Embroidering women and turning men

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This essay focuses on handiwork elites and genteel classes made in Sweden and Finland, 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 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. 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. 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, worktables, and lathes.

Keywords handiwork, gender, elites, emotions, material culture, 18th century, 19th century

In early 1767, the then 16-year-old Count Johan Gabriel Oxenstierna wrote in his diary that during the previous year he had engaged himself in turning for most of the time: ‘I finished last year by the [wood-turning] lathe; I started this one at the same place. Never a person has been more diligent in this work than I [have]; moreover, all the time I hardly did anything else. The day left me by the lathe, and rediscovered me there’. Oxenstierna’s observation captures a number of key issues for 18th-century elites and their relation to handiwork, gender, and emotions. Handiwork was a daily task, on which members of elites devoted considerable amounts of time, and the manual work could be performed with enthusiasm and even compelling absorption. Handiwork was also an expression of duty, diligence, and noble virtues.
This essay focuses on handiwork the elites and genteel classes made in the 18th and early 19th centuries in Sweden and Finland. The emotions linked to handicrafts and the making of artefacts and objects themselves are examined. My aim is to give a deeper understanding of the handiwork performed by the elites, and the vital role of handiwork for early modern elite culture. In order to ameliorate the perception of elite material culture, gendered handicrafts, and emotions as part of the 18th-century material culture, I will explore gendered learning and making of handiwork, the emotions linked to and conveyed through artefacts, as well as the spaces and places for handiwork. The central questions for my essay include: What role did handiwork play in the education of elite girls and boys? How was handiwork gendered? What were the meanings of handiwork for the social and everyday life of the 18th- and early 19th-century elites? Which objects were made and for what reasons? Where were handicrafts performed? How are emotions linked to and evoked by handiwork?

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, Kirsi Vainio-Korhonen, 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, modistes, and mantua makers have 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.

In this article, I will offer important new insights into elite handiwork and material culture. 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 throughout the article will offer new readings of gendered activities, emotion, and spheres, stressing the similarities and overlapping themes instead of separate experiences and spheres.

Diaries and letters reveal handiwork, the emotions it evoked, and emotions embodied to the objects made. Under scrutiny here are the writings of three diarists, who described handiwork as part of their daily occupation. Johan Gabriel Oxenstierna wrote about his turning, while Märtä Helena Reenstierna and Jacobina Charlotta Munsterhjelm recorded activities involving their textile work. Mentions of handiwork and emotions are rare in Swedish letters and diaries, thus they have to be filtered out from occasional mentions. More importantly, the objects themselves form essential sources for the study of handiwork and material culture. The material sources for this essay include samplers, bridal blankets, and worktables, which are analysed as sources and gendered elite artefacts. A survey of samplers made c. 1720–1820 and kept in Swedish and Finnish museums reveals the quantity of these objects, as well as their motifs, enlightening us about the importance of the practice of making a sampler, as well as the symbolic motifs of the samplers. Account books, bills, and probate inventories also attest to the production and consumption of handiwork paraphernalia and textiles. Visual sources such as paintings and drawings depicting the everyday appearance of needlework are also explored. A panoply of sources is vital for an understanding of the importance of handiwork in the early modern world. Since
handicrafts, servants, or female work were both commonplace and fundamental for the contemporaries, they are rarely explicitly mentioned; therefore different sources must be read and cross-read in order to gain full understanding of the nature of the everyday. Consequently, the volume and variety of objects elite women and men made tell us, in a more tangible way than any written source could, about the importance of handiwork. However, many objects remain silent about their makers, and it is not always possible to know the social rank of the person who held the needle or pedalled the wheel of a turning lathe.

To find emotions embedded in making objects and in those objects themselves is challenging, even though the use of emotions as an analytic tool is far from new to historians. While love between men and women, as well as objects linked to romantic love, has interested historians lately, there are fewer studies about grief and sorrow as embodied in artefacts. Historians interested in emotions have also drawn more often from textual than material sources. As Susan Broomhall emphasizes, the importance of the ‘understanding of earlier historical periods’ cultures of emotional sensitivities and forms of expressions’ is vital for the analysis of emotions in different historical periods. Pre-modern documents rarely record explicitly the emotional experiences of individuals and many texts describe events, conduct, and emotions that were appropriate or expected to be expressed in literal form. However, scholars have recently begun to consider literary sources such as letters as material and emotional objects.

My aim in this essay is to tackle the emotions linked to handiwork and read the expressions of emotions from objects and between the lines of scarce journal entries.

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. For centuries, learning handiwork was central for elite girls’ education. 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.

