

# THE EXPANDING DISCOURSE

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## *Feminism and Art History*

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EDITED BY

Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard



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1. Delsart studio, *Portrait of a Woman with an Album*,  
*carte-de-visite* photograph, about 1865. Private collection.



## SECLUDED VISION

*Images of Feminine Experience in  
Nineteenth-Century Europe*

ANNE HIGONNET

Women have many traditions of self-expression; the least known may be their albums and amateur painting. In countless pictures of family, friends, homes, and travels, as well as in self-portraits, middle- and upper-class women all over Europe, throughout the nineteenth century, painted or drew a domestic existence. The few of these pictures that survive now molder in drawers, attics, or flea markets. Yet, like their literary counterparts, the diary and the sentimental novel, they represent the way in which many women understood themselves and their femininity. Women's albums and amateur paintings constitute a widespread, self-conscious, and imaginative interpretation of femininity as a crafted social role. Out of this self-conception came a pictorial practice whose values and achievements have remained obscure.

A reconstruction of nineteenth-century feminine pictorial traditions encounters some basic difficulties, both material and theoretical. Most albums and amateur paintings find no place in public domains. Museums, libraries, academics,

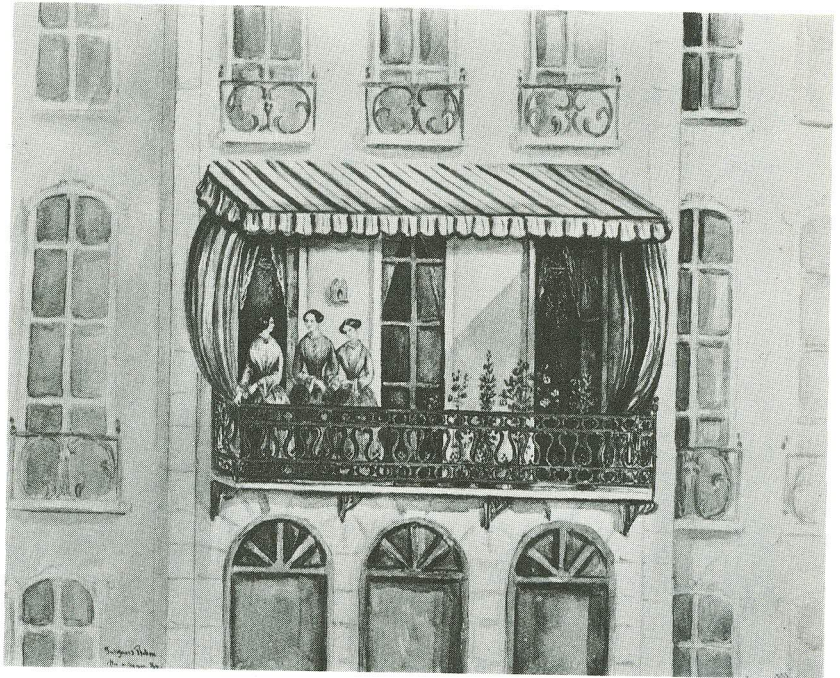
and publishing houses ignore them.<sup>1</sup> This neglect can be partially attributed to the images' own seclusion in the private worlds of women's lives. But in a larger sense, amateur images remain unknown because we do not fit them into the category of representations we call "art." The images of feminine culture are unlike the paintings we associate with nineteenth-century European culture; in an aesthetic comparison with professional painting, they often seem feeble. Such a comparison, however, avoids the real issue, which is that feminine images do not fail to meet aesthetic criteria, but rather obey other criteria altogether. The images of albums and amateur painting are not pictures that happen to be made by women. Nor would it be entirely accurate to say they represent women's lives. Rather, they represent women's definition of themselves as it was structured by gender conventions. Femininity shaped the practice of album-making and amateur painting, and set it apart from the norms of high art.

It would be unfair to treat the images belonging to a feminine pictorial culture, however, by merely stating difference. The difference between these images and those of high art is not just a difference, but also a power relationship. The norms of high art—basically of painting—still control our

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2. Princess Eugenie of Sweden, *On the Balcony, Tullgarn*, watercolor, 1853. Collection of His Majesty King Oscar II.

interpretations (or rather inhibit any interpretation) of a feminine visual culture. When women's albums or amateur paintings have been noticed, they have been condescended to as, at best, quaint illustrations of charming trivialities or, at worst, evidence of women's pictorial incompetency.

In this essay, then, I try to consider the subject from both within and without. I first describe the forms of visual expression practiced by middle- and upper-class women in nineteenth-century Europe, and then suggest what role these images may have played in definitions of femininity. I next observe the inability of feminine imagery to assert itself outside a domestic world, and go on to explain that inability by defining the differences between feminine imagery and painting. Finally, I seek to understand how the characteristics of feminine imagery have worked against its recognition.

