Crafting the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century

Both the problematic discourses of ‘professional/amateur’ and ‘public/private spheres’, and also the multifaceted hierarchies between the fine and the applied arts, have received substantial academic enquiry in the last thirty years. This is particularly true for the art historians researching the cultural activities of middle-class women in 19th-century Britain. Deborah Cherry, Clarissa Campbell-Orr, Janice Helland, Jan Marsh, and Lynne Walker, have made outstanding contributions, and have developed understanding of the complex relationship between the artistry of middle-class women and concepts of professional identity during this period. (1)

Crafting the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century: Artistry and Industry in Britain builds on this body of work, and is an excellent publication, which has the potential to significantly shape future research. It is edited by Kryriaki Hadjiafxendi and Patricia Zakreski and consists of twelve chapters, divided into three sections ‘Industrious amateurism’, ‘The artistic career’, and ‘The craft of self-fashioning’. Within these chapters, authors from a variety of scholarly fields explore the links between professionalism, gender, artistry and industry. Topics as diverse as: female keyboard étude players, the virtuosity of transparencies, the intricacies of crafting a literary identity, the craze for china painting, and the aunt and niece team who self-fashioned their personal and creative careers through meticulously planned fashion ensembles, are all discussed.

The main argument that connects these chapters together is in their joint demonstration that indicators of
professionalism shifted and changed throughout the century, and within different creative disciplines. It highlights that there were continued backlashes across the century against professional activities for women, and also the important role of the amateur. The book aims to dismiss the simplistic idea that there was continuous progress for middle-class women from amateurs into professionals during this period. *Crafting the Woman Professional* instead provides a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between gender, artistic labour, and creativity.

Divided into three parts, the first section ‘Industrious amateurism’ focuses on the links between amateur activity, gender, and industry. The first chapter, ‘Women’s work: the history of the Victorian domestic handicraft’ by Talia Schaffer discusses the mid-century proliferation of domestic handicrafts as a widespread hobby for middle-class women. Schaffer postulates that these hobbies expressed the dominant cultural interests of society and that the objects being created voiced a clear position regarding industrialism and political activity. More could have been done to draw out the personal significance these objects may have held for their makers. The next chapter, John Plunkett’s, ‘Light work: feminine leisure and the making of transparencies’, discusses the world of transparencies and feminine leisure. Although transparencies have received little scholarly attention to date, they were a central form of popular art in the late 18th, and early 19th centuries. They pervaded societal events, and were a constant fixture at pleasure gardens, balls, assemblies, lectures, theatres, fairs, and civic celebrations. Plunkett contends that the making of transparencies endorsed artistic experimentation and freedom for women.

The third chapter considers another perceived feminine accomplishment of the period. The reader is immersed into the realm of female amateur musicians in Elizabeth Morgan’s chapter ‘Pertinacious industry: the keyboard étude and the female amateur in England, 1804–20’. Morgan examines a genre of music that resembles nineteenth century conduct literature: that of keyboard études. She contributes to the current flourishing body of academic work dismantling tales of complete female containment during this period, and instead seeks to uncover how discipline and music making were actually practiced. Her research shows that pedagogical tools could be subverted, as this education inevitably developed the skill of women musicians. The final chapter in this section ‘Dresses and drapery: female self-fashioning in muslin, 1800–1850’ by Alice Barnaby focuses on see-through muslin in the domestic interior. Barnaby posits that muslin provided the opportunity for individual women to utilise their interior design skills, a precursor to the professionalisation of interior design in the late 19th century.

The second section of the book ‘The artistic career’ contains a series of chapters exploring the professional careers of women in wood drawing, china painting, design education, and painting, across the century. The first chapter, by Catharine Flood, is titled ‘Contrary to the habits of their sex? Women drawing on wood and the careers of Florence and Adelaide Claxton’. Florence and Adelaide Claxton were pioneers who established professional careers in the field of drawing on wood for the periodical press. This chapter benefits from basing its focus on a case study of these two women and Flood immerses the reader into the lived experiences of the Claxton sisters. Of particular interest is the evidence Flood uses to highlight the Claxton’s immense awareness, and indignity, at their subjugation in their positions as female artists, such as Florence Claxton’s sketches on the trials of being a female artist, and also the ways they negotiated commercial opportunities. Following on from this, Anne Anderson’s chapter ‘The china painter: amateur celebrities and professional stars at Howell and James’s “Royal Academy of China Painting”’ examines the blossoming craze for china painting and its connection to public exhibitions in London. China painting had a complicated status in the decorative arts, and tended to be seen as a suitable hobby for both amateur and professional women. They could contribute to the embellishment of the domestic, but also offered income for those needing a ‘lady-like’ profession. Yet Anderson details how the popular press regularly propagated the unprofessional and feminine tendencies of women in this field in particular.