In the 18th century, every girl learned to sew under the watchful eyes of her mother, grandmother, older sisters, or a governess. A woman with a needle was an archetype of feminine diligence and was depicted in textual and visual form. Sewing was important as a practical skill, but also because it was educational. It helped girls and women to control their conduct, feelings, and emotions; it schooled them to be obedient, virtuous, and industrious.

During the period 1720–1820, elite girls’ education to handiwork met little change in terms of techniques and content. In Sweden and Finland, the most significant change was the gradual change amongst elites towards institutionalized education. Wealthy bourgeoisie and clergy began, with a growing number of high civil servants, to favour education in boarding schools for their daughters from the late 18th century onwards. Education at home was most persistent amongst the highest aristocracy and less wealthy nobility. The aristocracy strived to keep its cultural codes, traditions, and
practices amongst the social group, whereas schools were expensive and thus unreachable for less wealthy families, despite their rank.

A significant object for girls’ learning was a sampler (Figure 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.

It is easy to imagine a young girl’s emotions while completing her sampler: joy and contentment on fulfilling a task; a need for approval and acceptance from her parents; and 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. 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 200 samplers dating from 1720–1820. Their provenance is not always clear; a surviving sampler may have been made by elite girls or women or by girls and women from other social groups. However, the number of preserved samplers indicates the vitality of the tradition for women’s lives. Shared cultural practices and manual skills across different echelons of the society are also implied.

However, with all probability, elite girls, as well as middle-aged women, made most of the samplers. A strong argument for the makers of the samplers being from
genteel families is the character of the samplers not only as exercises in stitching
techniques and materials but also as family trees. Letters, numbers, and symbols such
as flowers, hearts, crowns, fruit baskets, dogs, keys, and figures are central items from
the 1720s to the 1820s, but at least as visible are initials of the executor of the sampler
and her parents’ and grandparents’ initials, embroidered mostly in cross stitch. For
instance, samplers made by unidentified genteel girls in 1731, 1762, and in the 1770s,
as well as samplers by Elsa Maria Löwenhielm in 1755, Ebba Helena Boije af Gennäs in
1780, Märtä Cristina Salenius in 1806, and Mathilda Charlotta Mattheszen in 1815, all
follow the same pattern. In addition to letters, numbers, and symbols essential for
marking linen, all samplers proudly record the initials of the maker, as well as the
initials of her parents and, in some of them, her grandparents as well. The rank of the
maker and her ancestors is distinguished with crowns; in Sweden those crowns are the
emblems of the titled nobility. 19

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 pride of aristocratic lineage, ranks, and connections was
stitched visibly into the samplers, stressing the importance of ancestors and family for
elite culture. 20 Other symbols could later be used as markers of parental, platonic, or
carnal love, friendship, or obligation, depending on which materials and colours were
used, on which objects they were embroidered, and to whom the objects were given.
Thus, 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 samplers were expected to feel obligation, duty, and diligence.

Jacobina Charlotta Munsterhjelm was 13 years old when she began to write a diary
in 1799. 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. 21 Jacobina Charlotta had responsibility for her own
clothes, which she most often sewed with her older sister Ulla, who taught her skills
to her younger sibling. Apart from sewing her dresses, Jacobina Charlotta spun yarn,
heckled flax, knitted socks, and plaited straw for straw hats. She, her sisters, and their
cousins also made wax pearls, flowers of fabric, and jewellery of hair. 22 Sometimes she
sewed with her mother and grandmother. 23 Handiwork within the family and house-
hold should be seen, as Susan Broomhall argues, as a means to forge emotional
networks as future insurance. 24 Emotional bonds created between family members,
cousins, and friends while working together often lasted decades or a lifetime.
Working together and learning from older sisters and female relatives as well as
from previous generations was central in genteel girls’ education. At the same time,
they internalized values of nobility and aristocracy and assimilated closely to the
culture and lifestyle of the nobility.

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 with 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. Partly, it seems to have been the idea of working together with other women, being able to chatter along with the work, while creating garments for oneself or making small gifts for beloved friends and relatives. Supposedly, sewing was, amongst young elite women, also linked to the possibility of fashionable attire, dressing for social occasions, and mixed-gender sociability, which was the backbone of elite culture.

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, Johan Gabriel Oxestierna wrote in his diary enthusiastically about wood-turning. His uncle, Count Gustaf Fredrik Gyllenborg, had sent him a lathe from Stockholm in autumn 1766, after which Johan Gabriel turned almost daily. 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, published in 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. Count Gyllenborg, who took an interest in his nephew’s education, was probably familiar with both the fashion of woodwork amongst the European elites and Rousseau’s thoughts on education, and wanted to offer Oxenstierna more manual and artistic activity in addition to his classical education, aiming at a career as a high civil servant.

