Domestic Power.

Eighteenth Century Needlework and Female Transcendence

In the archives of the Quilters Guild lies the 1718 patchwork coverlet. Created from an array of colourful silk fabrics and encrusted in a variety of motifs, at present, the coverlet is described as the earliest dated example of British patchwork.¹ Little is known about the identity of its creator, however, a recent investigation of the coverlet has revealed a numbering system for the unique design. While this particular investigation has disclosed the level of thought, focus and intellect embedded within the material coverlet, it can reveal something further: the embodiment of a great female mind.² Mrs Delany, a well-known figure within eighteenth century research on domesticity and craft, never hid her passion for creativity. It is well documented that she turned her private ‘closet’ within the home into a space for creative activities, including needlework.³ In a sharp contrast, the great Mary Wollstonecraft expressed her distaste for sewing on numerous occasions, once stating that “confining girls to their needle shuts them out from all political and civil employments, narrowing their minds.”⁴ Hannah More, social reformer and Bluestocking member, was of a similar state of mind; she believed that types of needlework were imitations of true ‘femininity.’⁵

Despite offering varied opinions and insights, a mutual feature of needlework was that it was fundamentally a domestic pursuit and female activity within the eighteenth century. Surviving documents and correspondence reveal that needlework was utilised for a variety of purposes; for repairing, as a social activity or as a reflection and coping device for domestic confinement.⁶ These examples are reflected in Mary Wollstonecraft and Hannah More’s theories which centralise the

¹ Heather Audin, Patchwork and Quilting in Britain, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013) 14.
² Ibid.
³ Ruth Hayden, Mrs Delany and her flower collages, 2nd Edition (British Museum Press, 1992) 95; Mark Laird & Alicia Weisberg-Roberts, Mrs. Delany and Her Circle, (Yale Center For British Art, 2009); Rachel Wilson, Elite Women in Ascendancy Ireland, 1690 – 1745: Imitation and Innovation, (Boydell & Brewer 2015); Emily Morse Symonds, Mrs Delany (Mary Granville) A Memoir, 1700 – 1788 (E.P Dutton and co., 1900) 153. Mary Delany, The Autobiography and Correspondence of Mrs Delany, Rev. from Lady Llanover’s Edition, (Roberts Brothers, 1882)
notion of gender inequality and female suppression within domestic spheres. While additional first-hand accounts from the eighteenth century can provide support for their claims, Wollstonecraft and More’s views which surround needlework can be deemed as somewhat partial. A variety of aspects integrated within needlework, such as expression, are overlooked in their writings and, possibly, their thoughts. Expression is the central focus of this study and needlework will be analysed through a lens of optimism and empowerment. A variety of eighteenth century records which disclose the art of needlework and its creations will be probed, revealing that the activity was fundamentally an outlet for female expression and transcendence. Specifically, the idea that needlework was a form of domestic confinement and associated with ideals of a constructed femininity will be overruled. These conclusions will be enabled through exploring Wollstonecraft and More’s alongside with the contrasting praise and descriptions of needlework found in letters and records of surviving needlework.

Eighteenth century needlework is widely studied in modern day research and the underlying functions and significance of needlework has been examined. Bridget Long and Amanda Vickery have characterised needlework as a reflection of individual narratives and have focused on the art of sewing as embodying female expression beyond aesthetic and material displays of the craft. Their compelling views, along with other contemporary methods, provide a base for this study, however a philosophical approach will be also conducted. Transcendental themes will be integrated for the purpose of revealing more individualist and metaphysical

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dimensions of eighteenth century needlework and to pave the way for future research and collaborations of different disciplines.

In keeping with the themes of domesticity and female suppression, elements from Cynthia Wall’s study “Gendering rooms”\footnote{Cynthia Wall, “Gendering Rooms: Domestic Architecture and Literary Acts” Eighteenth-Century Fiction, Vol 5, No. 4: 1993.} will be converted and applied to the process and creations of needlework. Wall took a literary approach and examined a range of eighteenth century novels, including “Roxana”\footnote{Daniel Defoe, \textit{Roxana: or, The Fortunate Mistress} (1724)} to probe transcendental elements attached to the female protagonist and the domestic space she occupies. “Transcendental” in this sense relates to the notion of higher powers beyond what is considered normative, a meaning that will reflected in the entirety of this study.\footnote{Douglas Harper “Transcendental”, Online Etymology Dictionary, 2010. http://www.dictionary.com/browse/transcendental} One way in which Wall examines and illustrates this concept is by revealing silent power relations and developments between the characters and their ‘considered’ assigned and restricted spaces.\footnote{Cynthia Wall, “Gendering Rooms: Domestic Architecture and Literary Acts”, 350-351; Daniel Defoe, \textit{Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress}, 1790.} This methodology will be transposed and applied to authentic accounts of needlework in a way which reveals the activity’s and handcrafted creation’s ability to transcend and control the domestic space. This study will not discuss eighteenth century literature in detail; it will only apply particular themes of power and spatial transcendence to accounts and examples of needlework in various ways.