### *Albums and Amateurs*

Women throughout nineteenth-century Europe drew and painted. Only the rare middle- or upper-

class family did not include at least one serious amateur woman artist every few generations. While exact figures cannot be computed, a wealth of literary sources—novels, biographies, family histories, journals, etiquette manuals, pedagogic treatises, political commentaries, and magazine stories—provides some measure of the phenomenon. The heroine of *Wilkie Collins's* 1860 *Woman in White*, for instance, meets her hero when he comes to supervise her outdoor afternoon watercolor sessions; Ibsen's 1890 *Hedda Gabler* disguises her reunion with her former lover by innocuously leafing through her album of honeymoon photographs; Jane Austen's 1816 *Emma* has a fine but undisciplined talent for "figure-pieces," landscapes, flowers, and especially "likenesses." Over and over again the motif of a woman sketching appears in contemporary painting and in fashion illustration especially. Many women who became famous for other reasons turn out to have been dedicated amateur picture makers: reigning women like Princess Eugenie of Sweden (1830–1889) [2], professional women such as George Sand (1804–1876), and the wives of emi-





3. Adèle Hugo, *Page with Portraits of Her Sons Charles and François Victor*, pencil, 1838. Paris, Maison Victor Hugo (Photographie Bulloz).

nent men, among them Victor Hugo's wife, Adèle (1806–1868) [3].

A pedagogic curriculum emphasizing the fine arts gave women basic expressive means. Most middle- and upper-class girls learned rudimentary drawing and watercolor techniques, and occasionally even oil-painting skills. Artistic proficiency counted among the feminine accomplishments attractive to suitable husbands. Early exercise provided a technical basis for later work. While many women abandoned hobbies after the first years of marriage, some women went on painting or sketching for the rest of their lives—for instance, Louise de Broglie, Comtesse d'Haussonville (1819–1882), better known as the subject of an Ingres portrait than as a dedicated amateur artist. Queen Victoria (1819–1901) painted her last picture at the age of seventy-one. Virtually all the images discussed in this essay were made by adults or young adults who independently chose visual means to express themselves. Descendants or family chronicles describe such women frequently spending many hours making pictures. Consider the case of the Belgian Duchesse de Vendôme,

who in 1920 recorded the scenes of her twenty-fifth wedding anniversary trip through North Africa in four volumes of watercolors and notes; during her one-hundred-and-twenty-day trip she produced an average of three watercolors and seven manuscript pages a day.<sup>2</sup> Mary Ellen Best (1809–1891), an Englishwoman who worked also in Holland, Belgium, and Germany, left a list of 651 portraits made between 1828 and 1849; her biographer estimates a lifetime total of about 1,500 pictures.<sup>3</sup>

Above all, women made albums. Albums lent themselves to a wide range of skill and means. Initially a volume of blank pages, the album could contain whatever its maker chose. Albums ranged from tooled, leather-bound, gold-stamped books with ornamental clasps to cardboard-covered tablets, measured between twelve by eighteen to two by four inches, and contained somewhere between twelve and a hundred sheets. Some albums were filled by one person; others were collective efforts.

Many kinds of pictures fill album pages. Delicate watercolors or pencil sketches of landscapes and interiors hover on the surface of the page,





4. Henrietta Thornton, *Thornton Sisters and Brothers with Nurse Hunter in the Library*, pen and pencil, about 1825. Whereabouts unknown.

fading off at the edges, images of a cozy sitting room [4], the view from home windows [5], or a picturesque vista. With technical difficulties cheerfully bypassed, lively little pen-and-ink figures engage in household occupations [4], relax [2], or travel together. More careful studies, usually in pencil, gouache, or watercolor, portray family [3], friends, and self [6]. Beneath the images in albums, spidery captions tell a story, identifying places and people [5,3].

Although many album pictures were made with pencil or brush, just as many others were found, collected, or assembled. Marie de Krüdener (1823–1910), the Swiss-raised daughter of a Russian diplomat, put both kinds of pictures in her album: penned caricatures and watercolor landscapes, but also lithographs of favorite pianos, maps charting trips, photographs of family homes and family [5], pressed flowers, and butterflies.<sup>4</sup> Other albums turn pictures into words. In “keep-sake books” or “albums amicorum,” friends and

family members each contributed a page of their own design, combining sketches, prints, proverbs, witticisms, poems, advice, or messages of friendship however they chose, usually uniting the page with decorative borders and ornaments. This type of album ranged from formal volumes like Maria de Marches’s tooled blue leather album, including dedications by Alfred de Vigny, Victor Hugo, and Alexandre Dumas, as well as watercolors by Baron Tyler and Isabey,<sup>5</sup> to young Hedwige Oppell’s tiny cardboard album in which one friend neatly inscribed next to a poem, “Chère et bien aimée Hedwige quand vous feuilleterez votre Album rappelez vous votre amie Suzanne,” and stuck on a color lithograph for emphasis.<sup>6</sup>

The practice of album-making seems to have begun in England and Germany toward the end of the eighteenth century. It has its origins in Romanticism’s cult of the outdoor sketch, and in concurrent concepts of leisure. A new perception of the countryside brought women and men out-

