School of Art Library; Winchester, Hampshire UK.

Figure 2 (right): Yellow Irises Pattern, represents a “message”.³⁷

Artist Unknown, “Embroidery for a Chair Back”, *Ladies' Treasury*, (January 1887), print.

Reproduced with kind permission of the Winchester School of Art Library; Winchester, Hampshire UK.

These patterns indeed provide evidence of the popularity of flowers in decorative needlework. However, it is difficult to ascertain whether their presence is merely an example of the inclusion of a popular design subject. Nevertheless, when the patterns are put into the context of other

30. Due to want of space, a discussion on the entirety of these patterns is not possible here. For reference, two patterns and their images have been included.

31. This could be evidence of the editor, or society in general, using these symbolic meanings to prescribe to the readers what they considered to be appropriate behavior; an interesting application of these meanings that I am unable to discuss in depth here.

32. *The Ladies' Treasury* (1886); Greenaway, 43.

33. *The Ladies' Treasury* (January 1888); Greenaway, 27.

34. Greenaway, 37.

35. *The Ladies' Treasury* (1887, January); Greenaway, 23.

36. Greenaway, 27.

37. *Ibid.*

items found in the pages of the magazine, such as the orange blossom reference, the application of symbolism seems possible, or even appropriate. Deducing from the research conducted thus far, flowers in embroidery patterns were popular and prolific for their overall aesthetic and design appeal as well as for society's knowledge of their symbolic meanings. With the prevalence of floral patterns available for embroidery and the general knowledge of flower symbolism, the likelihood of a woman combining them to incorporating meaning into her embroidery is great.

Embroideries

“Esteem and love” are represented by the strawberry flower in the embroidery in Figure 3.³⁸ The addition of symmetry to the design creates the impression of idealized beauty or natural perfection. The three points of the basket, from which the flower and its leaves are extending, could provide further implied symbolism.



Figure 3: Symmetrical Strawberry Flower Design, symbolizing “esteem and love”.³⁹ Artist Unknown, Untitled, designed by Leek Embroidery Society, photo by Christen Elaine Ericsson. (Hampton Court Palace, Surrey UK: Embroiderer’s Guild Museum Collection, 1880-1890), embroidery. Reproduced by kind permission of the Trustees of the Embroiderers’ Guild.

The embroidered border in Figure 4 depicts intertwining vines of William Morris-style marigolds and the purple and yellow violets known as heartsease or wild pansy.⁴⁰ Marigolds symbolize “grief” and pansies, “thoughts”.⁴¹ The combination of these meanings, as well as the inclusion of the color purple⁴², indicate that this embroidery could have been created during mourning; alternatively, as the primary color is not black⁴³, this could have been made as a keepsake, after the period of mourning had been observed.

38. Ibid., 39

39. Ibid.

40. *Royal Horticultural Society Encyclopedia of Plants & Flowers: The Definitive Illustrated Reference Guide*, 4th ed., ed. Christopher Brickell (London: Dorling Kindersly, 2006), 348.

41. Greenaway, 28 and 32.

42. A color often used in and related to a secondary degree of mourning.

43. The color typically used in and associated with mourning.

William Morris designed his 'Flower Pot', seen here as an embroidered cushion cover (Fig. 5), in 1880.⁴⁴ This pattern is an example of a design that was both made in the firm's workshops as well as sold in a kit for the customer's completion at home. The subjects here appear to be chrysanthemum, and rose; white chrysanthemum represents "truth", and the rose symbolizes "love".⁴⁵ These two meanings are emblems of Victorian morality, or perhaps they are a representation of what Morris, himself, believed to be most vital to his own life.



Figure 4: Marigold and Pansy Border, symbolizing "grief" and "thoughts".⁴⁶

Miss A. Ramage, *Untitled*, designed by Leek Embroidery Society, photo by Christen Elaine Ericsson, (Hampton Court Palace, Surrey UK: Embroiderer's Guild Museum Collection, late 19th c.), embroidery.

Reproduced by kind permission of the Trustees of the Embroiderers' Guild.



Figure 5: 'Flower Pot' Embroidered Cushion Cover. The chrysanthemums and roses represent "truth" and "love".⁴⁷ Miss Ionides, *Flower Pot*, design by William Morris, photo by Christen Elaine Ericsson (Hampton Court Palace, Surrey UK: Embroiderer's Guild Museum Collection, c. 1880), embroidery.