Oxenstierna found wood turning undeniably pleasurable, even though not being able to fulfil objects he planned to make was frustrating: ‘I turned, but since I succeeded in nothing, I remained the whole day glowering’. Almost daily, after his studies, Oxenstierna engaged himself in turning, which balanced his days full of reading, writing, and learning. He referred to his turning as work and as art, which stresses the 18th-century notion on handicrafts as both a beneficial occupation and as a decorative art that one could master through discipline, practise, and a subtle co-ordination of hand and eye. His classical studies Oxenstierna referred to as work, especially when burdened with a heavy curriculum. A short diary entry from 1766 reveals his 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 1793 and 1794, Hans Abraham von Schnell received money as a Christmas present from his father for buying a turning-lathe for woodwork. Finally, in May 1795, his lathe was fully furbished and the then 15-year-old adolescent could display his turning skills for his mother. Equipping a lathe with different parts, blades, and tools was an expensive enterprise, and even a well-to-do genteel family like the von Schnells could not afford it at once. Nevertheless, manual skills were an essential part of Hans Abraham von Schnell’s education, since acquiring a lathe was an endeavour that took several years. Here we can perhaps read more about the emotions of von Schnell’s mother, Märta Helena Reenstierna, recording the events in her diary, than the feelings the young man himself had towards turning. By the 1790s, Märta Helena Reenstierna had lost seven of her eight children, and the sorrow at losing them, as well as the love
she felt towards all her children, dead or alive, was recorded through her diary.\footnote{32} She was very ambitious regarding her son, his education, and his future career, which is presumably the most important reason for acquiring a lathe. However, it seems that von Schnell did not share Oxenstierna’s passion for turning, because his mother does not mention turning again in her diary.

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. Conversely, boys rarely learned to sew in their childhood, acquiring skills in embroidery as adults. Nevertheless, Count Göran Oxenstierna did learn to sew as a boy. In 1805, when he was 11, he sewed patch squares of which he

\begin{figure}
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\caption{Charles Louis Lignée, after Johann Heinrich Eberts, \textit{L’Occupation}, 1774. Engraving, 42 x 31 cm. Nationalmuseum, NMGrih 528. CC BY-SA.}
\end{figure}
made a stool. His father, Johan Gabriel Oxenstierna, wrote with pride in his diary, addressed to his wife, that the son’s sewing was very accomplished, ‘and I assure, it is as if you had sewed it’. Comparing the son’s skills to those of his wife was clearly meant as a compliment to both.

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.

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 mixed-gender 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 (Figure 2).

**Emotions in artefacts and gendered practices**

In the 18th and early 19th centuries, friendship was a powerful connection between individuals, celebrated through a panoply of emotional objects, such as hair jewellery or pocket books given and received as tokens of love and affection. Other important ties between parents and children were embodied in garments mothers made for their sons or sons made for their mothers, expressing their love and devotion through artefacts that the beloved ones could wear or carry with them, feeling the materials and remembering loved ones. Bridal linen, which girls sometimes sewed and embroidered for years, demonstrated the pride and joy in its maker’s skills and family connections, as well as the anticipation of entering a new phase of life as a married woman. In an embroidered, quilted bridal blanket, women stitched their hopes and fears of future marriage, married life, childbirths, and deaths while socializing in mixed-gender groups.

If genteel and elite women took an interest in needlework, they were presumably highly skilled, having practised it from childhood. Many women achieved skills that equalled professionals. 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 aristocracy. Jessica Karlsson’s study on elite women’s time use shows how women often lamented in their diaries the lack of time for sewing. Even though
women, even prolific diary writers such as Märta Helena Reenstierna, 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 to arrange time for it. Otherwise, they presumably would not have chosen to write about it at all.

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. Furthermore, in late 18th-century Britain, handiwork became an issue of female education, hotly debated especially in terms of ‘the proper balance between useful and ornamental accomplishments’, as Amanda Vickery puts it. She argues that the public display of elite women’s handiwork, instead of modest and private sewing ‘as an extension of family duty and for the pleasure of close kin’ at home, was at the heart of the debate. In Sweden and Finland, the public display of aristocratic women’s embroideries and other crafts was less conspicuous, leaving room for personal preferences. Nevertheless, handiwork was regarded as a fundamentally feminine pursuit, a seminal skill performed by women in order to create a panoply of objects for both domestic use and as gifts.

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 (Figure 3).

Often women used embroidery to occupy their time when alone or otherwise deprived of the company of family and friends. They could make good use of this time for interior decoration and domestic comfort. In the 1770s, Countess Hedvig De la Gardie embroidered upholsteries and quilts for several stools and beds in her homes. For her, handiwork filled her quiet summer days at a country house. In June 1777, she wrote to her recently married daughter Sophie von Fersen: ‘Every day sees my regrets grow, because of being deprived of your presence, in which I will never get accustomed. [. . .] My way of life here is so unilateral, that there is little to tell about it to you my dear friend [. . .], after dinner I work [. . .]’. The daily routines seem to have soothed the countess’ feelings and comforted her worries about the health and happiness of her daughter.

