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Nature Fancywork: Nineteenth Century Women Tell Stories about the Natural World

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Idealized nature entered the homes of middle and upper class Americans in the mid-nineteenth century in opposition to the harsh realities of growing industrialization, and as a celebration of humanity's control over nature as both a recreation and commodity. This “manmade nature” is evident in other ways during the same period: domestic architecture, with its bay windows extending into a cultured garden and yard; the growing popularity of pet keeping; and the science-mania that caused men and women alike to crowd into theaters to hear natural scientists espouse theories of glaciation or coral reef growth.¹ This large-scale cultural interest in nature found its way into ladies' employment through fancywork and crafts.

Fancywork, in general, has already been found to be an outlet for creativity, not mere rote repetition of a pattern. It has been shown to be a physical symbol of relationships, of morality, and of education in the home². I will be focusing on a subset of these crafts, what I call “nature fancywork.” This paper represents part of my doctoral work at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. I have studied over 150 such objects and over 300 references to them in the popular women's periodicals spanning from 1850 to 1914.³ Many of these nature fancywork objects were decorated with or made entirely of shells, feathers, whole birds or bird parts, fur (including amateur taxidermy), ferns, moss, seaweed, nuts, pinecones, and so on. These are all natural materials, which, for the most part, required the maker to collect the objects in the wild, or as near to the wild as she could get. They also required the maker to study these objects with both an artistic and scientific eye. The qualities required of the maker result in objects that reflect cultural values concerning the natural world.

¹ Evidence of the relationship between domestic architecture and nature can be found in Kenneth Ames, *Death in the Dining Room And Other Tales of Victorian Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992). For a primary source example see Jacob van Falke and Charles C Perkins, *Art in The House: Historical, Critical, and Aesthetical Studies on the Decoration and Furnishing of the Dwelling* (Boston: L. Prang and Co., 1879). Katherine C. Grier discusses pet keeping in *Pets in America: A History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). Also see James Serpell, *In the Company of Animals: A Study of Human-Animal Relationships* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1996). Finally, for examples on the popularity of science in the last half of the nineteenth century, see David Dobbs, *Reef Madness: Charles Darwin, Alexander Agassiz, and the Meaning of Coral* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005).

² For further discussion of these concepts see Nancy Dunlap Bercaw, “Solid Objects/Mutable Meanings: Fancywork and the Construction of Bourgeois Culture, 1840-1880,” in *WinterthurPortfolio* 26:4 (1991); Beverly Gordon, “Victorian Fancywork in the American Home,” in *Making the American Home: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Material Culture*, eds. Maryilyn Ferris Motz and Pat Brown (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988); Katherine C. Grier, *Culture and Comfort: People, Parlors, and Upholstry, 1850-1930* (Rochester, N.Y.: Strong Museum, 1988).

³ Over half of the objects I studied were housed in the collection of the Strong Museum, Rochester, New York. Journals include *The Delineator*, *Godey's Lady's Book*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Harper's Bazar*, *Ladies' Floral Cabinet*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Peterson's Magazine*.

Borrowing from literary genres, I categorize these objects in this paper based on implied function and meaning: *fantasy*, *sketch*, and *scientific*. *Fantasy* nature fancywork alters natural objects into new, often whimsical, items that are particularly humorous or bizarre. The *sketch* mimics a common style of nineteenth century women's literature describing daily life in an informal writing approach much like that of a personal letter or diary. Albums of seaweed specimens collected on vacation or fashion plates pasted over with collected shells portray an interpretation of the creator's daily interaction with nature. With *scientific* nature fancywork, the maker participates in the emerging world of natural science. Although most women could not participate professionally in scientific endeavors, domestic fancywork allowed exploration of this area in a culturally acceptable fashion.

Let me begin within the world of imagination, strange creativity, humor, and play found in *fantasy* nature fancywork. In an 1988 paper, Beverly Gordon found a relationship between ephemeral materials and motifs, miniaturization, and masquerade – fancywork “costumed” to appear as another object type. These are all suggestions of play and non-serious work, allowing fancywork to become “a symbol of the desire for something beyond the mundane and repetitive reality of domestic life.”⁴ Furthermore, Nancy Dunlap Bercaw also saw this relationship in her 1991 “Solid Objects/Mutable Meanings” article as she writes that “women often softened or deigned harsh realities by transforming the world around them.”⁵ Through the making of fantastical nature fancywork, natural objects were “improved upon” through artful arrangement, careful selection, and control.

Despite entries of advice in popular literature to observe and accurately reproduce forms from nature, authors and creators sought to diverge from this pattern. Many extant objects simply deviate from the natural form through the use of unrealistic color, such as vivid blue painted flowers on an otherwise staid brown seed wreath. However, there are a number of extraordinary published instructions to make nature fancywork objects that strangely combined forms in an unexpected way.