This study compromises of three main, and interconnecting sections. The first section will illustrate and examine the perceived link between needlework as a feature of ‘femininity’ and female suppression. Both Mary Wollstonecraft and Jean Jacques Rousseau’s strict views on needlework will be analysed. While the two publically disagreed with the other’s ideologies, a mutual feature of their theories is that needlework encouraged and exercised forms of gendered beliefs and, for Wollstonecraft, inequality. The activity restricted women’s ability to obtain and rationalise political and societal opinions.\footnote{Mary Wollstonecraft, \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Woman}, 99, 244. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Emile, or On Education, (1762)} The aim of this section is to challenge these eighteenth century ideologies with the combined support of Amanda Vickery.
and the examination of the 1718 coverlet. To apply transcendental themes, it will be demonstrated that women utilised needlework to develop and exert their personal beliefs which transcends the notion of female restriction.

The second section will build on these findings; it will focus on the ‘higher powers’ of needlework: the embodiment of a female essence within the material object. The dimensional aspects of needlework will be revealed. The activity allowed women to transcend both constructed gender confinement metaphysically, and physical boundaries of confinement found within the domestic sphere. This section will examine the life and work of Mrs Delany and the journey of needlework from its creation privately to its display in a public area of the home. The third section will turn to the contrasting and challenging views of Hannah More and other historiographical views concerning “aestheticized displays of home.” This section will have a particular focus on the normative view of needlework within middle rank and elite homes; the idea that aesthetic and monetary value was prioritised over creative power and expression of needlework. This section will also take into account context surround the Consumer Revolution and it will discuss the significance of craft and its development within the home. Examinations of further surviving needlework, including Elizabeth Montagu’s celebrated feathered needlework exhibition, will reveal that women were able to exert individual power throughout the domestic sphere regardless of class and material culture.
1. Gendered Identities: Confinement and the Needle

1.1 Eighteenth Century perspectives: Femininity and Needlework

Gendered qualities were prominent in the eighteenth century thought; both historical evidence and modern day research frequently attach needlework as a residing feature of femininity. Men were associated with what were considered ‘intellectual’ pursuits which included political matters while women were deemed to be nurturing, humble and delicate. Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778) was particularly vocal about his advocacy of these feminine qualities within his work, which is illustrated by the following passage.

Observe a little girl spending the day around her doll, constantly changing its clothes and continuously seeking new combinations of ornaments. Her fingers lack adroitness, her taste is not formed, but the inclination reveals itself. She adorns her doll and not her person. Nearly all little girls learn to read and write with repugnance. But when it comes to holding the needle, this they learn willingly. They imagine themselves grown in advance, and think with pleasure that these mays may one day serve to adorn them.

This passage both explores the qualities and expectations of a woman and demonstrates how they are bound within the domestic pastime of needlework. The quality of delicacy relates to fragility of the mind and body. The young girl is underdeveloped yet she is naturally drawn to certain gendered activities; she experiments with a doll to engage with aesthetic displays and embellishments of female dress. The girl is nurturing yet humble. She spends her day caring for the

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21 Jean Jacques Rousseau, Rousseau on Women, Love and Family, (UPNE, 2009) 77
doll; she “adorns” it over the experimentation and expression of her own mind and body. She internalises the childhood purpose of the doll, its aesthetic display and concludes her own adult purpose is to exercise these feminine qualities encompassed within the activity in order to fulfil certain expectations in her grown capacity.

Rousseau deems the three qualities as innate features of women which draws them naturally towards the art of needlework. The needle replaces the childhood attachment of the doll and it both represents and develops the ideal of delicacy. Partaking in needlework develops the “adroitness” of the fragile fingers and mind; women flourish in the skilful art of gentle stitching and craft-making. It represents nurturing as women grow and utilise needlework to construct and repair textile items to benefit their family and reflections of the domestic home. It builds on humility. The needle substitutes the childhood adornment of the doll; the activity of needlework encompasses creativity in the ability to construct dress and textiles to fit and embellish the human body. However, like the exclusive childhood priority of the doll, women are confined to the needle and lack thoughts or opinions on other subjects.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) believed that needlework encouraged and enforced female inequality. She disagreed with Rousseau’s innate qualities of femininity and claimed that women were born with intellectual capacities similar to men and that gendered qualities were nothing more than a societal construct. Needlework, according to Wollstonecraft, caused women to be ‘motionless’; the activity distracted their attention and capabilities of other, gender equal, functions. Her views on needlework are well documented within her revolutionary text *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) and can be summarised by the following clear cut statement: “confining girls to their needle shuts them out from all political and civil employments, narrowing their minds.”

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23 Gabriel Compayre “Jean Jacques and Education from Nature” 86, 89, 93; Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* 140.