Not all the work was done solely for home use; sometimes the objects made and received were powerful tokens of affection, friendship, and a sense of duty. Jacobina Charlotta Munsterhjelm enjoyed planning and realizing her work, sewing her own clothes and knitting or making fashionable small accessories. She made small hair jewellery with her sisters and cousins and a goldsmith from a nearby town adorned them with locks. This fashionable hair jewellery was given as tokens of friendship and love between her and her relatives. For Jacobina Charlotta, handiwork was an
occupation that gave her pleasure in a variety of ways, linking her to her family and the chain of generations because she worked with her siblings, her mother, and grandmother.

However, the lack of time for fancy sewing amongst married women limited their possibilities to fabricate anything either for themselves or others. Often women devoted precious time to sewing garments for their children. Anna-Maria Åström discusses a married woman’s care for the family’s clothing as part of her ‘profession’ and maternal solicitude. Joanne Begiato (Bailey) argues that providing clothing for children embodied tender and caring mothers’ parental sustenance for their offspring. Furthermore, Henry French and Mark Rothery have stressed that in elite families, mothers were much more important in their adolescent sons’ lives than previous research has acknowledged. This is also visible in my source material. Through sewing for their sons, mothers expressed their emotions and care towards them. In 1768, Countess Sara Gyllenborg helped her son Johan Gabriel Oxenstierna to pack his belongings when he was about to move from the family estate to Stockholm and work there as a civil servant. For him, the garments she had mostly sewn herself were tokens of her affection and care for him and his future success.

Similarly, Märta Helena Reenstierna had little time for handiwork, as she was fully occupied with running the household. The little time she could spare, she used for emotionally charged sewing or mending for her son Hans Abraham and husband Christian Henrik von Schnell. The emotions embedded in Märta Helena’s needlework have to be read through her frugal diary entries, in which she repeatedly noted that she

![FIGURE 3 Aurore de Maré, Landscape, 1801. Silk embroidery and water colour on canvas, 25 x 30,5 cm. Photo Bertil Wreting, Nordiska museet, NM.0221633. CC BY-NC-ND.](image)
had been sewing for ‘my son’ or ‘my husband’; these entries stress her emotional bond with her only surviving child and her husband. Rare were those occasions when she could write about her own emotions linked to her handiwork, as she did in August 1799: ‘Sunday. In the afternoon I enjoyed myself by drawing and [creating] a project for a fan, which I desire, if only I live until it will be made’. 46

Generally, Märta Helena Reenstierna used seamstresses and tailors for sewing, occasionally also commissioning fancy embroideries from a family friend, the aristocratic, unmarried Miss Wrangel. The skills of Miss Wrangel were well known in the high society of Stockholm: in 1794, the opera dancer Sophie Hagman commissioned from her an embroidered fire screen, which was to be a Christmas present for her lover, Fredrik Adolf, the Duke of Östergötland, the king’s youngest brother. 47 Miss Wrangel used her accomplishment as a needlewoman to earn an extra income, and her embroideries were in turn given as gifts, conveying in them emotions and feelings between the giver and the receiver, not the maker. It is possible that in the eyes of the duke, Sophie Hagman had made the fire screen, since needlework was ubiquitously feminine despite women’s rank or form of education.

While women’s work was omnipresent, quotidian, and external, men’s handiwork was channelled into evoking their own pleasure in the making of objects. However, this did not diminish male contentment embodied in self-made gifts such as turned wooden boxes or canes. Regardless of the fact that handiwork was a strongly gendered practice as a feminine occupation, men were also diligent in making artefacts and giving them as presents. In 1766, Johan Gabriel Oxenstierna turned small objects that he gave to his cousin Count Johan Henning Gyllenborg, expressing his gratitude and joy for having got a wood-turning lathe, a gift in which, according to Oxenstierna, Gyllenborg had played a key part. 48 In 1789, Chamberlain Count Adolf Ludvig Piper made Christmas presents of carton to the members of the royal court, at the request of his wife, Countess Sophie von Fersen, mistress of the robes at the court of the Duchess of Södermanland. 49 In 1800, Otto Magnus von Essen gave to his cousin, Baroness Ulrika Margareta Rehbinder, a pen case he had made. 50 Men were proud of and thankful for garments and objects they received from women, who had put their time, skills, and devotion into making them. In 1814 Jacobina Charlotta Munsterhjelm’s brother, Anders Munsterhjelm, thanked her warmly for a pair of gloves she had made for him. 51

