Embroidered sociability: Elite material culture, gendered handiwork and emotions, c. 1720–1820

This paper focuses on handiwork elites and genteel classes made c. 1720–1820, and the emotions linked to handicrafts, the making of artefacts and the objects themselves. It explores gendered learning and making of handiwork, positive and negative emotions linked to and conveyed through artefacts, as well as sociability and spaces and places for handiwork.

In early-modern Europe, handiwork was an essential part of the elite lifestyle and daily life. Girls and boys learned to sew and turn; manual work was essential for elite culture and its transmittal from generation to generation. The objects made were often intended as gifts, given as tokens of friendship, but also as visual symbols of the skills and status of their makers. My paper draws from Swedish and Finnish examples, illustrating Northern experiences of pan-European practices of elite sociability, material culture and handiwork. The sources for the research are textual, visual and material. Letters and diaries are explored as well as paintings, engravings and objects such as samplers, bridal blankets and woodturning lathes.

In spite of its omnipresence in aristocratic and genteel classes’ lives, handiwork is remarkably little known; its representations and meanings for early-modern elite culture are not completely understood. However, such scholars as Roszika Parker, Angela Rundquist, Amanda Vickery and Anna-Maria Åström have stressed the importance of handiwork in elite women’s lives and for the reproduction of aristocratic and genteel classes’ cultural codes. On the other hand, feminine needlework and the activities of seamstresses, milliners and mantua makers has been the subject of lively interest among scholars, since sewing was an occupation or source of livelihood for a great number of women in early-modern Europe. Furthermore, handiwork as an elite everyday practice could be juxtaposed to the gendered reading and writing habits amongst early-modern European elites, which has evoked voluminous academic research during recent decades.

This paper challenges the popular image of elite handiwork as empty decoration by exploring the meanings of handiwork for elite lifestyle, sociability, material culture and emotional well-being. Handiwork was a seminal part of elite sociability in eighteenth-century Europe. Home was the axiomatic place for handiwork, but royal courts were also places for elite handicrafts. Moreover, handiwork offered both women and men mental places and spaces, evoking emotions and embodying them into the artefacts made. Whilst most of the literature and research on handiwork is on women’s activities, I will show that men were also occupied with similar time-consuming hand-based pursuits. Comparisons of women’s and men’s activities will offer new readings of gendered activities, emotion and spheres, stressing the similarities and overlapping themes instead of separate experiences and spheres.
The paper is divided into three parts: 1) Learning handiwork, 2) Emotions in artefacts and gendered practices, and 3) Spaces and places for handiwork.

**Learning handiwork**

The importance of handiwork for elite girls’ and boys’ education in early-modern Europe is undeniable. However, learning needlework was vital for girls’ education, whilst for boys’ education manual skills never became as essential a gendered practice as needlework was for girls. Through handiwork, the girls learned not only sewing, but also diligence, duty and obedience, which was transmitted from centuries of female intellectual fellowship and work. The number of samplers made by young girls and saved through centuries by families and museums tells their incontestable story of the importance of needlework, manual skills and artefacts in women’s lives from generation to generation.

A significant object for girls’ learning was a sampler (slide 1), which was usually executed when girls were around eight to ten years of age. At that time, they had already practised needlework for years. Samplers exposed the girls’ skills in needlework and acted as a rite of passage to more demanding techniques and more delicate materials. In Europe, there were hundreds of model books on the letters and symbols used on the samplers, and girls may have been given a choice of their own on the themes of the symbols. In Sweden and Finland, the samplers also served as a family tree, recording in embroidered initials several generations of family members (slide 2).

It is easy to imagine a young girl’s emotions while completing her sampler: joy and contentment on fulfilling a task and a need for approval and acceptance from her parents and a recognition of the frustration ahead of difficult and time-consuming work. However, to find young girls’ emotions in sources is far more challenging because samplers seldom verbalize them. Mentions of handiwork and emotions are rare in Swedish letters and diaries; thus, they have to be filtered out from occasional mentions. Nevertheless, the number of samplers in museum collections and private homes suggests that they were highly esteemed objects that families kept and cherished. In Swedish and Finnish museums there are more than two hundred samplers dating from the period 1720–1820.