Personal letters of women, dated before the publication of this text, support Wollstonecraft’s claim, which suggests there was a general consensus of gendered suppression. Specifically, letters provide evidence of individual feelings surrounding women’s, and domestic, restraint. On speaking about female education and domestic pursuits Anne MacVicar Grant penned in 1790:

Experience has taught me the evil of this. Kept constantly to my needle, I was childishly ignorance of everything else when I got the charge of a family. I found Mary in the same situation. But I have employed her in domestic matters and occupation and find her willing to please, that I hope she will conquer all indolent habits.26

This short extract reveals a mass of information. The first section is similar to Wollstonecraft’s claim both in content and structure, it expresses the restriction of the mind while occupying the needle. The description of needlework being an “indolent habit” both mirrors and develops Wollstonecraft’s “motionless” attachment to needlework, suggesting that women are aware of their worldly potential. While MacVicar’s letter focuses on domestic restrictions and not the “political and civil” faculties expressed in Wollstonecraft’s ideology and public writing, the extract can be considered more insightful due to being a first-hand account in a personal capacity. Specifically it is an individual admission from an individual to a familiar peer, detailing negative feelings and female ignorance which has stimulated by a build-up of long term needlework.

The extract also builds on the process and experience of needlework by unknowingly agreeing with, and then refuting, Rousseau’s theory. The three gendered qualities can be deciphered within this passage. The phrase “childishly ignorant” and the context surrounding needlework demonstrates the recognition of a childlike persona, a delicate and fragile mind having a limited focus on a particular activity. Nurture and humility are bound by the desire to look after a family and to care for others, the characteristic of “willing to please” represents Mary’s favour of

needlework over the wellbeing, and countering negative tendencies, of herself. However the interchangeable narrative, the expression of MacVicar’s individual experience and the discussion of Mary’s situation, demonstrates the repurposing and overruling of gendered qualities and their negative associations. The letter marks the realisation of MacVicar’s other domestic responsibilities and her actions in fulfilling them. For instance the notion of humility is quashed; MacVicar becomes confident and vocal about her adult purpose and uses her own experiences to deter others away from the “indolent” or motionless effects of needlework.

MacVicar’s letter ultimately provides a new perspective to eighteenth century needlework which was not considered by Wollstonecraft or Rousseau. The letter confirms that needlework was not innate or accepted by all women, rather it was the social expectation associated with needlework which caused feelings of individual restriction. However, although MacVicar became aware of the distorting effects of needlework, the activity as interpreted by Wollstonecraft somewhat succeeded in limiting the knowledge available to women. Specifically the phrase “childishly ignorant” reveals the suppression of the adult mind, constricting faculties and reverting to a basic, childlike state.

Wollstonecraft built on her ideas of needlework and restriction. Focusing on the process of the pastime she claimed: “This (needlework) employment contracts their faculties more than any other by confining their thoughts to their persons.”27 Wollstonecraft’s statement provides a new dimension and more clarity to her overall perception of needlework. By taking part in the activity women internalise, and become obedient to, gendered constructs which then restricts natural, and equal, capacities. These ideas can be illustrated within a letter written by Hester Mulso Chapone, who, although a close associate of Wollstonecraft, had a contrasting view on needlework and encouraged a certain expectation of a middle rank woman. On speaking about needlework Chapone penned it as “a necessary part of a woman’s duty. Absolute idleness is inexcusable in a woman, because the needle is always at

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hand.” The first section of this extract is particularly interesting as it confirms the normative views of femininity which are grounded in Rousseau’s ideology, namely the gendered activity and duty of the adult woman. It also poses a sharp contrast to MacVicar’s views on femininity and needlework. While MacVicar claimed the activity to be “indolent”, Chapone believes needlework to avoid and cure “idleness”, as well as alluding the needle to be an innate artefact. Although some eighteenth century women such as MacVicar became aware of needlework’s apparent negative tendencies, Chapone’s letter demonstrates an alternative factor which supports Wollstonecraft’s claim, that some women were influenced by, and internalised, gendered constructs.

1.2 Modern perspectives: The elevation and empowerment of needlework

While eighteenth century accounts claim, or allude to the idea that, women were confined by needlework, modern day research has opened doors to disclose further dimensions to the pastime. Amanda Vickery has executed a thought provoking insight: “while the seamstresses’ hands were busy, who was to say that her mind was not flying free?” The transcendental articulation of this statement allows needlework to be viewed in a revolutionary manner, as a metaphysical elevation and expression of individual ideals. It juxtaposes the restricted and occupied physical body, “the seamstresses’ hands” with the free flowing spirit of the mind. Yet the statement interestingly concludes a connection of the two. The art of needlework, its process and materiality, embeds female consciousness, that of a woman’s experiences, emotions and their identity. This contemporary insight poses a direct challenge to both Wollstonecraft’s and Rousseau’s fixed ideologies.

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29 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
surrounding restrictive, or gendered, female capacities. Needlework can be viewed alternatively; it enables women to exercise all the capacities of the individual woman.

