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## "LITTLE TRIFLES": UNDERSTANDING VICTORIAN FANCYWORK

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As professionals working in museum and academic settings, many of you have probably found yourselves feeling at times like "poor cousins" -- textiles simply do not garner the same prestige as other types of artifacts and art forms. I now find myself in a situation where I feel like an even poorer cousin: although I am involved with textiles of all kinds, I find myself particularly fascinated or compelled by a type of textile-related artifact that is rarely considered seriously, even by textile historians. I am speaking of fancywork, specifically of small items such as tidies, wallpockets, sewing cases, flowerpot covers, and penwipers. Such items continue to engage time and attention, even today, but were especially prevalent in the nineteenth century. Instructions for fancywork filled the pages of women's magazines and manuals, and "fancy fairs," where the items were sold for fundraising purposes, were ubiquitous and profitable events. Fancywork once filled the Victorian parlor and boudoir, and fills the shelves of our museums today. The items are frequently dismissed as "silly little things" and "useless" time fillers -- Geoffrey Warren, author of A Stitch in Time, even pronounced them a waste of intelligence and a sign of limited imagination (p.16). Such contemporary judgements preclude real analysis, however, and do not take the items on their own terms. These sewn and stitched objects remain as nonverbal "documents" that tell us about the reality of the Victorian women who made them, and we must learn to read their expressive story.

I will return to the objects themselves momentarily, but wish to begin with a consideration of terminology. No satisfactory definition of fancywork is available. Present-day dictionaries refer to it simply as decorative or ornamental needlework -- it is contrasted with plain work -- but there is no indication of boundary, no point where plain becomes fancy, and no delineation of technique or media. Today fancywork is often thought of as embroidery, knitting and crochet, but in nineteenth century usage the term was inclusive, and shell, wax, leather and even pine cone work was referred to the same way.

Fancywork is an interesting term, one which is full of inherent contradictions, and captures the ambivalent Victorian attitude toward women and work. Women did of course work in actuality, but given the strong distinction and separation between the outside world of work and the inside world of the home, women were by definition not "workers." Most of their tasks carried other names, but light, ornamental and non-pecuniary efforts -- those that involved cloth and similar materials -- were dubbed needlework or fancywork. Embroidery sections in the periodicals



were called "work sections," "work departments," or "work baskets." "Women's work" displays at county fairs were filled with needlework rather than vegetables or other products of agricultural labor. The "fancy" part of the term, however, implies almost the opposite of work. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a fancy is a fantasy or mental conception; it is synonymous with imagination. It is also a whim, a supposition resting on no solid ground; an entertainment; an invention; or something bred or manipulated into a more beautiful form (pp. 60-62).

Nineteenth century epithets for fancywork -- "airy nothings," "trifles" -- imply that the objects were indeed seen as whims, as ephemeral things that didn't rest on solid ground. Many were made of the most ephemeral materials, such as paper, straw, gauze, or egg or lobster shell. There were also ephemeral motifs. The most frequently suggested iconographic image for embroidery designs in the 1860s was the butterfly -- a clear symbol of flights of fancy, and non-earthbound matter (Figure 1).

Consider also a Swiss cottage suggested in Godey's Lady's Book in April 1867 as a receptacle for wafers or pins (Figure 2). This was to be made of flexible perforated board, the material popular as a base for woolwork mottoes. It was a small item -- 2"x2" at the base; 4" high. It was to be stitched with colored silk, and steel beads added to the roof could serve as "little stones." There was a trellis on the balcony, and a gallery and chimney could be added "according to fancy."

The cottage is the epitome of the Victorian fancy. A large, solid building has been miniaturized and translated into a material that is antithetical to the original, as it is flimsy, and literally full of holes. The building is romantic and exotic (it is foreign), yet cozy (it is a cottage). Romantic detailing such as the trellis is retained, but practical detailing is omitted. The building has been tamed and domesticated, in other words; it is a little box, reduced in power, and it is feminized, no longer stone and mortar, but paper and silk.