However, it is important to note that despite their willingness to make gifts, men created handiwork that was perhaps on a smaller scale than that created by women. For women, handiwork was an essential part of their lives from early girlhood to the end of life. For example, 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 lives 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. 52 Jacobina Charlotta Munsterhjelm records in her diary the care with which her sister Ulla prepared her bridal linens in 1800. 53 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 stresses 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 a 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 also time consuming, the making of a bridal blanket 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 (Figure 4). 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. Kirsi Vainio-Korhonen emphasizes the creation of the trousseau and bridal blankets as rites of passage between girlhood and womanhood; while women worked together embroidering and quilting a bridal blanket, young men were also present conversing with them, teasing and tantalizing 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 handiwork 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 guests, 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, as recent research on love and marriage in early modern Sweden and Finland shows. Preparing for a marriage and the prospects for future life had an impact on the needlework and objects in the form of bridal blankets and bridal linen, but also as bridal garters. The bride’s close friends often embroidered bridal garters. Sometimes they were decorated with coquettish verses, promising carnal pleasures, which were considered an essential element of 18th-century marriages. 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). Linen marked with initials was in everyday use, but high-quality linen was also passed from mother to daughter, linking generations of women’s work, skills, and emotions embodied in the contents of a linen cupboard. Occasionally, linen was also inherited by sons, such as in 1794, when linen embroidered with the year 1605 was recorded in the movables that Count Hans Axel von Fersen inherited from his father.

Handiwork was not only present on joyous occasions; it could also act as a solace in times of sorrow, whether because of loved ones who had passed on or because one’s hopes for life were never realized. Hedvig De la Gardie found contentment in her needlework when in the country, where she was far from her usual social circles. For Johan Gabriel Oxenstierna, turning offered welcomed oblivion when he, as an adolescent, was deeply and wistfully in love with a female servant employed by his father: ‘I turned, and will do that as often as possible, because then I forget myself’.

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, both physical and mental. Needlework offered elite women a panoply of work, from plain sewing to ambitious artistic endeavours; thus, it also offered a wide array of emotions embedded in the objects women made. In mixed-gender 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.

Handicrafts, especially needlework, are 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 the home. Amanda Vickery has stressed that in Georgian England, elite women’s needlework became an important issue for domestication and women’s withdrawal to the domestic sphere at home. In Sweden and Finland, during the 1720s and the 1820s, this shift towards domesticity is less visible and, throughout the period, needlework was a seminal part of elite sociability. Nevertheless, during the 19th century, needlework became associated with women and domesticity more often than before. Since the home was a key arena for female agency throughout the 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.\textsuperscript{69}

Whilst at home, most elite women worked in the drawing room or salon. According to probate inventories, this was a room in many elite houses, in the countryside as well as in towns, in which a worktable or tambour frame was placed.\textsuperscript{70} Small tables in drawing rooms were not always described in inventories as worktables, but their small size, portability, and drawers suggest that these tables were multifunctional and also served as sewing tables.\textsuperscript{71} Bedrooms, boudoirs, and chambers were also places for handiwork, reading, writing, and intimate sociability between friends.\textsuperscript{72} Thus, physical places of handiwork performed indoors did not differ even though the wider environment could differ from urban to rural, from townhouse to country house. Worktables, spinning wheels, tambour frames, and other chattels used for handiwork were small, light pieces of furniture, easily moved around a room or house. This made handiwork a peripatetic task. It could be performed in different places depending on the time of the day or year, or social occasion and the character of the work. During the 18th century, in the distribution of rooms and the use of spaces in houses, there was less visible distinction between spaces for handiwork than spaces for writing, eating, dressing, or sleeping.

As Dena Goodman has shown in her analysis of 18th-century writing desks, these small, elegant, fashionable, and skillfully made fashionable pieces of furniture were seminal for the new writing practices and the subjectivity and autonomy of women through letter writing. Writing desks or \textit{sécrétaires} became, during the second half of the 18th century, highly personal and luxurious furniture.\textsuperscript{73} The same could be said about worktables. Worktables, with their drawers, pouches, and boxes were places where handiwork paraphernalia and materials could be kept. Elegant worktables made of precious materials by skilled artisans were luxury items, representing luxury production, consumption and trade, bringing sensual pleasure for their owners and users in the form of the high-quality materials that were stored in the table and used for handiwork and emotional comfort in the form of arts, crafts and handiwork. A worktable could also represent a mental space for its owner: it could be a space for work, recreation, duty, discipline, creation, solace, and friendship. Even though a working table rarely had lockable drawers or secret lockers, it was a private space in which women could store their work embodying their emotions. However, embroideries and other pieces of needlework were regarded as less revealing than letters, which were textual evidence of emotions and thoughts. Nevertheless, it can be argued that women embodied their feelings in the material objects they made.