The next chapter, ‘Creative industry: design, art education and the woman professional’ by Patricia Zakreski charts the rise of design education in England from 1837 onwards with focus on its development for the nationalised system of Schools of Design. The chapter argues that formalised design education gave creative women a more productive and positive way of thinking about their work. Design instigated debates about the rights of women to work, but also allowed women to think about the spheres of professionality they
wished to engage with. The final chapter, forebodingly titled ‘Dorothy’s career and other cautionary tales’ is by Pamela Gerrish Nunn. The book’s central argument is particularly well articulated within this chapter. From 1894 the Royal Academy Schools allowed female students to study life drawing, which had traditionally been a male-only activity. This has been seen as a crucial moment in many feminist art histories, yet thorough research into the years of 1893 and 1894 by Gerrish Nunn actually reveals a heightened campaign to reassert the amateur, dilettante tendencies of middle-class women artists. Gerrish Nunn evidences this through analysis of societal reactions to the novel Miss Angel (1875) and the feminising tactics of the Girl’s Own Paper, amongst other examples.

Part three of the book, titled ‘The craft of self-fashioning’, takes its historical parameters from around the second half of the 19th century, and creeps slightly into the early 20th century. It begins with Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi’s chapter about George Eliot and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, titled ‘Negotiating fame: mid-Victorian women writers and the romantic myth of the gentlemanly reviewer’. The chapter considers how George Eliot and Mary Braddon self-fashioned their identities as professional women writers. The two women utilised Romantic models of gentlemanly authorship from the 1820s in order to legitimise their professional positions and the chapter considers the problems that arose from these strategies. The next chapter ‘Crafting the woman artist: Ouida and Ariadne’ by Andrew King looks at the Victorian novelist Ouida and the novels she wrote pertaining to art and artistry. Valerie Sanders chapter “Mady’s tightrope walk”: the career of Marian Huxley Collier then traces the life of the painter Marian Huxley Collier who ‘summarises all the contradictions inherent in her position as a female artist in the second half of the nineteenth century’ (p. 227). Examples are provided such as the erasure of her name through marriage, and subsequent relegation to the ‘Artist’s wife’. Sanders explores Marian Huxley Colier’s complex relationship to 19th-century British society, her refusal to submit to neat classification, and the challenges she faced in her short career. The final chapter, by Ana Parejo Vadillo, ‘Living art: Michael Field, aestheticism and dress’ re-examines the lives of Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, the aunt and niece who wrote together under the joint pseudonym of Michael Field and also lived together romantically. Parejo Vadillo studies their joint diary and asserts that they perceived the way they dressed to be a ‘manifestation of their aesthetic personalities and of their joint authorship’ (p. 244).

The scope of the volume is to be commended. The chapters show the sheer diversity of ways in which women were culturally participating and formalising their activity through training, exhibitions, and their tactics of self-expression (selection of clothing and pseudonyms for example). The chapters draw extensively from representations and reputations of women; the media in particular is a constant fixture. This could be problematic, but the volume avoids overreliance on representations through its focus on a series of intriguing case studies about individual artists. These chapters pertinent evidence to the reader the breadth of experience of creative women, and range of tactics they appropriated, to carve their own space in society (King, Flood, Hadjiafxendi, Sanders, Field). The chapters sometimes present a mixed perspective in their content; again reiterating the often-contested ways women were constructing professional identity alongside each other, and across society.

Crafting the Woman Professional could have benefited from exploring the following themes. At times the reader wished for more detailed insights into the daily lives and the spaces actual women inhabited, as well as itching for the contributions to have more thoroughly explored these themes into the early 20th century. The book could have more fully questioned alternate ways of understanding the professionalising strategies of women, such as familial and friendship networks and patronage, a field of growing historiographical importance. The book could also have thought about the various sites in which women were busily crafting professional identity, such as the spatial strategies researched in Elizabeth Darling and Lesley Whitworth’s edited collection, Women and the Making of Built Space in England 1870-1950. Although Crafting the Woman Professional discusses educational spaces and the home, albeit briefly, what of the studios, workshops, and shops, which played an rising part in a physical demonstration of professionalism amidst a middle-class society obsessed with clubs and institutions? These sites of activity are crucial in building understanding about how women were forging a sense of working identity. The complex nature of the home
and its relationship with professionalism could have also been more intensively interrogated.

_Crafting the Woman Professional_ will positively contribute to a number of academic fields. Its articulation of the need for future research to explore the various contradictions and backlashes against professionalisation for culturally inclined middle-class women in the 19th century, rather than a journey of continuous improvement through to present day is important. To the historians reading this review, the book also holds great significance because, as Linda H. Peterson points out in the foreword, it reminds us of a continuing need to ‘situate research on women artists and authors historically’ (p. xviii). The cultural sphere has a lot to tell the historian, and this book encourages multi-disciplinary engagement. It will hopefully pique research enquiries of a socio-cultural historical nature into the lives of female artists in particular, who have until recently tended to remain in the terrain of the art historian.

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