Other man-made objects were also domesticated as they were transformed into fancywork. A bellows was made into a pincushion; a bell was softened into a penwiper; a coffee mill was made as a tape measure case (Figure 3). Natural phenomena were domesticated as well. Pine cones were mounted; animal hooves were stuffed with velvet; pumpkins were made to serve as work cases.

There were constantly instructions for objects that "fancied" nature -- made it into something better than the real thing. The flowerpot cover illustrated in Figure 4 was designed to simulate coral. It was made with cotton cord, dipped in tinted wax and artfully arranged. One material was often made to appear as another -- feather worked so as to imitate fur, wool sheared and singed so as to imitate moss. Soft soda crackers, popular about 1880, were made of padded white silk, stitched at intervals to create the indentations of the cracker, and scorched to simulate

the baking.

Objects were also disguised as other objects. Penwipers were dressed as animals or plants; matchboxes masqueraded as drums, pincushions appeared as shoes.

Transformation of this type must be understood as an exercise in fantasy, as an amusing, theatrical game. These "masked" objects allowed for experimentation with reality, a symbolic if limited experimentation with a different identity. Sewing was work, but it was made into play. Tools were made into toys. A miniature cottage was like a dollhouse; a penwiper fashioned as a parasol or cap was like a doll's accessory. Actual dolls were even incorporated into fancywork, and made into "little companions."

Today we tend to value or appreciate certain kinds of fancywork items, those that were clearly functional or complex technically, or that conform to contemporary taste. It is in those items that were fondly referred to as "little trifles" and "superfluities," however, that we are brought closest to the Victorian reality. Women used needle and thread, cardboard and silk to move, in a symbolic and socially acceptable way, beyond the tedium and routinization of the domestic realm to which they were largely confined. Work tools were transformed into amusements that helped pass the time and transport the maker to other times and places. (It is significant that the only time fancywork objects were regularly made by men is when the men were confined also, either to ships on long sailing voyages, to hospitals or to prison camps during periods of war.) If we move beyond our twentieth century viewfinder, we can appreciate the poignancy in fancywork objects. Fancywork involved long hours of painstaking effort and in many ways epitomized the confinement that helped generate it, but it was an inventive form, and simultaneously represented an escape from confinement and an imaginative vision.

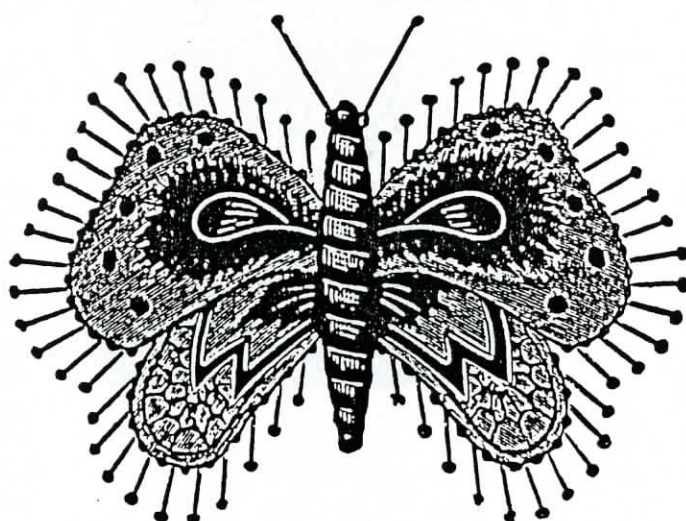
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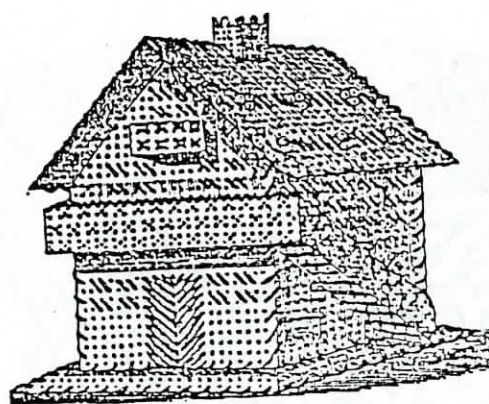
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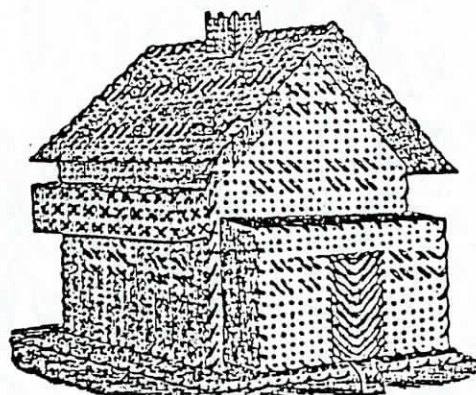