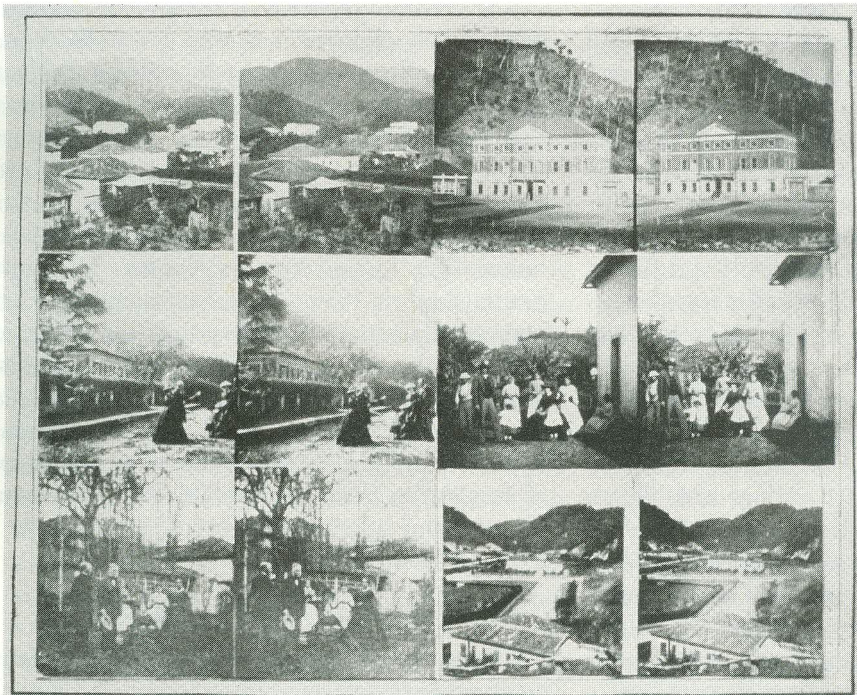


side to commune with nature through the medium of art. An intellectually sanctioned form of art-making had developed that women could master, in the most basic logistic sense. Women rarely had access to studios, academic courses, large canvases, and paid human models—the expensive and cumbersome equipment of professional art. Many, though, could obtain paper, pencil, or watercolors and sit outside, their work balanced on their knees. Inside, a small table in the parlor sufficed. Henrietta Thornton, a young Englishwoman (1807–1853), showed herself at such a table in the library her family used as a sitting room, working no more conspicuously than the two sisters who sew nearby [4].<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, a legitimization of leisure allowed women time to spend sketching. Amateur artistic pursuits were becoming a defining feature of femininity as it was conceived of by the middle classes. Earlier in the eighteenth century women had sometimes become accomplished amateur artists, like Mrs. Delany in England, whose paper cutouts of flowers were widely known and praised;

but, if they resembled Mrs. Delany, they thought of their work as a way to prevent idleness, a way they feared might not be as valuable as housekeeping or charity.<sup>8</sup> These negative connotations did not entirely disappear in the next century, but were mitigated by an increased approval of individualistic self-expression. From England and Germany album-making spread throughout the Continent, and has persisted in some form until the present.<sup>9</sup> As long as women made albums, their themes remained remarkably consistent. Only the representation of maternity evolved significantly, tending increasingly to images of mothers holding very young children, signs of a more exclusive and physically bonding conception of the subject.

Albums grouped images together into structured units. Domestic journals recorded scenes of everyday life, of places and people so familiar to their original audiences that they required only the briefest captions. Short descriptions recalled amusing incidents and special occasions, or referred to family jokes and rituals. Domestic jour-



5. Marie de Krüdener, *Album Page with Photographs of a Home*, stereoscopic photographs and ink, 1863. Private collection.



nals sometimes concentrated on a particular family theme, most commonly a mother's experience of a new child's development, and a family tradition of entertainment. Between 1803 and 1810, for example, the English Wynne-Williams family recorded each of their plays or pantomimes, with cast lists and watercolor illustrations.<sup>10</sup>

Other albums commemorate special times: a trip, for instance, or the months between engagement and marriage. In these albums, which we might call souvenir albums, the text tends to be longer, to weave itself around pictures and to make the depicted events into a self-contained story. One woman—remembered in her family only as the aunt of another album maker—put together an album in the 1860s that took her family from English train station to English train station, via boat, barge, and donkey peregrinations in the Middle East. The laconic irony of the captions contrasts humorously with the spontaneous verve of the images, which show three women cousins and their male chaperones dashing about in comic states of high spirits, earnest exertion, and exhaustion.<sup>11</sup>

Paintings by the same women who made albums, or the same sort of women, might seem to be isolated objects, but should be thought of as if they were detached album pages. While of course many amateur pictures were not made for albums, they were conceived of as if they were to be included in albums. Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879), for example, produced artistically ambitious and ostensibly separate photographs, but when she presented them to friends and family, she assembled them into albums that revealed her work's conceptual origins in a feminine amateur tradition.<sup>12</sup>

Women's amateur paintings reiterate album themes. Marguerite de Krüdener (1818–1911, sister of Marie de Krüdener) produced a significant number of both separate paintings and albums that, exceptionally, have been kept together. In both her paintings and her albums she represented vacations in the Alps, her home on Lake Geneva, each of her sisters, brothers, nephews, nieces, and many of her numerous friends. Her paintings by their repetitions demonstrate which were her fa-



6. Marguerite de Krüdener, *Self-Portrait*, gouache and pencil, about 1846–48. Private collection.

vorite subjects: her home, her sisters, her mother, and herself [6].

The common belief that the woman amateur painted only pictures of flowers is a myth. Some amateur women did restrict themselves to plant subjects, but more often as a chosen specialization than because they could do nothing else. Women whose painting provided an outlet for extensive botanical knowledge devised particularly ingenious reconciliations of their intellectual inclinations with femininity's exigencies. Marianne North (English, 1830–1890), for example, painted pictures of plants and landscapes around the world that won the respect of contemporary botanists. When she donated her works to Kew Gardens, she requested that they be assembled into an environment she would design as a homelike refuge for visitors to the gardens, complete with live-in couple, tea, and light refreshments.<sup>13</sup>

### *Representations of Social Experience*

Women presented in their albums and amateur paintings their version of what bourgeois feminin-



it should be. Album imagery is highly selective and coherent. Each individual picture works toward the meaning of the album as a whole. Each album adds its part to an overarching pictorial structure. No one image or one album provides a key, but taken together and considered contextually, amateur images show us how women visualized themselves.