Bridget Long has discussed a similar concept to Vickery within her extensive studies of British patchwork and the art of needlework.33 Long has utilised first-hand accounts of historic needlework to demonstrate human embodiment within needlework and its impact within the domestic sphere.34 The emotional attributes of needlework is a key theme within Long’s work; this includes the emphasis on personal reflection and empathy with others, enabled by the activity.35 The extract from Anne MacVicar’s letter, although critical of needlework, can be utilised to support Vickery and Long’s theories. The letter voices MacVicar’s frustration with her experiences with needlework; she is able to realise, rationalise and reflect on the conflict between her mind and the activity as well as expressing her emotions to her peers. Her mind ultimately overpowers the activity by exercising its independence and fulfilling desires, yet it requires partaking in the activity to realise both the restriction and potential of female capacities.36 In this sense, needlework can be considered to be an outlet for female expression and strive for elevation, despite its confining associations and effects. Vickery and Long neither disregard nor directly challenge the domestic confinement of eighteenth century women. Their work clarifies that women were able to utilise needlework in a way that expresses personal experiences associated with grounded societal perceptions, an idea which again can be found through the interrogation of MacVicar’s letter.37

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33 Bridget Long “Anonymous Needlework: Uncovering British Patchwork 1680 – 1820” (Submitted to the University of Hertfordshire, 2014)
1.3 Identity and Expression: The examination of the 1718 Coverlet

Cynthia Wall’s methodology surrounds gendered spaces within the architectural home and how conflicts are depicted and overcome in eighteenth century literature. The idea of “gendered” rooms and hierarchy are popular topics in eighteenth century research. A particular area of investigation is whether women in a middle and upper rank home had, and challenged, assigned and restricted spaces within the domestic sphere. This concept runs parallel with the gendered activity of needlework and its restrictive perceptions. Wall claims that female characters within eighteenth century literature are able to exert and develop their presence and individual power through assigned and restricted spaces. For instance, the titular character, Roxana builds on her “human desire to define and control space and regards rooms as the extension of herself.” Applying this claim to needlework, the notion of desire and control relates to a woman’s natural tendency to go towards the needle and the belief it is one’s duty as expressed by Rousseau and Hester Mulso Chapone.

Wall’s transcendental articulation of this statement can be combined with the liberal characteristic of needlework provided and probed by Vickery. New dimensions of “elevated ideals” can then be revealed. Needlework transcends ideals of confinement and obedience and reflects that women have various characteristics other than constructed, feminine ideals found in eighteenth century thought. This relates to the “extension” of the self and further methods in executing control. Women realise and tease their ability to demote, adapt and repurpose the construct of femininity by partaking in an “assigned” activity. Analysis of the 1718 coverlet can illustrate and develop these ideals.

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38 Cynthia, Wall “Gendering Rooms: Domestic Architecture and Literary Acts”,
Figure 1 “The 1718 Coverlet” and close up section of the Lion and Unicorn motifs, The Quilters’ Guild Collection, York.
Despite the identity of its creator being a mystery, the coverlet’s aesthetic and underlying details reveals clues of identity and personal expression. The array of colourful motifs share a natural theme; rural flowers, birds and other animals imply a domestic lifestyle in the countryside and two smaller gendered figures located in the upper central of the coverlet suggest a small family or the union of marriage. The consideration of these aspects can link to the notion of extending the self; the creator utilised needlework to both project identity - to tell an individual story freely.

To build on this concept, the coverlet both challenges eighteenth century gendered constructs and Mary Wollstonecraft’s general views of needlework being restrictive. Specifically the 1718 coverlet demonstrates that a constructed femininity and the suppressive nature of needlework are mutually exclusive and that the activity was used to build and adapt these beliefs. The intellectual capacities of its creator has been revealed by a prior x-ray investigation into the coverlet; the results demonstrate an intricate and mathematical pattern which formulated the overall precise, geometric design. With this finding in mind, needlework has been used in two ways; as an encouragement of women to realise and exercise intellectual capabilities, and therefore, overruling domestic suppression, and to team a perceived feminine activity with equal gendered capabilities.

A further example of this idea is the expression of political beliefs, a direct opposition to Wollstonecraft’s fixed view of political restriction. Equidistant from the upper central motifs of a man and woman, small sections either side of a lower diamond motif depict an embroidered lion and unicorn. The motifs are positioned on their side which echoes themes of heraldry. With the date of the coverlet in mind, this may construe personal support for the 1701 Act of Union between England and Scotland or perhaps depicting the creator as a loyal Royalist.41 Needlework was utilised to a woman’s advantage; the creator took control of their assigned “space” or activity in a way to overrule normative views and to express individualism. To

further this claim, the location of the embroidered political motifs reveal specific transcendental approaches. The lion and unicorn motifs are somewhat hidden within the coverlet; they are encompassed within a busy and varied motif pattern and not instantly visible to the observing eye. The political expression, which represents the transcendence of a woman’s opinions and understanding, is both silent and peaceful. Rather than a vocal statement or public writing, the gentle hand of a woman has stitched thoughts and opinions in a free manner through an accepted and encouraged domain. The notions of delicacy, motionless and humility in this sense have been used to a woman’s advantage; the perceived “constructed” woman is present yet she is also knowledgeable and unassuming. She has controlled the domain of needlework and her own gendered perceptions.