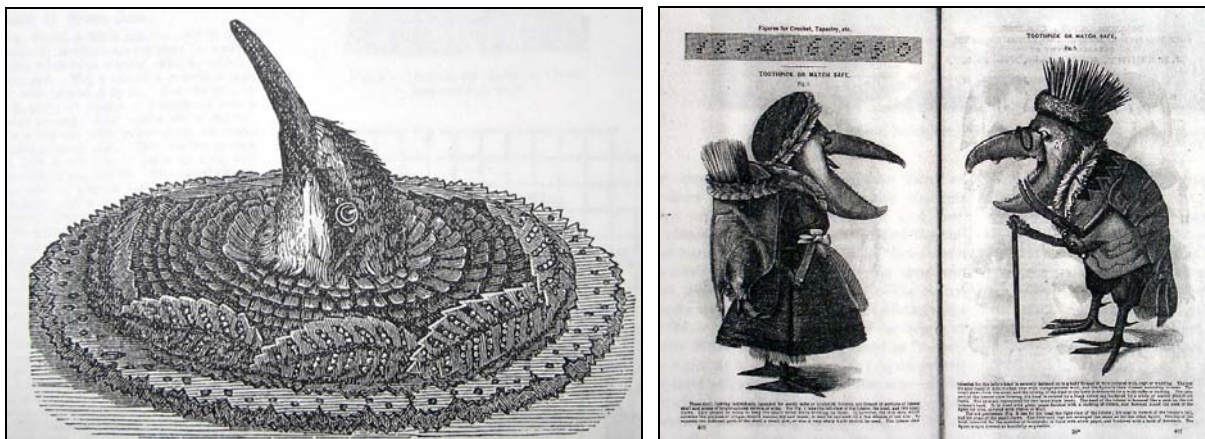


Figure 1 (left). “Penwiper” Godey’s *Lady’s Book* 77 (August, 1868), 164.

Figure 2 (right). “Toothpick or Match Safe” Godey’s *Lady’s Book* 74 (May, 1867), 406-7.

In figure 1, a humming bird’s head seems to burst through pinks of fabric and beaded leaves at a startling angle. This juxtaposition of a diminutive and fast-moving bird used as a decorative

⁴ Gordon, 60-63.

⁵ Bercaw, 243.

writing accessory borders on absurdity. Additionally, take, for example, the “improvements” made to lobster shells in figure 2. There is clearly whimsy and a sense of humor in these kitchen-scrap-turned-kitchen-servants-to-be-on-hand-with-toothpicks-or-matches. The claws become faces, the legs rearranged and elevated to anthropomorphic proportions.⁶ These objects speak to the fact that even nature was not off limits to flights of fancy. Natural objects could be combined in new ways to decorate functional objects or completely reassembled to form a new type of creature altogether. Making these fantasy objects was one more way that middle and upper class women found a way to fulfill their roles in Victorian society by adding culture, taste, and class to all things she touched.

The *sketch* was very often an embellished version of the author’s life, not quite fiction, but not quite author-tell-all autobiography.⁷ This term adequately fits the function of this next set of objects, which serve as physical manifestations of memory and experience.⁸ These memories are of daily life, special outings, or travel, with each handmade object acting as a remembrance of the experience or person.

The Victorian parlor was often filled with *memento mori*, and this sense of permanence beyond the grave was also evident in the preservation of beloved pets. Growing numbers of Americans welcomed small creatures into their homes in increasing numbers starting in the mid-nineteenth century. They began becoming companion animals as well as objects kept for aesthetics, novelty, and social status. Owners took delight in training these creatures, cultuaizing them.⁹ Yet, delight did not stop at the pet’s death. Notice that the title of the engraving in Image 3 is “The Pet Bird.” At first glance, this bird seems very much alive in this engraving, but, as shown by the ghost-image of a glass dome, this “pet” is a taxidermic version of its former self – still meant to grace the parlor with its beautiful plumage, but no longer its song.



Figure 3. W. E Tucker, “The Pet Bird” *Godey’s Lady’s Book* 44 (January, 1852), frontispiece.

⁶ The Strong Museum in Rochester, New York has approximately 6 of these lobster dolls. Many in their collection are doing playful things such as playing cards, the violin, and bagpipes.

⁷ For an example of a novel-length sketch, see Carolina Matilda Kirkland, *A New Home – Who’ll Follow? Or, Glimpses of Western Life*, ed. Sandra A. Zagarell (New Brunswick : Rutgers University Press, 1990, reprint 1839).

⁸ Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, “Why We Need Things,” *History From Things: Essays on Material Culture*, eds. Steven D. Lubar and W. D. Kingery (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993).