Turning stools or turning tables could be as luxuriously made as worktables, but they were less movable. In the collections of the Nordiska museet (\textit{Figure 5}), there is a turning stool that probably was made in the 1760s for Fredrik Adolf, the Duke of Östergötland.\textsuperscript{74} It is not much larger than a worktable (79 x 72 x 49 cm), but it was considerably heavier and relocating it was not as easy as moving a lightweight worktable or tambour frame. Moreover, turning wood was noisy and dirty work that could not be done in a drawing room or bedroom. According to Count Clas Julius Ekeblad’s probate inventory in 1796, his turning stool was in the cabinet room by his library.\textsuperscript{75} Johan Gabriel Oxenstierna seems to have changed the room in which his turning stool was placed from time to time, since in February 1768 he wrote: ‘Because I have these days turned in the salon, where there is never fire, I have got a cough, but I will not
turn less because of it’. The salon, usually the largest and most lavishly furnished room in a country house, was often unheated during the winter months. The size of salon made it a suitable room for a turning stool, as turning required more space than women’s needlework.

In the creation of places and spaces for handiwork, lightness and movability of a worktable were of crucial importance because fancy needlework required constant light, preferably daylight. Worktables could easily be moved close to a window for more light or near a fireplace for more warmth and light in autumn and winter. In Sweden and Finland, the spring and summer are luminous, but in the autumn and winter, days are short. Spinning, yarning, knitting, crocheting, and plain sewing require less light and can be done in relative, even total darkness, while detailed embroideries require plenty of light. However, women sewed throughout the year and adapted their work to light conditions. Turning of wood was less reliant on light than embroideries, which probably is one of the reasons why Johan Gabriel Oxenstierna was most engaged in turning during winter months.

For Jacobina Charlotta Munsterhjelm, the most usual place for her handiwork was at home in the room she shared with her sister. Jacobina Charlotta also sewed with her grandmother, but she does not explicitly say in which room they worked together. However, it would be reasonable to presume that the work took place in the drawing room or her grandmother’s bedroom. On fine summer days, Jacobina Charlotta and her sisters took their handiwork outside and sewed by a nearby lake, where they enjoyed working together in the balmy weather.

Elite women had several options in terms of locations for their handiwork. Märta Helena Reenstierna had freedom and possibilities for sociability because of her status as
a married woman. Nevertheless, in her diary, she rarely specifies the places and spaces in which her handiwork was created, although it was mostly performed at home, or occasionally also at friends’ homes. She had friends who also were accomplished needle workers, who presumably worked while she visited them. For Märta Helena Reenstierna, her garden was a pleasant place for needlework. In early June 1793, she wrote about having sewed in the garden for the first time that year. Her choice of words suggests that she took pleasure in working outside and that it was habitual for her.

Nevertheless, the outdoors was not the most common location in which handiwork was performed; homes were the principal places for elite handiwork. For aristocratic women in 18th-century Europe, there were other places 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. 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. There he made some lanterns for the pavilion.

When Baroness Charlotta Sparre was chosen as a maid of honour at the court of the then Crown Princess Lovisa Ulrika in 1742, she discovered that needlework was an essential part of sociability at court and indispensable for female courtiers. Charlotta Sparre described herself as an idler, who thought she would never pick up a needle: ‘I have often regretted not to have thought that [acquiring high-quality scissors for handiwork] when in Paris, but there I thought I was an indolent and I did not think I would ever work’. Her attitude suggests that needlework, despite being central in elite women’s lives, was not enjoyable for all women, and was performed because of duty, obedience, and social necessity.

At court, needlework, especially fine embroidery, was part of everyday sociability. In 1776, Chamberlain Baron Gustaf Johan Ehrensvärd 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. Especially in paintings and engravings on women performing handiwork, the elegance, grace and posture required from elite women was depicted in detail; artists fashioned the position of women’s hands holding lavish materials and luxurious working tools.

Furthermore, artistic skills in embroidery and connections to the court opened a possibility for aristocratic and elite women in late 18th-century Sweden of public recognition for their needlework. In 1780, Countess Fredrika Eleonora von Düben,
mistress of the robes at the court of Dowager Queen Lovisa Ulrika, became an honorary member of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts for her skills in embroidery. In 1784 Ulrica Melin, in 1795 Maria Catharina Polheimer, and in 1797 Baroness Wendela Gustafva Sparre became honorary members of the Academy. They all belonged to aristocratic or elite circles and were exceptionally skilled in their embroideries or needle paintings with landscape motifs. Anna Lena Lindberg stresses the artistic skills of these women and notes that the quality of their work fully met the requirements of the Academy.  