2. Transcending normative boundaries of femininity

2.1 The spiritual and material: The embodiment of Needlework

The first section has provided many insights into the underlying aspects of eighteenth century needlework. Analysis of letters and the 1718 coverlet has provided challenges to the normative views regarding eighteenth century needlework, as identity and female expression have been illuminated and exercised through the activity. Modern day views have enabled the realisation of these insights; they can also be subject to further examination in order to reveal new dimensions and approaches in understanding needlework. For example an in-depth consideration of Amanda Vickery’s statement of the “free flying of the mind”42 has revealed higher powers of needlework, namely its enlightening features of the female form. The particular statement can also be examined from a new point of view surrounding material creation. The lives of women and their unique identities which have elevated and realised in their own female thought and the process of needlework become a fixed element of the handcrafted creation. With this in mind, needlework therefore expresses, embodies and projects female essence. Needlework

allows this female essence to move beyond constructed social and physical boundaries; the mind has flown and has inhabited a new domain which enables transcendence.

Historians of eighteenth century needlework have tended to solely focus on how the activity either confirms or transcends ideals of confinement and the perceived construct of femininity. Although both Vickery and Long’s methodologies surrounding the elevation of ideals has been successful and thought provoking, other historians have implied that elements surrounding expression and power in needlework may in fact be paradoxical. Art historian Rozsika Parker, author of the monumental text *Subservive Stich*, agrees that the activity of needlework “provides a source of power for women” yet she also claims that historic needlework was somewhat contradictory and “indissolubly linked to their (women’s) powerlessness.” Parker’s views imply that although needlework may be viewed as an activity of elevation, the attempt of female transcendence is nothing more than a response and adaptation of needlework’s restrictive and inferior associations. This suggests that beliefs of female inferiority is overriding and constant; women partaking in the activity are falling for needlework’s trickery and become involved in a never ending cycle of female suppression and suppressive action. This particular mind-set could be attached to, and illustrated by, Hester Chapone’s letter, in which the praise of needlework can be considered as an individual way of accepting and coping with domestic confinement. Chapone’s statement, the “absolute idleness is inexcusable in a woman, because the needle is always at hand” best illustrates this claim and adds further context and support to Parker’s overriding view of needlework.

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46 Ibid, 11.
47 Ibid.
On one hand, Chapone’s statement moves beyond the boundaries of physical and mental confinement associated with the eighteenth century gendered perceptions similar to Wollstonecraft and Rousseau. Yet on the other hand Chapone has admitted that without needlework her life and character would be redundant and somewhat powerless, an opinion she has projected and generalised with all women. With this in mind, Chapone’s vocal praise and attachment to needlework can be considered a device, a device which overcomes internalised feelings of idleness and general, eighteenth century female suppression. Partaking in needlework, as suggested by Chapone, represents the crafting of a new persona and individual purpose. It ironically suppresses the reality of women and gendered perceptions while at the same time, creates a paradox; a never-ending cycle unable to be broken.

To build on this inference regarding the paradoxical notion of needlework in relation to modern research, it is important to note that the tone and underlying truth of Chapone’s eighteenth century letter may never be deciphered and therefore the true emotions and factors prior, during and post needlework can never be proved. This suggests that historiographical research surrounding needlework may also be subject to a never ending cycle of confinement and all instances of transcendence may be rejected with uncertainty. This could be the case for the analysis into the 1718 coverlet as circumstances surrounding the coverlet’s creation and state of mind through the needlework remain a mystery.

Historiographical views, such as Parker’s claim of paradoxical needlework, which create this uncertainty appear to stem from eighteenth century theories which connect the notion of “powerlessness”49 with the construct of femininity. For instance, Parker’s view mirrors Rousseau and Wollstonecraft’s implied views that women are ‘motionless’ and confined to needlework solely for decoration and domestic obedience.50 For Rousseau, the concept of immobility relates to the quality

of humility and the belief that females had an innate “desire to please.”  

Wollstonecraft’s text details the suppressing nature of domestic sewing in which women became motionless through activity, they were “neglected, and forced to sit.”  

Previous analysis into the 1718 coverlet can potentially be an illustration of Wollstonecraft’s claim and adds support to Parker’s paradoxical ideas of needlework. The high level of detail within the coverlet, its precise separate pattern and clear stitching suggests a full time focus and a possible goal of displaying the craft. The creator can be imagined as sitting, fixated on the project, generating a finish representative of harmony and domestic life through eloquent silks and neat motifs.

Cynthia Wall’s feature of the “extension of the self” can be utilised to demonstrate an alternative way in which needlework can transcend boundaries of eighteenth century needlework without falling subject to paradoxical notions and modern day uncertainty. Specifically the extension can combine with the higher powers of needlework, that of embodiment of female essence, which overrules the concept of female immobility. The needlework, formulated and embedded by identity becomes a physically active object.

Within Wall’s literature, occupying a domestic space extends the presence and significance of the individual; their presence and ideals are projected upon the walls, transcending their original boundaries. In transferring this architectural notion to the moveable creation of needlework, the female essence is able to be contained, and in some cases recognised, in different domestic and exterior spaces. The lifestyle of Mrs Delany (1700-1788) can illustrate this idea effectively.