⁹ Katherine C. Grier, *Pets in America*.

I have studied two strikingly similar objects to this illustration. The preserved canary housed in the Strong Museum no longer has its history.¹⁰ However, a very similar canary object from Villa Louis, a historic site maintained by the Wisconsin Historical Society, has an interesting background that speaks to the relevance of such objects. The Villa Louis canary was the beloved pet of the women in the Dousman household residing in Villa Louis, a mansion on the shores of the Mississippi River in Wisconsin. This cherished bird passed away in the early 1880s, but Nina Dousman, the family's matriarch, had it preserved so the family could continue to enjoy the bird's, now somewhat diminished, presence.¹¹ By keeping a pet and creating a taxidermic display after its death, families successfully transformed a part of the natural world into a cultural object twice over: first as a trained pet and second by preserving it from the natural processes of death and decay.

Another type of *sketch* nature fancywork are keepsakes, particularly “piece-of-the-rock” souvenirs a visitor might collect. Keeping albums, a popular pastime for much of the nineteenth century, allowed their makers to preserve daily and special experiences. Although there were many types of albums, in general terms, the album served as a semi-public method for keeping edited aspects of life: a visual version of the *sketch*. The pages were filled with all manner of ephemera and collected materials. They are “material manifestations of memory.”¹² Additionally, these album pages, when collected in a place other than home, also function as souvenirs. The souvenir's purpose is a physical embodiment of another time and place. This object's “physical presence helps locate, define, and freeze in time a fleeting, transitory experience, and bring back into ordinary experience something of the quality of an extraordinary experience.”¹³



Figure 4. Sea Plants gathered by Mrs. Charles Penfield in Bridgeport, Connecticut, circa 1870-1890. Private Collection, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Photo taken by author.

¹⁰ Object number 82.1077 The Strong Museum. Rochester, NY.

¹¹ Michael Douglas, interview with author, Villa Louis, March 2, 2006.

¹² Susan Tucker, Katherine Ott, and Patricia P. Buckler, eds., *The Scrapbook in American Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 3.

¹³ Beverly Gordon, "The Souvenir: Messenger of the Extraordinary," *Journal of Popular Culture* 20 (1986): 135.

Certainly the pages from this seaweed album do just that. Image 4 is the first page of a seaweed album which was collected by Mrs. Charles Penfield in the waters of Long Island Sound, to the south of Bridgeport, Connecticut. Between 1860 and 1890, over 20 references to creating seaweed images appear in the studied popular women's periodicals, home manuals and crafting books.¹⁴ In *On Longing* Susan Stewart depicts souvenirs as detailed stories, and explains how souvenirs can portray past events.¹⁵ Souvenirs of this type carry with them the experience of a special time on the shore. These seaweed album pages were created by submerging watercolor or blotting paper beneath the water's surface, artfully arranging the seaweed on them, and, finally, cutting the stem of the plant. The papers were then allowed to partly dry in the sun and finished by pressing. Collecting shells was a similar activity, and as the authors of *Ladies' Fancywork* suggest, "Those who can enjoy the pleasure of the trip to the seaside . . . will have little trouble in collecting many beautiful shells. When it is possible to examine coral reefs, quantities of the most beautiful shell-fish will be found; and by washing sea-weed various tiny shells of rare beauty may be secured."¹⁶ Clearly the act of collecting and experiencing nature is just as important as the making of an object that commemorates just such an experience. The creation seaweed album pages required a considerable time outdoors in the water, and certainly memorialize its collection to the viewer and makers, alike. Collecting seaweed, coming in contact with nature, and being able to relive and relate that experience to others through an object is an important part of displaying the album.

Women's periodicals not only contained advice on how to make *scientific* nature fancywork, but often included articles on the natural sciences. From 1860 forward, the natural sciences gained stronger footholds in American culture and education. Much can be attributed to Jean Louis Agassiz, a Swiss biologist who began teaching at Harvard in 1846, and to others who embraced his philosophies. Robert Brooks writes that "by his lectures, his writing, his founding of a great museum, [and] above all by the force of his personality, Agassiz broke through the barriers between the scientist and the layman . . . In so doing, he disseminated a general understanding and a love of nature."¹⁷ Although Agassiz most commonly wrote for a more scientific audience, he also toured the lecture circuit and published a number of articles for general interest publications such as the *Atlantic Monthly*. Other periodicals took up the same theme, incorporating scientific study and principles into the popular press. An article on microscopes featured in the March, 1862 issue of *Godey's Lady's Book* trumped fiction and travel articles in the same issue. Furthermore, *Godey's* also published a six month series of front page articles explaining shells, their ecology, and taxonomy.¹⁸ All quite serious subjects for the woman who is looking to make fancywork with them.