Conclusion

In early modern Europe, handiwork was an essential part of the elite lifestyle. The objects made and the act of needlework or other handicrafts were burdened with a variety of emotions, from enthusiasm to artistic satisfaction, from a sense of duty to boredom. For some, handiwork was a dull and even painful task, but there were also women and men who enjoyed working with their hands, planning and making objects. Handiwork was gendered; girls learned to sew and boys learned to turn. However, the distinction between genders was fluid, and both sexes were equally free to engage in embroideries or woodwork and other crafts. Moreover, handiwork was a seminal part of elite mixed-gender sociability from homes to the royal and imperial courts.

Elite girls expressed their accomplishments and feminine virtues in making a sampler. The quantity of surviving samplers executed in Sweden and Finland c. 1720–1820 suggests the vitality of visible proof of a girl’s skills in needlecraft, as well as the wish to link generations to previous and coming ones through embroidered initials on samplers. The samplers were preserved in families carefully and with pride, visualizing the importance of girls’ and women’s skills for elite culture. Manual crafts were also part of elite boys’ education, but their work was less deliberate and they executed no object as universally significant as the sampler.

Handiwork offered its makers a number of physical and mental spaces and places, evoking emotions and embodying them into the artefacts made. For those who enjoyed manual work, handicrafts offered joy, consolation, artistic satisfaction, and emotional comfort. The making of objects as gifts was a means to show one’s love, affection, and devotion, and offered a means to exercise power through objects and gift giving. Especially mothers’ emotions were embodied into the garments they made or mended for their sons. In elite culture, gift-giving was rehearsed from childhood: both girls and boys, women and men made gifts given as tokens of friendship, but also as visual symbols of the skills and status of their makers.

Handiwork was a channel for women’s agency and it offered women mental spaces for positive and negative emotions. Handiwork was performed mostly indoors at home, but women also sewed in the garden and at social occasions. At the royal courts, needlework was indispensable for everyday sociability and offered women possibilities for artistic endeavours with fine materials and fancy embroidery.

Elite handiwork, the objects made, and 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.

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Notes

1 Journal de l’Annee 1767. 31 May 1767. Johan Gabriel Oxenstierna’s diary 1766–1768, Tosterupsamlingen vol. 108, RA. ‘Je finissois l’année passée dans le tour, je commencerai celle ci au meme endroit. Jamais personne n’a été plus diligent a ce travail que moi, aussi je n’ai guere fait autre chose pendent tout le tems. Le jour me quittoit dans le touret, il m’y retrouva.’ Translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

2 The concept of ‘elite’ is here understood as the Swedish concept of ‘ståndspersoner’ or ‘herrskap’, the upper echelons of the society.


4 See, e.g., Crowston, Fabricating Women; Rasmussen, Skräddaren, sömmerskan och modet; Simonton, ‘Milliners, Modistes and Marchandes de Mode’; Vainio-Korhonen, ‘Handicrafts as Professions’; Vainio-Korhonen, Käsin tehty; Verdier, Façons de dire.

5 See, e.g., Björkman, Catharina Ahlgren; Brant, Eighteenth-Century Letters; Brown, Liksom en herdinna; Goodman, Becoming a Woman; Hansson, Svensk brevskrivning; Leskelä-Kärki, Lahtinen, and Vainio-Korhonen, Kirjeet ja historiantutkimus; Ruberg, Conventional Correspondence.


7 See www.digitaltmuseum.se, search word märkduk (sampler); www.finna.fi, search word merkkuusiilina (sampler); www.suomenmuseotonline.fi, search word merkkuusiliina (sampler).

8 Holloway, Romantic Love; Kietäväinen-Sirén, Erityinen ystävyys, 94–7.
9 Long, ‘Regular Progressive Work’.
10 See, e.g., Frevert et al., *Emotional Lexicons*.
12 Herbert, *Female Alliances*; Holloway, *Romantic Love*.
17 See www.digitaltmuseum.se, search word *märkduk* (sampler); www.finna.fi, search word *merkkausliina* (sampler); www.suomenmuseotonline.fi, search word *merkkausliina* (sampler).
18 13 May 1795. *Årstadagboken* I.
23 22 November 1799. *Jacobina Charlotta Munsterhjelms dagböcker*.
27 14 February 1768. Johan Gabriel Oxenstierna’s diary 1766–1768, Tosterupsamlingen vol. 108, RA. ‘Je tournai mais comme rien ne me reussit, j’en demeurait de mauvais humeur pendant le jour.’
32 See, e.g., 13 March 1797. *Årstadagboken* I.
Vardagslit och sju års krig, 53–4, 80, 84. ’både Frun och ig ägt ofta rådnade då Våra ögon möttes. […] Ömsom arbetade Hon Vid Sitt Sybord, hvarvid ig Också biträdde, och Hvaröver Hon icke Litet Förundrade Sig […]. På detta Sätt passerade ig mina Dagar i ett avundsvärdt nöije.’


