

A Stitch in Time: The Needlework of Aging Women in Antebellum America.* Aimee E. Newell. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014. 265 pp.

Reviewed by Maureen Daly Goggin

The 21st century has witnessed a steep resurgence of handcrafts with fiber arts among the most prominent. Why? No doubt part of the answer lies what David McFadden points out in *Pricked: Extreme Embroidery* (2008, 1): “fiber is the oldest material manipulated by human beings for practical and aesthetic purposes and at the same time, the most ordinary and ubiquitous in daily life.” In *A Stitch in Time: The Needlework of Aging Women in Antebellum America*, Aimee E. Newell transports us back nearly two hundred years to an earlier time of revitalized interest in stitching by mature women, some of whom were nostalgic for the days of their mothers and grandmothers as they coped with social and cultural transformations brought on by industrialization, feminism, abolition of slavery, and changing politics as well as their own affective response to growing older. Newell examines how these various forces influenced 19th century women’s needlework. Just as women were coming to rely more and more on “factory-produced and store-bought thread, yarn, and cloth as well as published patterns,” women, like those today, turned back to needlework as an expression of “their beliefs, values, and fears in a changing world” (3). By studying aging women and their sewing, Newell fills an important gap in the scholarship on samplers in which young girls and their works are typically studied and on quilts in which the stitched piece itself is usually the focus rather than the stitcher.

Newell deftly analyzes 167 pieces of needlecraft—samplers, quilts, decorative needlework—stitched by 103 well-classed women aged 40 and over during the antebellum era (1830-1860) in America. Throughout the book, Newell provides delightful details (sketchy as they are because of a paucity of archival material on ordinary women) on the life and times of these women drawn from their letters, diary entries, and needlework. The book is also filled with alluring images of the quilts, samplers, and decorative pieces as well as paintings and photographs of many of the women who completed these stitched pieces. Newell demonstrates how more than just stitched artifacts, needlework offered a communicative space in which aging women could express their beliefs, values, and ideas on all sorts of topics.

In the first chapter, Newell examines how women coped with bodily trials of aging—from changing eyesight (sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse), to freedom from the cessation of menses, to loss of hearing, to aches and pains in fingers and body—and how these trials are evident in their needlework and writings. Then, in the second chapter, Newell explores women’s ambivalent responses to cultural expectations about growing old gracefully. Together, these chapters make clear the ways in which needlework (as well as diaries and letters) offers a vibrant space for considering how antebellum women dealt with the signs of aging in their stitching.

During the rise of industrialization, a number of technological inventions radically shifted women’s relation to cloth and needles. For one, women were released from the utilitarian tasks

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of the spinning wheel, the weaving loom, hand sewing, and yarn work. In her third chapter, Newell explains how the rise of industrial looms, cylinder printing machines for cloth, sewing machines, and knitting machines created disparate responses among aging women. For some people, the rise of these new technological inventions created an anxiety about leisure time for women; for others, it generated nostalgia for the past and its ways of stitching; for others still, the machines opened up new methods for creating decorative needlework. Newell points out that “decorative needlework, in particular, became a tool with which women could express opinions, show creativity, and demonstrate their familiarity with genteel standards” (58). Other changes were wrought by the rise of new indelible inks that could be used to mark linens for laundering. Prior to the new inks, women would hand stitch initials and other symbols on clothing and household linens to distinguish them at laundries. The new ink not only made the chore of marking obsolete, it also gave rise to new kinds of needlework such as the album or signature quilt and the family record sampler.

In the fourth and fifth chapters, Newell investigates the exchange value of needlework for 19th century women over 40. Since married women were allowed to hold only movable property—including, for example, furniture, silver, plate ware, draperies, and needlework pieces—they were limited in what they could bequeath or gift to others. Needlework thus was valuable and valued not only as items given in death but also as gifts given for celebratory life-marking occasions such as birth, marriage, and death or as merchandise to sell or as competition entries. Textiles can be understood in this sense, according to Newell, as a form of family currency.

Women crafted quilts, samplers, and decorative needlework in a number of textile genres. In the last two chapters of the book, Newell examines a number of these: marking samplers, family record samplers, fancywork samplers, album or signature quilts, wedding quilts, baby’s quilts, and memorial quilts. Many of these, as Newell points out, functioned as “both biographical (conveying a life story) and epistolary (employing words on the object, whether written, stitched, or applied, to tell that story)” (140). Biographical epistolary stitched pieces offer a tantalizing space for conducting research on women as shown in *A Stitch in Time*.

Newell’s careful and skillful analyses allows her to conclude that “aging women had their own experiences that affected their work: changes in their bodies and minds; an increasing nostalgia for the past; and memories to reflect on and remember, which were portrayed in their quilts and samplers” (182). This valuable book offers important insights on aging antebellum needlewomen in America and should be of great interest to scholars in such diverse disciplines as museum studies, textile studies, anthropology, art history, cultural studies, literary studies, material culture studies, and rhetorical studies.

Maureen Daly Goggin is a Professor of Rhetoric and former Department Chair in the Department of English at the Arizona State University. She is the author and editor of numerous works, including a series of volumes co-edited with Beth Fowkes Tobin. These include Material Women, 1750-1950 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), Women and Things, 1750-1950 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles, 1750-1950 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009) and Women and the Material Culture of Death (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.14434/mar.v8i2.13338>