¹⁴ For examples see "Album Picture," *Godey's Lady's Book* 71 (September, 1865), 260; or Mrs. A. M. Holdingsworth, "To Prepare Sea-Mosses," *Peterson's Magazine* (August 1860), 147; and Eva Marie Niles, *Fancy Work Recreations. A Complete Guide to Knitting, Crochet, and Home Adornment*. (Minneapolis: Buckeye Publishing, 1865) 275-6.

¹⁵ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984).

¹⁶ Mrs. C. S. Jones and Henry T. Williams, *Ladies' Fancywork. Hints and Helps to Home Taste and Recreations* (New York: Henry T. Williams, 1876) 162.

¹⁷ Paul Brooks, *Speaking for Nature: How Literary Naturalists from Henry Thoreau to Rachel Carson Have Shaped America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980) 87.

¹⁸ This series ran from August to December of 1856. The articles are quite scientific in nature, explaining ecology and Linean taxonomy.

Close observation of nature, not infrequently with a scientific eye, was considered paramount to the making of nature fancywork. Authors of fancywork instructions encouraged their readers to take live flowers apart, label their pieces, and consult botanical guides before craft-making. Pattern pieces were made from tracings of actual petals and leaves for wreaths made with paper, feathers, leather, and the like. Live examples were even encouraged for the making of shell flowers, where no cutting or shaping of the material was required.

Yet scientific observation did not stop with the pattern for the end-product. Fancywork instruction authors also encourage their readers to label and sort the material components to their crafts. In regards to shell-work, the authors of *Ladies' Fancywork* advise readers that “what ever the purpose to which the shells are to be applied, it is always advisable to assort them into their several species, and classes.”¹⁹ In some cases, it seems that the craft-making came secondary to the knowledge gained by close observation of nature – merely a pretty and functional way to use up the remnants of study.

The display of the natural world could also be found in another place besides the home: The American Museum. Because of women’s experience with making things, museums often employed them to make some of the very first dioramas. The diorama started to win favor within museums in the early 1870s because they were easier for the public to understand, and captured their imagination more than monotonous drawers and cabinets.²⁰

One woman who emphatically embraced taxidermy and museum display was Martha Maxwell, a Denver Colorado hunter, taxidermist, and museum owner. Over the course of about fifteen years she amassed an almost complete collection of animals native to that state, killing and stuffing almost every one of them herself. In 1876 the state of Colorado invited her to display this collection and answer the public’s questions about it at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition. Her helper at the Exhibition, Mary Dartt, wrote Maxwell’s biography, and the article that accompanied this illustration for *Harper’s Bazar*.²¹



Figure 5. “Mrs. Maxwell’s Rocky Mountain Museum,” *Harper’s Bazaar* (November 11, 1876), 729.

¹⁹ Jones and Williams, 162-3.

²⁰ Mary P. Windsor, *Reading the Shape of Nature: Comparative Zoology at the Agassiz Museum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

Edward P. Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History) 1979.

²¹ Mary Dartt, “Mrs. Maxwell’s Rocky Mountain Museum” *Harper’s Bazar* (November 11, 1876), 729-30.

Other like-minded women, although perhaps less ambitious, undertook similar endeavors. A display, now housed in The House on the Rock Museum in Spring Green, Wisconsin, encases the taxidermic efforts of Mary Bates. While parts of this case are not original, Bates assembled her collection of ducks, owls, eagles, and song birds into a similar arrangement in her home in 1881. Similarly, smaller domed cases densely filled with a compilation of song and field birds were popular in parlors.²² While taxidermy was never as popular an occupation as Berlin wool work, it nonetheless held enough interest to publish several editions of home taxidermy guides geared towards women and abbreviated advice in women's periodicals. The book and articles did not, however, recommend that women trap and kill the specimens they meant to mount. Cats and the household's young men could be employed for that task. Like other forms of fancywork before-mentioned, close scientific study of living examples was required before the task of preserving and arranging.

While the scope of nature fancywork object types, materials, and techniques are wide-ranging, they reveal important nineteenth century attitudes about nature and the natural world. These objects functioned as a way for women to apply their cultured touch to the world, and embellish it, adding humor and wit. They also functioned as an autobiographical device, capturing the experience of being in nature, allowing the maker and viewer to remember and relate. Finally, nature fancywork represents a subset of a larger trend towards popular interest in the sciences. They allowed women the choice to participate in scientific endeavors as playful armatures, or serious students in an emerging professionalized field which, too soon, left them behind.

²² Examples of this type of work can be found in the Wisconsin Historical Society, object numbers 1969.170.4 and 1982.71; The Strong Museum, object numbers 74.2456, 74.515, and 82.609; and at Villa Louis.