Hedvig De la Gardie to Sophie von Fersen 25 June 1777. B XXV a:14. Löfstadarkivet, VLA. ’et Chaque jours voit acroitre mes regret, sur La privatisation de votre presanse, à la qu’elle je ne m’accomuterée jamais. […] ma façon de vivre ici est si uniforme, qu’il y à peu de Chose à vous en dire ma Chere amie […] L’aprai dinée je travaille […]’


French and Rothery, Man’s Estate, 71, 83, 133.


29 August 1799. Årstadagboken I. ’Söndag. Eftermiddagen roade jag mig med ritning och projecter till en solfjeder, som jag åstundar, om jag lefver tills den kunde bli gjord.’

See, e.g., 15 October 1793, 7 December 1793, 24 December 1793, 30 October 1794, 9 December 1794, 13 February 1797, 21 February 1797, 18 March 1797, 30 March 1798. Årstadagboken I; on Mårta Helena Reenstierna’s sewing and commissions from seamstresses and tailors, see also Rasmussen, Skräddaren, sömmerskan och modet, 106–25.


Adolf Ludvig Piper to Sophie von Fersen 27 November 1789, 1 December 1789. BXXVa:11. Löfstadarkivet, VLA. I thank Mr Hellsing for these references.


Vainio-Korhonen, Soifie Munsterhjelmin aika, 83.


Rundquist, Blått blod och liljevita händer, 206–7.

Axel von Fersen’s account books 1777. Fredrik Axel von Fersens räkenskaper vol. 7. Stafsundsarkivet, RA.


Rundquist, Blått blod och liljevita händer, 110–13.


On needlework as consolation, see Long, ‘Regular Progressive Work’; see also Daly Goggin, ‘Stitching (in) Death’.

Hedvig De la Gardie to Sophie von Fersen 25 June 1777, 12 August 1779. B XXV a:14. Löfstadsarkivet, VLA.

12 October 1766. Johan Gabriel Oxenstierna’s diary 1766–1768, Tosterupsamlingen vol. 108, RA. ‘Je tournai et le ferai le plus souvent que je pourrai, car je m’oublie durant a la moi meme.’

Simonton, ‘Milliners, Modistes and Marchandes de Mode’; Vainio-Korhonen, ‘Handicrafts as Professions.’


Handicrafts as part of philanthropic work of women’s associations were, however, seminal for women’s movement from the mid-19th century. Cf. Lehto, ‘Handarbeten från 1700- och 1800-talet’, 22–4.


See Broomhall, *Spaces for Feelings*.

Probate inventory after Axel von Fersen. Axel von Fersen d.a.:s arkiv vol. 34. Stafsundsarkivet, RA; Probate inventory after Clas Julius Ekeblad, in *Svenskt herremanshem under 1700-talet*, 73, 76; Probate inventory after Jürgen Christoffer Müller, in Carl Forsstrand, *Storborgare och stadsmajorer*, 172.

See *Inventariüm Uppå meübler*, 13, 41.


Turning stool. Nordiska museet, NM.0082084A-C.

*Svenskt herremanshem under 1700-talet*, 69.

7 February 1768. Johan Gabriel Oxenstierna’s diary 1766–1768, Tosterupsamlingen vol. 108, RA. ‘Pour avoir tourné ces jours dans la sale, ou il n’y eut jamais feu, je viens de gagner un toux, mais je n’en tournerai pas moins.’

Oxenstierna got a turning stool in late September 1766, and after that he turned almost daily, according to his diary from 1766–1768. In 1767 Oxenstierna made only a résumé of his year, noting that he had ended the year of 1766 by his turning stool and started the year of 1767 again there. Johan Gabriel Oxenstierna’s diary 1766–1768, Tosterupsamlingen vol. 108, RA.

5 September 1800. *Jacobina Charlotta Munsterhjelms dagböcker*.

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On convents and elite handiwork in early modern Europe, see Campagnol, ‘Invisible Seamstresses’, 167–82.
Cf. Campbell Orr, ‘Mrs. Delany & the Court’. Campbell Orr stresses the importance of courtly connections to Mrs. Delany’s exceptional handicrafts in 18th-century England; see also Browne, ‘Mary Delany’s Court Dress’; Vickery, ‘Female Accomplishment’, 100; Vickery, Behind Closed Doors, 240.


Charlotta Sparre to Carl Gustaf Tessin 30 April 1742. Autografsamlingen vol. 196. Eriksbergsarkivet, RA. ‘je me suis bien souvent repentie de n’y avoir pas pensé pendant que j’étais a Paris, mais c’est que la j’étais une paresseuse et je ne pensois pas que je travailleroit jamais.’

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Literature


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