BUTTERFLY PIN-CUSHION.

Figure 1



Front of Swiss Cottage.



Back of Swiss Cottage.

Figure 2

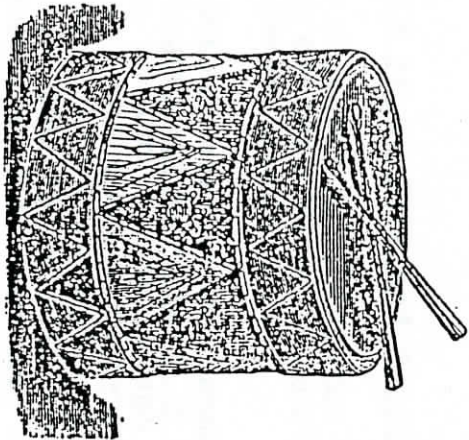


Figure 3

## CORAL CASE FOR FLOWER-POTS.

BY MADENOISELLE ROGER.

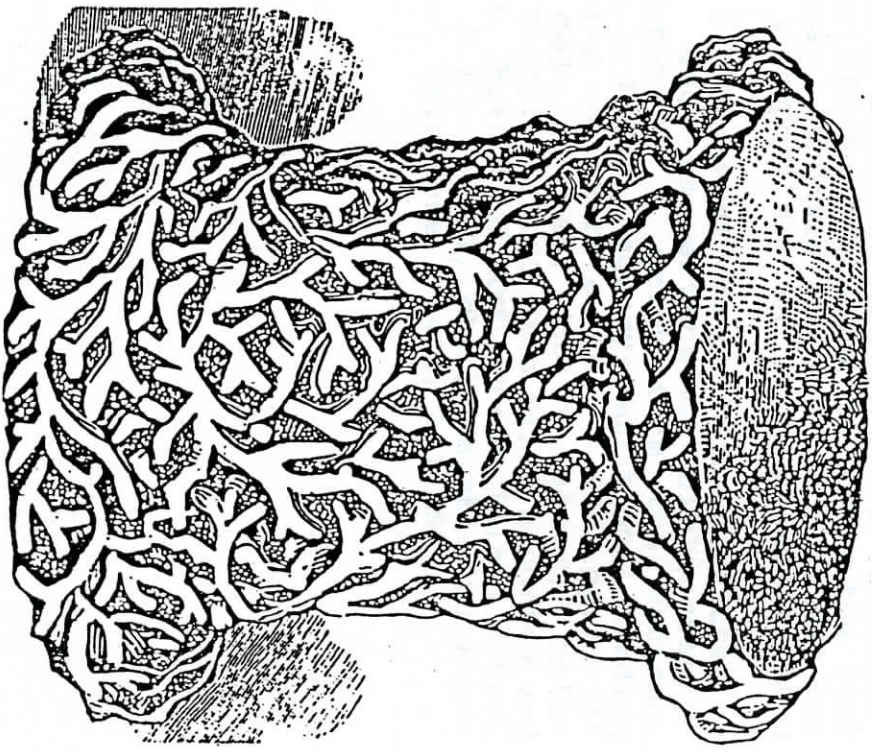


Figure 4