2.2 Private to Public: Mrs Delany’s closet

Mrs Delany (Born Mary A. Granville, 1700-1788) was a prominent and active figure in eighteenth century crafts. Although she created decorative gifts and

51 Rozsika Parker, The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the making of the feminine, 124.
52 Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, 108.
55 Ruth Hayden, Mrs Delany and her flower collages, 11-14; Mark Laird & Alicia Weisberg (eds.) Mrs Delany & Her Circle, 1-18.
displays for the benefit of others, studies of Mrs Delany demonstrate that “the desire to please”\textsuperscript{56} was not as strict, humble and prescribed as figures such as Rousseau suggests. Rather Mrs Delany’s active nature was equally evident in her creations, embedding her own characteristics, taste and spiritual development.\textsuperscript{57} Specifically her crafts surrounded her connection to nature; her paintings and sketches depict natural landscapes while the majority of her embroidery is inspired by florals.\textsuperscript{58} The aesthetic of all her creations, the bright colours and unique designs are obvious expressions and extensions of her elaborate character. Mrs Delany’s statement regarding the design of court dresses also supports and illustrates her original aesthetic: “the vanity and impertinence of dress is to be avoided.”\textsuperscript{59} In a similar way to the 1718 coverlet, this statement demonstrates that Mrs Delany was a free thinker and encouraged, individual taste in creations rather than the distortion of fashionable and expected ideals.

Mrs Delany had a dedicated space for her creative projects: “a comfortable closet”\textsuperscript{60} within her home, which included “working tools, stores for painting, books and needlework.”\textsuperscript{61} The division of public and private space is a popular theme within eighteenth century research with scholars often analysing architectural elements of the home in relation to gender and gender projections.\textsuperscript{62} Closets ranged from small chambers to dressing rooms, they were private spaces exclusive to each gender and were often connected to larger, public spaces of the home. Modern research has analysed and built upon these particular structural divides, often presenting the characteristics of women within the public and private space to be both distinctive and contrasting. Middle rank women, as depicted in art and documented in writing, are associated with ideas of forced sociability and affective

\textsuperscript{56} Rozsika Parker, \textit{The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the making of the feminine}, 124.
\textsuperscript{57} Mark Laird & Alicia Weisberg (eds.) \textit{Mrs Delany & Her Circle}, 4-10.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Clare Brown, “Mary Delany’s Embroidered Court Dress) in Mark Laird & Alicia Weisberg (eds.) \textit{Mrs Delany & Her Circle} (Yale Center for British Art, Yale University Press, 2009) 66.
\textsuperscript{60} Ruth Hayden, \textit{Mrs Delany and her flower collages}, 95.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
façade, whereas women in the private sphere, such as Mrs Delany are more often expressive with individual taste.

Mrs Delany’s closet is widely known in contemporary research. However there is limited scholarship on the relationship between Mrs Delany’s crafts and their creation without the private space. Ruth Hayden has unknowingly addressed this gap through the documentation of Mrs Delany’s crafts and designs. One item with Hayden’s text is of particular interest, a set of embroidered seat covers. Hayden provides the journey of these seat covers, from their creation within Mrs Delany’s private workspace to their public display within the welcoming drawing room. By considering the journey of these seat covers as a “free flying of the mind,” an embodiment of female essence is not only revealed but developed. Mrs Delany’s needlework, embedded with true representations of thought, character and skill is present and displayed both within the private and public domains. The needlework, embedded with true representations of thought, character and skill is present is displayed both privately and publicly. This demonstrates a woman’s ability to transcend the physical boundaries of the home.

The notion of transcending physical boundaries can reveal a new dimension to Wollstonecraft’s claim that needlework creates “motionless” beings. Despite the possibility of other women being “forced to sit” and conduct needlework, the ‘mobile’ characteristic of the material object is able to transcend the ‘confining’ female position. Specifically the mobile characteristic demonstrates a metaphysical extension of the self. The higher powers of needlework, both the embodiment and expression of female essence, not only moves throughout the domestic sphere physically, it can also glide without the presence of mobility from a physical human body. The identity and personal expressions of the needlework creator are transposed from the mind to an external object. In this sense, women become a

63 Ruth Hayden, Mrs Delany and her flower collages, 88.
65 Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, 108.
spiritual presence in their needlework creation, an everlasting phenomenon contained within an external, material object.

This insight of spiritual and material transference is particularly compelling as it is applicable to modern research surrounding eighteenth century art and material culture. For example, various studies surrounding Mrs Delany’s life and creations have noted and praised her unique characteristics which centre round her surviving craft projects.66 By applying Wall’s methodology of projecting individual essence within spaces, further significant aspects of needlework can be revealed. For example, the higher powers of needlework can reveal and project the spiritual presence of Mrs Delany and her lifestyle, a notion which can then be internalised and documented by modern historians. The long term significance of female craft can also be highlighted, namely the extension and recognition of individual values. Ultimately, the transcendence of eighteenth century women is everlasting, an instance which is beginning to be uncovered and built on.