Women's albums and amateur paintings cleave to values professed by the bourgeoisie. Their pictures focus on places and activities with which the middle class identified itself. The travel scenes in albums record middle-class leisure: earned, no doubt, and seriously spent. Images of relaxation and tourism balance images of labor and office. Landscapes catalogue middle-class vacation spots: beaches, lakes, spas, country houses, or the more exotic Alps, Middle East, and North Africa, sometimes adorned with picturesque peasants. Souvenirs of theater performances and scenes from novels or poetry illustrate genteel amusements.

As rest was to work, so was private to public, feminine supposedly to masculine. The bourgeoisie tried to polarize its experience into separate spheres, ideally finding shelter in the one and purpose in the other. New living patterns decreed new spaces, the sacrosanct spaces of home. Femininity belonged to the home, in the home. Men of course occupied and needed home, but home was a world to be invented and managed by women.

Women's album pictures accept the domain allotted to women—indeed, they insist on it. The outside world in albums reaches only as far as families went on vacations or unmarried women could go unchaperoned—not as far as cafés, boulevards, or professional studios, let alone the realms of erudition, politics, or history. Even within these boundaries only women's places are represented: the park or garden, the ballroom, the parlor—not the office, the billiard room, or the stables. Virtually all albums that are not travel souvenirs focus on the maker's home, and on women's occupation within the home (whereas men's albums only occasionally do). At home, in twos or threes, women were most often shown reading or playing the piano, sometimes posing or drawing, occasionally

dancing. Princess Eugenie chose to paint three women together on their balcony [2], Henrietta Thornton grouped her entire family inside their home [4], Marie de Krüdener selected photographs of her family both in front and in back of their house [5]. Men make rare appearances in women's albums, and then as family members, and only in women's home territory [4,5]. The objects that recur throughout amateur imagery belong to women: porcelains, fans, knick-knacks, small pets, and, above all, needlework.

Amateur images assertively emphasize the signs of femininity. Etiquette books of the period, novels, moralistic tracts, and sociological essays all agree in assigning a gender connotation to the places and objects depicted with such insistent frequency. Women certainly spent time in other places, handled other objects; the ones they chose to use as visual self-expression were ones that stood for their roles as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, and homemakers. The objects of album imagery—the fans, the flowers, the caskets, the needlework, the little pet, the drapery—were so resonant that France's best-selling women's magazine, the *Petit Echo de la mode*, intertwined them into its decorative masthead. The place so often returned to in feminine images, the small worktable in the parlor, by the window or the hearth, was designated a center of feminine gravity, the spot from which the values of home and family emanated. A particularly blunt story, signed by Emmeline Raymond and published in the popular women's magazine *La Mode illustrée* in 1871, articulates the worktable's significance. A concerned husband chastises his heedless wife: "The most important of all duties, because it subsumes all her obligations, is to know how to stay at home."<sup>14</sup> How shall she learn, the wife inquires. He answers: "Have, I beg of you, a worktable, at which you will acquire the habit of sitting for a few hours each day."<sup>15</sup>

Amateur artists edit the variety of female experience into feminine self-representations. What they depict is a social role, not a biological condition. They sedulously avoid the female body itself. Here class distinctions that disembodied bourgeois women and animalized lower-class women



make themselves forcefully felt. Two kinds of women populate feminine imagery: working-class and middle-class (or upper-class identifying with middle-class values). Working-class women virtually all appear as domestic servants performing the kinds of household chores from which middle-class women would like to distance themselves. Images of bathrooms and bedrooms that do not double as parlors are rare, and tend to be relegated to caricatures, disclaimed thereby with pictorial irony. Servants are represented as members of extended families, and only the mother-substitute nurse gains pride of place, as she does in Thornton's image [4].

Amateur imagery represents only the most social aspects of domestic life. Middle- and upper-class apartments had their public and their private areas; amateur women's pictures concentrate on the public. They avoid whatever is solitary and intimate, and contain almost none of the introspective musing or personal reactions more common in verbal diaries or journals.

Women were performing in their images; the images themselves were their performance. They played a role onstage that succeeded inasmuch as it built on, but concealed, the efforts and conditions of its creation. Women presented a crafted vision of themselves from which all preparations and underpinnings had been pruned away.

Yet these women brought to the making of images underlying values of their own. In their pictures they asserted femininity not merely as a subject but as a way of perceiving, which informed the intentions, practice, and destination of their imagery. Only as a complete activity can albums and amateur paintings be understood or contrasted with other kinds of images. Approached picture by picture, feminine imagery yields little, nor can albums and amateur pictures be well understood on opposed terms of public and private, society and individual, despite their adherence to an initial bourgeois polarization of masculine and feminine. Rather, feminine imagery is structured according to beliefs in which public, private, self, and other are less easily distinguished.

Feminine imagery works not just with objects or settings, but through them to depict, cultivate,

and perpetuate ideals of social harmony and emotional bonding. Amateur pictures represent shared experience, just as Princess Eugenie's women share their balcony and Thornton's sisters and brothers gather in their library [2, 4]. Adèle Hugo thanked her sons' tutor in 1838 with two signed and dated portraits of the children assembled into the equivalent of an album page with a commemorative caption: "offert à Monsieur Marin en souvenir des bons soins qu'il a eu pour mes enfants." Travel souvenir pictures include pure landscapes, but also many images of companionship and social events. Often images and especially captions recall the interaction, serious or comic, between travelers and local inhabitants.