The making of a sampler was a highly gendered pursuit, in elite circles executed exclusively by girls, who thus expressed their obedience and diligence towards their parents in stitched form. The symbols executed on the samplers can be interpreted as expressions of anticipation of the girls’ future lives as women, mothers and managers of their own households. Whilst it is perhaps inconceivable for a historian to evoke emotions associated to samplers without written sources explicitly recording them, it is clear that the girls making a sampler were expected to feel obligation, duty and diligence.

Jacobina Charlotta Munsterhjelm was the daughter of an officer belonging to the nobility and local gentility in South-Eastern Finland. She began to write a diary in 1799, when being 13 years old. Her journal offers us a glimpse of elite girls’ learning practices and, implicitly, the pedagogical and educational ideals of elite girls’ upbringing, experiences and emotions. She describes almost daily her sewing and handiwork. She does not mention sewing a sampler, which may have been completed earlier, probably before beginning her diary. Along with needlework, diary-writing and improving writing skills and expression was a part of education.
Jacobina Charlotta’s diary also reveals the pleasure she took from working together with her sister and cousin and the enjoyment of planning and executing new garments. However, in her extremely scarce daily diary entries, she never expresses her feelings or emotions in words, but they can be read between the lines. The repetitions and frequency on which Jacobina Charlotta records her sewing and other handiwork compared to her reading habits and letter writing or gardening suggests that her enjoyment of handiwork was considerable.

Written sources on elite boys’ or young men’s learning of handicrafts, such as wood turning or needlework, are rare, even though both crafts were practised by elite men. In the 1760s, the then 16-year-old Count Johan Gabriel Oxenstierna, later poet, diplomat, courtier and civil servant, wrote in his diary enthusiastically about wood-turning. Turning was a popular craft among royals and aristocrats in 18th-century Europe. Woodwork and manual skills were also valued by intellectuals and pedagogical writers, such as Rousseau, whose *Émile ou De l’éducation* (1762) was well known amongst the Swedish aristocracy. Rousseau argued for the importance of manual skills for the education of children, using carpentry as an example of an educational occupation. For Rousseau, apprenticeship of manual skills was essential for a child’s education, being an ideal way to socialize children to society. A short diary entry from 1766 reveals Oxenstierna’s enthusiasm for his manual work: ‘All these days were divided between the book and the lathe, but I confess [that] the greater part was given to the latter’.

In elite boys’ education, discipline, patience and artistic endeavours were displayed through wood-turning, drawing and music. Woodworking tools required more manual coordination and skills than holding a needle, which is why boys learned to turn in adolescence. Boys rarely learned to sew in their childhood, acquiring skills in embroidery as adults. Nevertheless, Göran Oxenstierna, son to the aforementioned Johan Gabriel Oxenstierna, did learn to sew as a boy. In 1805, when Göran Oxenstierna was eleven, he sewed patch squares of which he made a stool. His father wrote with pride in his diary, addressed to his wife, that the son’s sewing was very accomplished.

Johan Gabriel Oxenstierna himself became interested in designing embroidery patterns and making lace in his 50s, whereas dragoon Carl Johan Aminoff learned embroidering in the 1750s, after his 25th birthday. Aminoff used his skills in embroidery as social capital along with his skills in music and conversation, evoking an (often erotic) interest in genteel women, who brought their needlework to social occasions. ‘[…]. both Madame and I blushed quite often when our eyes met. […] Sometimes she worked by her worktable, where I assisted her, of which she was not little surprised. […] That way I passed my days in enviable pleasure’, he wrote in his memoirs. (*Slide 3*)

The gendered practices of handiwork and the power connotations linked to feminine and masculine spheres of life are well illustrated in these examples of embroidering men. For men, needlework was pleasant leisure, whereas for women it was an everyday task, performed from an early age as an interpretation of feminine virtues and skills representing not only the girls themselves, but also their families. Nevertheless, fine embroidery clearly was an opportunity for mix-gendered socialising, valued by both sexes. Furthermore, individuals could fully consciously use their skills in hand-based activities, such as embroidery, to flirt and to induce erotic tension.