3. **Needlework as an elevation of female status**

3.1 “Keeping up appearances”; The aesthetic of the home

The analysis of surviving needlework and letters have demonstrated that eighteenth century needlework challenges both domestic confinement and the construct of femininity in various ways. However other historiographical views continue to place pressure on this recognition. Hannah More (1745-1833) shared elements of Mary Wollstonecraft's view on female restriction yet she accepted the process and need for domestic sewing. Ultimately, More had a more lenient approach to needlework; on one occasion she once praised Mrs Delany for reflecting personal character and surroundings within her crafts.67 However More’s central issue with needlework was that it commonly influenced by what she phrased as

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“aristocratic decadence.” Specifically More believed that the 'exhibition' of crafts found within middle rank and elite homes were imitations of true femininity; they lacked genuine female character and expression and were purely present for traditional and aesthetic values. Although More’s criticism surrounds designs and aristocratic ideals of the early eighteenth century, elements of her theory are applicable to the later Consumer Revolution, an era of opportunity for consumerism and increased domestic comfort.

To echo More’s negative view on domestic exhibitions, “consumer” materials such as cotton, linen and embroidered fabric patterns were desired for fashionable displays within the home as they reflected “exotic associations,” visual wealth and status. Cotton was utilised for practical purposes. Later coverlets were primarily made from the material due to its durability and comfort, outranking earlier textiles such as wool. The Calico Act of 1721 banned the importation and sale of these desired and popular materials in England. Historical evidence and modern documentation reveals various loopholes of this law which includes accessing materials through black markets and the interpretations of exotic designs such as embroidered motifs. These facts illustrate the prominence and desire of material culture and the extent society went to achieve and replicate ideals within the domestic home.

Aside from premade furnishings and items made and purchased outside the home, women would often have had the role of dealing with luxurious materials in order to imitate culture and display exotic influences. This can be illustrated by the ‘Tree of Life’ coverlet depicted below. Like the 1718 coverlet, the identity of its creator remains unknown, however the use of Irish linen suggests that the item was created in Britain.

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73 Heather Audin, “Patchwork and Quilting in Britain” 17.
74 Ibid, 17.
Figure 2: “The Tree of Life Coverlet” 1780 – 1799 and close up section of the central motif. The Quilters’ Guild Collection, York.
Following the Calico Act, linen from Ireland was imported freely to England which created further opportunities to access fashionable and desired goods.\[^{75}\] The floral and bird motifs within the *Tree of Life* coverlet are stitched together from various cotton prints and they imitate Indian symbols.\[^{76}\] This particular design became popular after the original importation of Indian material and culture to Britain.\[^{77}\]

These aspects surrounding the *Tree of Life* coverlet hark back to More’s claim of imitation. Unlike Mrs Delany’s extension of individual values and the 1718 coverlet depicting individual expression, other forms of needlework may be an influence and an extension of solely material culture. Individual expression of the creator may be neglected and other modes of expression, such as aesthetic displays may have become the prominent focus of the needlework. Ann Bermingham provides further information relative to this claim in the following passage.

“The rise of the accomplished woman went along with the domestic confinement and the tendency to transform the home into an aestheticized space of commodity display.”\[^{78}\]

The use of the term ‘accomplished’ in this context relates to the wealth of the woman rather than her creative talents.\[^{79}\] Bermingham has hinted at a potential conflict within the conscious woman which, again, reasserts the confining associations of needlework discussed previously. In particular, the notion of conflict builds on Roszika Parker’s claim of “paradoxical needlework.” While the woman is elevated in

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\[^{76}\] Heather Audin, *“Patchwork and Quilting in Britain”* 20.

\[^{77}\] Ibid.


society through the means of status and wealth, she may have become trapped by societal expectations of needlework, femininity and cultural commodities. As a coping device, the woman became driven by aesthetic and material expressions which was then exercised throughout the domestic sphere. This potentially allowed women to have a sense of purpose and domestic power while ultimately conforming to societal ideas.

3.2: Power and Space: The accomplishments of needlework

Bermingham’s views on eighteenth century needlework appears to be a common ground between female power and the construct of femininity. To reiterate the “rise of the accomplished woman”\(^{80}\) implies that a previous conflict has been settled, with eighteenth century women agreeing with societal influences. Bermingham’s claim is applicable to both historic examples and contemporary debate as it depicts a combination between aesthetic desires, driven by external influences, and the internal power and creative skill of the woman. Arguably the creativity of women may be perceived as equal to the wealth and status of women in this particular sense, yet the promotion and development of “needlework accomplishment” is enabled by instances relative to cultural and gendered constructs.

Bermingham’s central focus on wealth and cultural commodities overlooks the further significance of needlework and female status. Specifically, aesthetic displays within the home can be explored in an alternative way which can depict genuine domestic power and independence of the woman. This concept involves regarding female accomplishments as exclusively their creative talents and needlework skills. Keeping this notion in mind, an aspect of the consumer revolution can also be applied and examined: the dependence on female creativity in order to achieve aesthetic value and comfort within the home. Wall’s notion of “gendered spaces”\(^{81}\) can be applied once more in this context, with the extension of realisation


\(^{81}\) Cynthia, Wall “Gendering Rooms: Domestic Architecture and Literary Acts” 352.
and command of spatial power being the key attributes.\(^{82}\) In this sense, needlework can transcend the ideals of confinement and obedience through associations with luxurious materials and culture within the home. In a similar fashion to research which depicts Mrs Delany’s lifestyle and expressive character, women can be viewed as free figures within the domestic sphere. They have control of spatial characteristics; the imagined and desired décor is materialised through mind and action.\(^{83}\) Elizabeth Montagu’s unique feather hangings can illustrate this idea beautifully.