Self is understood as it affects others. Women dwell on their presentation of themselves to mutual scrutiny. At resorts, at balls, in the loges of respectable theaters, on balconies [2] (the domestic equivalent of the theater loge) women go on display to arrange marriages, conduct personal business, introduce their children, or engage in the critical occupation of seeing and being seen.

At times in their images women submit passively to public opinion, but just as often with their images they cultivate private relationships. Women who made albums and amateur paintings did not hide themselves or their works from a male audience; a number of nineteenth-century paintings by men represent women sketching out-of-doors, and women artists used male family members as subjects. Women preferred, however, to represent each other, their times together, and their meeting places. Many women's inscriptions address each other. Their pictorial work celebrates the bonds between artist and subject, especially those between the artist and her mother, sisters, daughters, nieces.

Album pictures dwell on the places of feminine sociability—above all the parlor and its outdoor equivalents, the veranda or private garden. Marie de Krüdener used six images to represent her home in Petropolis: one of the building, one of the street in front of it, two views from it, and two of its garden in back [5]. Seated in the parlor next to the chimney or the window, surrounded by flowers or house plants, the mistress of the house re-

\* 4/4 below album + diary



ceived and paid calls. There women met friends, maintained family ties, paid deference to social superiors, cultivated their husbands' colleagues through their wives, exchanged information, forged alliances, and conducted business. There mothers trained their daughters in the graces, disciplines, and rituals of their condition.

In their albums, women assembled images that seemed pertinent to a sense of social self. In 1854, A.-A.-E. Disderi introduced the *carte-de-visite*, a type of very small portrait priced significantly lower than its competitors because multiple exposures were grouped on a single photographic plate, printed on paper, and mounted on cardboard. As its name implies, the *carte-de-visite* (calling card) introduced a visual component into existing social rituals; women incorporated it into their album practice. Women exchanged and collected *carte-de-visite* portraits of friends and family, making their albums microcosmic versions of their social networks.<sup>16</sup>

The social orientation of feminine imagery extended to the conditions of its creation and presentation. Women rarely painted or drew alone, tending instead to work in the presence of female friends and relatives, most often a sister. Sometimes two sisters painted or drew together; more often one would sketch while the other played an instrument or sewed [4]. Women transmitted skills across generations, from mother to daughter or from aunt to niece.

Amateur paintings were hung in family rooms, given as tokens of friendship, exchanged as talismans against separation. From the richness of their covers, which make of them display objects rather than ordinary books, and from literary descriptions or other images, we know that albums were usually presented on a table or console in the parlor, where they could be perused or added to by callers. Henrietta Thornton shows one of her sisters, Lucy, who was also an amateur artist, leafing through an album with one of their brothers [4]. Occasionally women would even have themselves photographed with an album [1], indicating the degree to which albums could constitute a part of their willed self-image.<sup>17</sup>

Many albums and amateur paintings are dated,

and usually some biographical information about their makers survives. It seems, on the basis of this evidence, that a large majority of album makers and amateur painters were young women, between the ages of about sixteen and thirty-five. Of the women who continued to paint and draw for the rest of their adult lives, a majority seem to have been single. Most exceptions are women who started an album or a series of pictures during a trip or at the birth of a child.

If the subject matter, the emphasis on social role-playing, and the author's age are considered together, it becomes possible to understand the motivation of feminine imagery. In some sense, the motivation for any act of visual self-representation is the basic desire to express oneself. But what triggers that desire? What configuration of circumstances produces a particular kind of self-representation? And how does a particular situation enable and affect the forms self-representation will take?

The majority of women made albums and amateur paintings at transitional moments in their lives, especially just before or after marriage and motherhood. Many started making pictures during adolescence, when they left school, fell in love, or gave birth to their children. Interludes marked by travel also spurred picture-making: "finishing" trips after school and before coming out, for instance, or honeymoon trips. Women actively represented feminine conventions during phases in which they had to redefine themselves and their social role. Picture-making rehearsed feminine obligations and privileges. Feminine imagery acted as self-representation in the sense that it was a means both to learn and to perform an identity.

Ironically, the most telling, because least rewarded, tribute to the adjustment provided by visual self-expression came from unmarried adult women seemingly released from feminine obligations. While a few exceptional women used their positions outside normative feminine roles to achieve in public domains, many more used their time to celebrate and reaffirm the domestic roles they observed without playing. Spinsters remained in a state of liminal femininity—neither children nor mothers—all their adult lives. Yet



they devoted their pictures primarily to their mothers, to their sisters as mothers, and to their sisters' daughters.

Women's amateur pictures demonstrate pride taken in the accomplished performance of a role, but that pride reached its culmination in self-effacement. The final purpose of feminine imagery was dissolution into a family context. Many young women took up drawing and painting to navigate their passage toward a married life whose obligations would preclude picture-making. Small in size, rapid in execution, women's painting was squeezed in between more imperative domestic or emotional preoccupations. These little pictures were integrated into domestic surroundings or closed between book covers. Gradually they merged into a family's sense of self, of its homes, characters, kinship networks, amusements—of its history. As long as family memory endures, the pictures remain within its embrace. Still today, virtually all of the pictures that survive do so in private homes, accessible only through contact with family members.