*Emotions in artefacts and gendered practices*

If genteel and elite women took an interest in needlework, they were presumably highly skilled, having practised it from childhood (*slide 4*). Meeting requirements of female accomplishments and
virtues, visualized in needlework, was undoubtedly an emotional process for many, since handiwork played a key role in elite culture and because practising it took at least several hours a day. Not all women had time for more handiwork than the unavoidable plain sewing and mending. Especially women running large households and estates had less time for needlework than young girls, women in old age or women from the highest levels of the aristocracy. Elite women often lamented in their diaries the lack of time for sewing. Even though women, even prolific diary writers, seldom explicitly expressed their emotions in written form, it is probable that those who wrote about the lack of time for sewing longed for sewing or at least felt an obligation for arranging time for it. Otherwise, they presumably would not have chosen to write about it at all. It is also important to understand that not all women enjoyed handicrafts, regarding it as an unavoidable task, first in the form of formative and educative learning of stitches and making of a sampler, then as seminal and obligatory part of elite sociability.

Amongst the many objects elite women were skilled in making were aprons, blankets, carpets, dresses, fire screens, furniture covers, handkerchiefs, pocket books, tapestries and waistcoats. Elite women donated to churches frontals and other ecclesiastical textiles they made, manifesting the significance of religion for the elite culture, as well as the social status and feminine virtues of the producer of the textiles. Thus, women’s work had both profane and sacral aspect. Needlework, especially elaborated embroideries, represented a woman’s accomplishments, diligence, taste and the status of her family, visible in church, at home or on a person. The objects women made embodied representations and emotions of their makers, carrying them further to those who received and used the objects, visualizing through them at least some of the emotion embedded in their making.

In many women’s lives fitting out a trousseau for marriage was both a vital and time-consuming endeavour, on which young women presumably conveyed their hopes and fears for their future life as married women. The trousseau, carefully prepared sometimes years before nuptials, embodied traditions and cultural codes in objects. Richly embroidered linens – bed sheets, pillowcases, tablecloths and napkins – conveyed cultural codes of nobility between generations (slide 5). Jacobina Charlotta Munsterhjelm records in her diary the care with which her sister Ulla prepared her bridal linens in 1800. Elite girls embroidered linen to build up a trousseau, which would display their feminine skills and capability as the mistress of a household throughout their lives. Angela Rundquist has stressed the importance of linen marked with embroidered initials as powerful markers of elite women’s pride in their rank, skills and family tree. Fine cloth for bridal linen was considered as necessary luxury, through which the marrying couple manifested their union, taste and the bride’s skills, whether the bride-to-be embroidered the linen herself or the work was commissioned from professional embroiderers. In 1776, when Countess Sophie von Fersen prepared her wedding with Count Adolph Ludvig Piper, the linen cloth for her trousseau cost 4,300 dalers, more than the price of an average country estate.

Not only costly, but time consuming the making of a bridal blanket (slide 6) was loaded with positive emotions, anticipation and delight. The joy of creating things together added to its importance as an essential part of an elite trousseau. The bridal blankets or marriage quilts were made of silk; they were quilted and richly embroidered. The technique of quilting and the size of a blanket meant that the work easily took months, even years, and was often performed by using a large frame around which several women could gather to work together. These were occasions for younger women to learn from elder women, about both needlework and women’s lives. The creation of the trousseau and bridal blankets should be seen as rites of passage between girlhood and womanhood. While women worked together embroidering and quilting a bridal blanket, young
men were also present socializing with them. Thus, the production of needlework offered possibilities for mixed-gender socializing and provided opportunities for both women and men to find suitable partners for possible marriages. Furthermore, exquisite handicraft decorated the bed in a room in which the newly married couple would spend their wedding night, and into which the bride, prepared for the night by female guests, and the bridegroom, accompanied by male guest, were lead. According to Angela Rundquist, the embroidered, lace-decorated sheets and the bride’s nightdress and nightcap were targeted more to impress other women than the bridegroom.