Reproduced by kind permission of the Trustees of the Embroiderers' Guild.

44. Morris. *Victorian Embroidery*. 173.

45. Greenaway, 12 and 36.

46. *Ibid.*, 28 and 32.

47. *Ibid.*, 12 and 36.

The tri-paneled screen, below (Fig. 6), was designed by Morris and Company between 1885 and 1910. Screens were also available either completed or as a kit. The three flowers depicted in this are documented as the “parrot tulip”, the “large horned poppy” and the “anemone”.⁴⁸ The red tulip symbolizes a “declaration of love”, the poppy, appearing to be both white and red, represents “sleep” and simultaneously, “consolation”, and the anemone stands for “expectation”.⁴⁹ The combination of these meanings creates an interesting symbolic screen. Perhaps, its intended location was the bedroom, which is the location in a house for love, sleep, consolation (if the tenant is ill) and expectation (if the tenant is pregnant).



Figure 6: Embroidered Screen with “Parrot Tulips”, “Large Horned Poppies” and “Anemones”.⁵⁰ Design by Morris and Co. The symbolism includes a “declaration of love”, “sleep” and “consolation”.⁵¹ Victoria and Albert Museum, Morris and Co. (1885-1910). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

48. Victoria & Albert Museum, available from <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/objectid/O78101>. Accessed on November 11, 2008.

49. Greenaway, 41, 33 and 8.

50. Victoria & Albert Museum.

51. Greenaway, 41, 33 and 8.

Conclusion

Though, kits such as those sold by Morris and Company and the patterns printed in the *Ladies' Treasury* allowed the embroiderer to choose her own color scheme and stitches, the flowers within the design had already been decided. However, choosing the flowers for subjects in embroidery patterns according to their symbolism did occur. The *Girl's Own*, another 19th century magazine, endeavored to teach and guide young women toward proper behavior and appropriate activities. In an article from 1883, entitled "Common Errors in Daily Life, Part III: Errors of Taste", the importance of harmonious symbolism in embroideries was made clear. The author of the article complained about inartistic examples of Art Needlework (the popular embroidery style of the last 25 years of the 19th century) and discussed the uses of randomly chosen subjects within one design, which, as a result, created, according to her, "nothing but an unmeaning jumble".⁵² Some designers, therefore, did create embroidery patterns with their symbolic meaning in mind. How this symbolism was chosen and how many designers practiced this remain unanswered questions.

As far as has been discovered through the process of this research, the designers of the embroideries and patterns here have left no record of their reason for choosing the flowers in their designs. It is, of course, possible that these embroideries were intended simply for decoration and their creators had no intention of implying meaning. It is also possible that the meaning applied was of a more personal nature, connected with a particular event or memory, and not the meaning that is assigned in de Latour's symbolic dictionary. It is important to consider, too, that these implications could also be the result of a 21st century perspective on the subject. Even though the examples given here have not provided tangible proof, it is still a possibility that there was meaning in them. The indirect evidence discovered here is appealing for the implications it provides. The literary evidence that has been analyzed has provided examples of the use of flower symbolism in Victorian society, in addition to the general knowledge of and appreciation for the Language of Flowers. By stitching together evidence from the embroidery examples that have been presented, with the *Ladies' Treasury* embroidery patterns, a demonstration of the knowledge and use of flower symbolism in Victorian society through literary analysis, and the abundance of contemporary publications on the Language of Flowers, an argument can be formed which validates the question: is it not possible that the Language of Flowers was used to impart covert meaning in the designs of Victorian women's embroideries? Without knowing for certain, only implications can be given; future investigation needs to be performed. This argument, therefore, leads to the continuation of research to find such evidence. Personal documents and records such as diaries were not utilized here. These could, in the future, provide the additional concrete evidence necessary to prove this hypothesis. As a work in progress and broad introduction to the subject, this essay remains a stepping-stone on the path to determining if the Language of Flowers was indeed used for the incorporation of covert meaning into women's embroidery. Though the question remains unanswered, the possibility exist.

52. "Common Errors in Daily Life, Part III: Errors of Taste", *Girl's Own* (1883), quoted in Mary Schoeser, *English Church Embroidery 1833-1953* (London: Watts & Co. Ltd., 1998), 31-32.