### *Feminine Imagery in a Commercial World*

Feminine imagery did not survive outside the home. Either it simply disappeared from sight or it succumbed to the forces of commodity marketing. In the 1840s feminine imagery developed a public and professional avatar in the form of fashion illustration. With tragic rapidity, fashion illustration turned on its progenitor, as the tool of forces that would exhaust feminine visual culture's energies by the end of the century.

From the 1830s through the 1890s, magazines targeting a female audience printed several black-and-white engravings on almost every page, and the expensive magazines (or the more expensive editions of a magazine) included two or three full-page, hand-colored plates in every issue. For obvious reasons, fashion illustration detailed clothing more precisely than did women's albums or amateur painting. Otherwise, the images share the same themes and to some extent the same types of composition. They have in common the same middle-class women, the same pairing or grouping

of figures, the same emblematic objects, settings, and occupations—and the same concentration of vision on a domain both social and intimate, selfless and selfish. The figures of fashion illustration, like most figures in albums and amateur paintings, hover large and flat in the foreground, accompanied by a few delineated objects and pieces of furniture placed well in front of a vague background, which itself floats nimbuslike on a small sheet of paper.

Fashion illustration developed a distinctive style of its own in the 1840s, with the influential work of Jules David, Comte Calix, and three sisters: Heloïse Leloir (1820–1873), Anais Toudouze (1822–1899), and Laure Noël (1827–1878), all born Colin. For decades the Colins counted among the dominant artistic forces in fashion illustration, especially Anais, who outdistanced all the others in sheer output. The Colins' work clearly demonstrates the connection between early nineteenth-century amateur imagery and fashion illustration, for in addition to their professional work, the Colins maintained a private, more traditional, practice, creating pictures for themselves and their families, with images much like those by other album makers and amateurs.

Fashion illustration answered women's images of themselves. The financial interests of women's magazines—sales—dictated a product with which women could identify. The enormous consumption of women's magazines and the iconographic stability of fashion plates over more than a half century suggest that women saw what they wanted to see. In France, center of fashion production, *La Mode illustrée*, whose plates set the highest standards, enjoyed a circulation of 40,000 in 1866, and 100,000 in 1890. The *Moniteur de la mode* had 200,000 subscribers in 1890, as did the *Petit Echo de la mode*. For each subscriber, there were almost certainly several readers.

What happened to feminine imagery like the Colins' when it was bought by the fashion and publishing industries and transformed into a consumer product? In 1866 Anais Toudouze designed a fashion illustration for *La Mode illustrée* [7] that shows one woman leafing through an album and another, formally dressed, checking her appear-

fashion





7. Design by Anais Toudouze in *La Mode illustrée*, fashion plate, engraving and watercolor, 1866. Private collection.

ance in a mirror. The picture, consciously or unconsciously, reveals the vulnerability of feminine self-expression in a capitalist culture. One woman looks at a social portrait of herself that she has assembled. The other looks at a reflection of herself in a costume she has bought. The difference is between a personally produced self-image and one that is purchased. Yet the fashion illustration equates its two sides.

The fashion illustration has no fixed center. Each woman, echoing the other, turns toward her mirror, whether of glass or photographs. The entire image reflects the self-image of *La Mode illustrée*'s audience. An "original" self is everywhere, and consequently nowhere. Ideals reflect back and

forth, visions women had of what they wanted to be, of what they thought they should be, of how they hoped to please others. In this hall of mirrors, the only constant is the desire to please.

Femininity demanded a self-effacement that the fashion industry converted to its own purposes. Women rigorously projected signs of their emotional and physical availability. Those signs interwove themselves into a system of appearances we still think of as "feminine." The intention of those appearances was opposed to the values of a capitalist economy inasmuch as they stressed personal relationships and family nurture or, to put it another way, an altruism diametrically opposed to opportunism. Yet the means by which feminine



intentions made themselves manifest proved highly susceptible to market forces.

Feminine visual culture led a fragile existence exposed to an inclement economic environment. Industrialization and fashion chased each other toward ever more rapid production, coupled with ever more rapid consumption. This rhythm threatened to turn feminine appearances into spectacles. What had been extensions of a feminine sense of self easily became ephemeral displays of purchaseable goods. In a studio photograph [1], the woman in a day dress holding an album valorizes herself and her social situation; she poses for the public eye, presenting to the camera textures and emblems that will convey an aura of bourgeois femininity: straight back, graceful gesture, clear skin, silk dress, family album. In the fashion plate [7], her confident outward gaze and inviting gesture have disappeared—only the dress and the album remain. The subject no longer exchanges gazes with a spectator but instead turns toward an image of itself.

The woman in the photograph relies on surfaces to represent herself, yet her individual and social presence still generate the image's message. She manipulates her stance and her accessories, she seeks out the photographer whose style flatters her preconceptions of herself. No individual presence emanates from within the fashion plate. All sense of self has vaporized into a promise that hovers somewhere between costume and caption. "Buy these outfits," it intimates, "and this social situation with all its connotations might be yours." Album pages used captions, descriptive, humorous, or fond, to explain the relevance of the image to its maker. The fashion plate used captions to list where both magazine and outfit could be bought. Women's album captions close the small gap between image and intimate viewer by situating the image in the viewer's personal memory. Fashion print captions do the opposite: they keep image and viewer apart by diverting identification with the feminine subject toward the channels of commodity consumption. Fashion prints hold personality forever hostage against a limitless ransom.