Though marriage was an ideal objective for women, not all elite women married. Naturally, marriage and getting married were loaded with various emotions, both positive and negative. Thus, needlework was closely linked to women’s life cycles and moments in which women moved from one life phase to another, from childhood to girlhood (sampler) or from unmarried to married woman (bridal blankets, bridal linen).

Spaces and places for handiwork

Examples of handiwork at home and at the royal courts suggest that far from being simply a domestic task, needlework was also a social and artistic accomplishment of elite women, performed in a variety of places and spaces. Needlework offered elite women a panoply of work from plain sewing to ambitious artistic endeavours. In mix-gendered elite sociability sewing, women conversed with each other or with men, listened to reading or worked silently. Handiwork was as manifold as any other form of women’s work. (Slide 7)

Handicrafts, especially needlework, is often linked to the domestic sphere and domesticity when explored amongst the elites, whereas for women earning their living by sewing, whether working at home or in a workshop, needlework opened a world outside home. Since the home was a key arena for female agency throughout centuries, needlework was naturally performed there. However, elite women moved around and had several places and spaces for their work, both at home and outside it. These ‘spaces for feeling’ could be both physical, in which individuals actually physically were, and mental, into which they could withdraw in their minds in emotional times.

For aristocratic women in 18th-century Europe, there were other places than home for handicrafts, such as convents and courts. I would argue, that royal and princely courts were more important places and spaces for female accomplishment and fancy needlework, especially ornate embroideries of luxurious materials, than previously recognized. In Lutheran Sweden, there were no convents, but the royal court was a significant arena for feminine handicrafts (slide 8). Queen Lovisa Ulrika and Princess Sofia Albertina were both accomplished needle workers, working on embroidered pictures, needle paintings, stool upholsteries and fire screens, or wall hangings and carpets, completed together with their ladies-in-waiting and maids of honour. The court was also a space for masculine crafts, since turning, clock making and drawing architectural plans had been regarded as suitable leisure for sovereigns since antiquity. Because woodwork paraphernalia was less mobile than needlework tools, it is possible that men did not work together in the same way that women did. In Sweden, King Adolf Fredrik, who was passionate about turning, had an atelier for his woodwork tools at the Chinese Pavilion (Kina slott) in the park of Drottningholm Palace.

At court, needlework, especially fine embroidery, was part of everyday sociability. In 1776, Chamberlain Baron Gustaf Johan Ehrensvard described in his diary an ordinary day at court; he wrote that female courtiers were engaged in endless needlework. The court painter Pehr Hilleström
illustrated a similar scene in 1779 in his famous painting on reading and conversing courtiers at Drottningholm Palace, where ladies-in-waiting and princesses sit by worktables with their handiwork.

**Conclusion**

Elite handiwork, the objects made, the emotions linked to these objects and in the making of them were a seminal part of the lifestyle of the high society. The handiwork was a part of everyday life and sociability, performed by both genders. Moreover, because of its central role in the lives of elites, especially in the lives of women, handiwork evoked a panoply of emotions from love and joy to resignation and frustration. Handiwork could also soothe emotions such as sorrow or tedium. Likewise, the objects that the elites produced evoked mixed feelings among contemporaries and continue to do that today, which is a significant reason to further explore early-modern elite handiwork.

This paper is based on a journal article ‘Embroidering women & turning men: Handiwork, gender and emotions in Sweden and Finland, c. 1720–1820’, *Scandinavian Journal of History* 2016 (forthcoming).