As a reflection of worldwide culture Montagu dedicated a room in her home to display her exotic collection of feathered needlework.\(^{84}\) Hundreds of guests, including a royal visit in 1791, came to view this original and flamboyant display.\(^{85}\) The general reviews of the house and Montagu’s décor were positive and are summarised as a “gorgeous exuberance and palace of chaste elegance.”\(^{86}\) This statement of review illustrates the full extent of Montagu’s power and control as her unique needlework achieved the goals of demonstrating status culture within the home. Furthermore, while personal expressions and embodiment may be neglected or suppressed by aesthetic displays or cultural expressions, the reviews of Montague’s feather hangings and the study of surviving needlework demonstrate that the power of needlework can still be deciphered through research. This allows the positive and ‘elevating’ significance of needlework to still be recognised, despite possible distortions of expression caused by cultural features.

### 3.3 Home Comforts: Crafting the domestic sphere

The study of aesthetics and material culture and the relationship with needlework has primarily focused on middle rank and elite women. Investigating

\(^{82}\) Ibid, 350.

\(^{83}\) Amanda Vickery, “Theory & Practice of Female Accomplishment” in Mrs Delany & Her Circle, 107.


\(^{85}\) Ibid, 123; Amanda Vickery, “Theory & Practice of Female Accomplishment” in Mrs Delany & Her Circle, 104.

\(^{86}\) Amanda Vickery, “Theory & Practice of Female Accomplishment” in Mrs Delany & Her Circle, 106.
the notions of domestic “comfort” can also illustrate similar ideals and is applicable to all eighteenth century homes. The reason that the focus has been on material culture and higher ranks is due to rarity of lower rank needlework. The practicality of consistent use and methods of eighteenth century recycling limits the chance of lower rank and everyday needlework examples surviving. In addition the low literacy rates of lower rank women restricts textual evidence surrounding needlework and craft. However historians such as John E Crowley and Bridget Long have discussed the significance of “physical comforts” such as bed sheets and have provided evidence of coverlets being a consistent feature in all ranks of society.

In considering these aspects it becomes clear that the eighteenth century home relied on female craft for the various levels and ideals of comfort. Furthermore, the research surrounding comfort demonstrates that all eighteenth century women had a natural power of control and significance within the home, a concept which is represented by needlework. Hannah More’s theory that needlework was the “imitation” of societal ideals can then be deemed as somewhat of a partial view. The realisation and significance of female craft presents a genuine feminine ideal, in the form of needlework. In regard to domestic comfort of lower rank women, needlework and its creations depict a true representation of their surroundings and life. These aspects fundamentally overrules the normative view of femininity which is found in both eighteenth century theories and contemporary research. Ultimately the activity of needlework transcends notions of confinement; it allows females to exercise their domestic power and character which elevates their status within the home.

Conclusion

The intention of this study was to demonstrate needlework as an outlet for female expression and power and to challenge eighteenth century views and

perceptions of domestic confinement. Through applying transcendental themes, this study has revealed further significance and power of needlework. Section one outlined the construct of femininity and how needlework emphasised these ideals. This involved the eighteenth century theories of Rousseau and Wollstonecraft who had contrasting opinions of needlework. Cynthia Wall’s method of transcending “assigned spaces” was connected with Amanda Vickery’s suggestion that needlework was a liberal outlet for women. Women utilised the ‘assigned’ activity of needlework in a way to express their individual character and experiences which in turn, demotes and reconstructs the notion of femininity. This was supported by the study of letters and surviving needlework. Rousseau’s claim of innate love for needlework was overruled as letters demonstrate a distaste for sewing while the 1718 coverlet depicts a political symbol, allowing females to express their individual beliefs.

Section two detailed the significance of the material object. Needlework creations contained and revealed individual female essence which became a moveable presence. This was illustrated by the lifestyle of Mrs Delany, whose unique character and presence is extended to and recognisable within her embroidery. The journey of Mrs Delany’s creations from a private space for craft to other domestic spaces allows the realisation that females were able to transcend both physical and mental boundaries of confinement. Furthermore contemporary research is able to decipher character and expression of surviving needlework which demonstrates the long term significance of needlework. Section three detailed Hannah More’s distaste for aesthetic displays within the home which presented a fundamental challenge to the claim of true expression. Females may have been influenced by and suppressed by material expressions, overpowering their own characteristics. In utilising features of the consumer revolution it was demonstrated that females had domestic power and control; they were significant figures in creating material displays and levels of comfort. Ultimately needlework reveals the significance of females which overrules normative perceptions of femininity.
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