Feminine visual culture steered perilously close

to consumer culture. Nineteenth-century industrialization spun femininity centrifugally outward into objects: costume, accessories, interior decoration. Every virtue had its dress, every affection its token, every body its corset. Acceleration of industrial cycles shrank the life span of femininity's representations. Appearances had to be ceaselessly reconstructed, new defenses thrown up around a social sense of self continually menaced by relentlessly novel market directives. Some women recouped faster than others; a few ignored or disdained the world around them.

By the end of the century, though, feminine visual culture and consumer culture had merged almost entirely. Postcards of celebrities replaced family photographs in albums, department store bonuses succeeded watercolors, snapshots taken like trophies supplanted the mixed-media narratives of earlier voyages. The renewal of femininity's representations often became an end in itself.

### *Marginal Status*

Economic and gender constructions interacted to limit the means of women's self-representation. While high art did not escape the mechanisms of consumer culture, it managed to dominate them or, at least, profit from them. Painting used its aura to win for itself not only money but intellectual breathing space. Belief in innate genius and in transcendental beauty enabled some painters to distance their pictures from cultural and economic forces without sacrificing the advantages of those forces. Their work could both partake of privilege and comment on it. Even if it was imaginary, painters' cultural isolation gave them a sustained energy to develop ideas and to perfect techniques with which to express those ideas. In feminine visual culture there was never time for the unfolding of resources. Painting protected itself with a powerful profession and an elaborate body of theory. Women had a pictorial tradition and feminine values, but no institutional protection.

Most of the women who made albums and amateur paintings believed that their work was less



meaningful and worthwhile than the professional painting they saw exhibited in galleries and museums, and even in their own homes. Women faced nearly insuperable external obstacles when they chose to join the profession of painting. Fundamental obstacles also lurked within which kept women from even wanting to confront external impediments. Women must have believed that their experience and their values were worth representing. Their albums and amateur paintings, as well as fashion illustration, show that they did believe this to some extent—to a greater extent than we have perhaps been aware of. But marginality weighed against a belief in their work, and restricted its scope. The reader may be wondering why feminine imagery has been contrasted with “high art” rather than with “masculine” imagery. High art is “high”—that is, dominant—precisely because it so completely denies alternatives that it becomes normative even for those it excludes.

Women may have believed their images were inferior as art, but they adamantly adhered to their values. Feminine visual culture resisted the isolation and self-promotion that granted painting its margin of freedom. Feminine art did not just look different; it obeyed fundamentally different conceptions of meaning and purpose.<sup>18</sup> Albums and amateur paintings were small images perused in intimate settings; ambitious paintings were so large they could hang only in institutions or in the public rooms of large homes. Feminine picture makers tended to work with delicate, evanescent materials like paper, pencil, and watercolor; high-art painters made their finished works in oil and canvas and framed them with carved wood. Amateur pictures were destined for a secluded family life, within which they would be understood as memorials to emotional bonds and private history. Professional paintings were meant for public exhibition and sale, for interpretation by art critics who would extend their significance as far abroad as possible. Album makers and amateur painters shunned the market and its values; professional painters sought the market as an objective indicator of worth. Feminine imagery showed the social situations women hoped to perpetuate, while pro-

fessional painters aspired to transcend social situations and create ideals.

The essential difference is between contextual private objects and autonomous public ones. Feminine pictures are saturated with their social and affective functions; their meaning comes from their setting, from the conditions of their creation and a knowledge restricted to those who knew the maker personally or to her descendants. Album makers and amateur painters make no pretense of an aesthetic or intellectual self-sufficiency. No one album picture makes much sense by itself—its meaning emerges only in its relationship to other pictures in the same album, and from the situation of the album in the life cycle of its maker and her family. Easel paintings signify as autonomously as possible, which enables them theoretically to function in any setting, for any audience. Paintings, more than any other kind of art object, are divorced from their context; whether or not the goal is possible, paintings imply an intellectual and formal self-sufficiency. Amateur feminine imagery takes aesthetic considerations into some account but sustains itself through affective relationships or external social situations; painting may or may not demonstrate social concerns but almost always strives for internal aesthetic coherency.

Unfortunately for feminine imagery, art historians understand that difference in terms of inferiority and superiority. Only one kind of standard is applied, the standard of internal aesthetic excellence. Since the Renaissance the characteristics of painting have become the criteria of artistic judgment. The hegemony of painting has been so complete that its characteristics not only define norms of formal quality, but even norms of visual meaning. All kinds of visual expression have come to be solipsistically measured against the qualities of painting. Those that cannot fit the norms are simply dismissed.

Ironically, that dismissal of marginality seeps even into sympathetic evaluation of women's images. Of women's many visual self-representations, only their painting has really won its way into the purview of art history. No one reasonably argues against the importance of reintegrating women into a history of painting. But that recu-



peration may miss the point of gendered image-making. The challenge may now be not to locate women's images that approximate men's and then measure them on some normative scale of greatness, but to consider whether women may not have made images that are different from men's, to investigate the power of gender in visual culture, and then to ask whether, after all, a feminine vision may not have something of its own to teach us.

From women's amateur picture-making we learn that during the nineteenth century a great number of women all over Europe engaged in self-representation of their own. Though restricted to a domestic sphere, within that sphere they re-created social values, adjusted boundaries between public and private, and found an alternative to the elite art from which they were excluded.

Feminine imagery shows that throughout the century radically different kinds of visual representation did coexist, each with its own economy of creation and exchange. Not everyone made pictures to sell them, justify them theoretically, and define a pictorial "real." The women who made the albums and amateur paintings discussed in

this essay made pictures as integral parts of family life and emotional bonds.

Lastly, the fate of feminine images demonstrates the frailty of marginal visual culture. Mary Ellen Best made hundreds of pictures of her family, her travels, and the homes she lived in, mounted them in albums, and left them to her family.<sup>19</sup> Decades passed, family memory faded. Two heirs inquired whether Sotheby's would be willing to auction Best's watercolors. At first, "expecting a sheaf of amateur doodlings," Sotheby's hesitated.<sup>20</sup> Then, seemingly convinced of the particular meaning of the albums as a whole, they accepted them. Howard Rutkowski of Sotheby's wrote: "There was more to these charming views of early nineteenth-century life than immediately met the eye. Indeed the watercolours themselves were a diary, a chronicle of the life of a young woman of the previous century." But the apparent recognition of Best's work proved to be only a marketing ploy. Rutkowski continued: "Promoted as such, these watercolours proved a tremendous success, not only in the salesroom, but in the public's mind as well."<sup>21</sup> Sotheby's broke up the albums and sold Best's work as individual paintings.

## NOTES

1. England provides some exceptions to the rule. English definitions of professional and amateur art have long been less rigid than others. Consequently, museums and publishers have brought the work of several women amateurs into the public sphere. See J.P.M. Brenan, Anthony Huxley, and Brenda Moon, *A Vision of Eden: The Life and Work of Marianne North* (New York, 1980); Betty Bright-Low and Jacqueline Hinsley, *Sophie Du Pont: A Young Lady in America. Sketches, Diaries, and Letters, 1823-1833* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987); Stefan Buczacki, *Creating a Victorian Flower Garden: Original Flower Paintings by Alice Drummond-Hay* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988); Caroline Davidson, *Women's Worlds: The Art and Life of Mary Ellen Best, 1809-1891* (New York, 1985); Mariana Davydoff, *Memoirs of a Russian Lady: Drawings and Tales of Life Before the Revolution* (London and New York, 1986); Robert Fairley, ed., *Jemima: The Paintings and Memoirs of a*

*Victorian Lady* (North Pomfret, Vt.: Trafalgar Square Publishing, 1989); Flora Fraser, ed., *Maud: The Diaries of Maud Berkeley*, introduction by Elizabeth Longford (London: Secker and Warburg, 1985); Ruth Hayden, *Mrs. Delany: Her Life and Her Flowers* (London, 1980); Gordon Mingay, *Mrs. Hurst Dancing and Other Scenes from Regency Life, 1812-1823: Watercolors by Diana Sperling* (London, 1981); Marina Warner, *Queen Victoria's Sketchbook* (New York, ca. 1979).

2. S.A.R. Madame la Duchesse de Vendôme, *Notre Voyage en Afrique* (Paris, 1928). The duchess had her travel journal printed in order to share it with the many members of her family.

3. Davidson, pp. 9, 148.

4. Private collection, France.

5. Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris.

6. Private collection, France.

7. On the English case, see Michael Clarke, *The Tempt-*



*ing Prospect: A Social History of Watercolors* (London: Colonnade, 1981), pp. 90–102.

8. See Hayden.

9. On the origins and definitions of “album” in the Romantic period, see Segolène Le Men, “Quelques définitions romantiques de l’album,” *Art et métiers du livre*, January 1987, pp. 40–47. While amateur sketching seems to have developed fastest in England, some evidence suggests that albums containing material other than pictures originated in Germany. See Henry Monnier, “La manie des albums,” *Paris, ou le livre des cent-et-un* (Paris: Ladvocat, 1832), vol. V, pp. 199–200. Victor-Joseph de Jouy proposes either a German or a Russian source. (L’Hermite de la Chaussée d’Antin.) “Des albums,” “Recherches sur l’album et le chiffonier sentimentale,” *Observations sur les mœurs et usages parisiens au commencement du XIXe siècle* (Paris: Pillet, 1811), vol. 1, p. 145.

10. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

11. Private collection, England.

12. Helmut Gernsheim, *Julia Margaret Cameron: Her Life and Photographic Work* (Millerton, N.Y., 1975), pp. 175–77. Harry H. Lunn, Jr., *Julia Margaret Cameron: An Album* (Washington, D.C., 1975).

13. See Brenan et al.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 214.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

16. This point has been made by two authors. See André Rouillé in *L’Empire de la photographie* (Paris, 1982); and Caroline Chotard-Lioret, who in her unpublished dissertation, “La Société familiale en province; une correspondance privée entre 1870 et 1920” (Université de Paris V, 1983), shows that a specific series of albums were constituted by exchange of photographs among women, and contained images only of family and friends.

17. Private collection, France.

18. The relationship between professional and amateur art changed with the advent of Impressionism, which brought into the domain of high art some, though by no means all, aspects of the feminine pictorial tradition. My study of women’s albums and amateur painting began, in fact, as part of my dissertation on the Impressionist Berthe Morisot (1841–1895), whose paintings were shaped by her feminine heritage. Here may also be the place to note that men, too, made albums and amateur paintings; these are far fewer in number than women’s, and conform quite closely to professional high-art models.

19. Davidson, p. 9.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 7.