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Fig. 1. Woman with album. French photograph, Delsart studio, c. 1865.

## Secluded Vision: Images of Feminine Experience in Nineteenth-Century Europe

Anne Higonnet

Women have many traditions of self-expression; the least known may be the tradition of 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 those pictures that survive now moulder 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 obscured.

A reconstruction of nineteenth-century feminine pictorial traditions encounters some basic difficulties, both material and theoretical. Most albums and amateur paintings are virtually unknown. Public collections, academics and publishing houses ignore them.<sup>1</sup> Ignorance of them stems, in part, from their original intention to represent a secluded world. But in a larger sense, they 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 painting they often seem feeble.

The problem is not that feminine images fail to meet aesthetic criteria, but that they 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 tradition, 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 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.

This essay, then, tries to consider its subject from both within and without. It first describes the forms of visual expression practiced by middle- and upper-class women in nineteenth-century Europe, and then suggests what role these images may have played in definitions of femininity. Next, it observes the inability of feminine imagery to assert itself outside a domestic world, and goes on to explain that inability by defining the differences between feminine imagery and painting. Finally, the essay seeks to understand how feminine imagery's characteristics have worked against its recognition.

### Albums and Amateurs

Women throughout nineteenth-century Europe drew and painted. It would be impossible to arrive at any exact figures, but it seems that the middle- or upper-class family was rare that did not include at least one serious amateur woman artist every few generations. A wealth of literary references gives some idea of the phenomenon's prevalence. The heroine of Wilkie Collins' *Woman in White*, for instance, meets her hero when he comes to supervise her outdoor afternoon watercolor sessions; Ibsen's Hedda Gabler disguises her reunion with her former lover by innocuously leafing through her album of honeymoon photographs; Jane Austen's 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. Women one might imagine otherwise engaged spent their spare time making pictures: the royal Princess Eugenie of Sweden (1830-1889), for instance, was a dedicated amateur, and so was George Sand.

A pedagogic curriculum emphasizing the fine arts gave women basic expressive means. Most middle- and upper-class girls were taught at an early age, and for some years, the rudimentary techniques of drawing and painting. Visual literacy was considered a feminine accomplishment that brought out a girl's best qualities and enabled her to find a suitable husband.

Childhood training served as the technical basis for later work. But it has to be emphasized that many women cultivated and developed their training well beyond their school years. Queen Victoria painted her last picture at the age of seventy-one. Virtually all the images discussed here 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. Again, exact figures are impossible to compute. There is the evocative case, however, 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 English woman 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 1500 pictures.<sup>3</sup>

Above all, women made albums. Albums lent themselves to a wide range of skill and means. Rarely larger than about eighteen by twelve inches, usually smaller, the album contained some twenty-five to one hundred sheets, bound with anything from cheap cardboard to tooled leather and elaborate metal clasps. Some albums were filled by one person; others were collective efforts.

Many kinds of pictures fill the album pages. There are the delicate watercolors or pencil sketches of landscapes and interiors—images hovering on the surface of the page, fading off at the edges—a cozy parlor [Fig. 2], a view from a country house, a picturesque landscape. Or, cheerfully bypassing technical difficulties, lively little pen-and-ink figures sway this way and that, animated by domestic occupations or the curiosities of travel; and beneath the figures, spidery captions tell a story, identifying places and people.

Many pictures made with pencil or brush find their way between album covers, and just as many 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: pen-and-ink caricatures, watercolor landscapes, but also lithographs of favorite pianos, maps charting trips, photographs of family homes and family [Fig. 3], pressed flowers and butterflies.<sup>4</sup>

Other albums turn words into pictures. In what are called

"keepsake books" or "album amicorum," friends and family members each cover a page with sketches, prints, proverbs, witticisms, poems, advice or messages of friendship, usually united by decorative borders and ornaments. They range from formal volumes like Maria de Marches' tooled blue leather album containing 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 added a color stick-on for emphasis.<sup>6</sup>

The practice of album-making seems to have begun in England 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. Both men and women, moved by a new perception of the countryside as source of inspiration and solace, went outside 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.

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. Women earlier in the eighteenth century had sometimes become accomplished amateur artists, like Mrs. Delany, whose paper cut-outs of flowers were widely known and praised but, like 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>7</sup> Those negative connotations did not entirely disappear with the advent of the next century, but were mitigated by an increasing approval of individualistic self-expression.

From England album-making spread throughout the continent. Albums continued to be made during the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, and the practice has not yet ended. With the years, album images moved from the created toward the ready-made. Photography's diffusion contributed to the change, as did chromolithography and the distribution of chromolithographs by manufacturers and department stores as bonuses. Intermediate albums combine drawings, watercolors, photographs and lithographs. Despite changes in media, the general style, and especially the subject matter of albums remained remarkably stable. The most

noticeable thematic evolution is the increasing frequency of mothers alone with children, an expression perhaps of a more intense (perhaps Freudian?) idea of the mother-child bond.

Albums group 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 recall amusing incidents and special occasions, or refer to ongoing family jokes and rituals. Domestic journals sometimes concentrate on a particular family theme, of which the most common were a mother's experience of a new child's development, or a family tradition of entertainment. Between 1803 and 1810 the Wynne-Williams family put on a number of plays and pantomimes, each of which was duly represented in an album with cast lists and watercolor illustrations.<sup>8</sup>

Other albums commemorate a more chronologically specific experience: a special trip, often the time of one's engagement. 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 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.

Paintings by the same women who made albums, or the same sort of women, seem to be isolated objects. But their paintings are more usefully considered as detached album leaves than as minor variations on professional painting. In fact, most women's "paintings" were destined for albums. Even Julia Margaret Cameron, when she wanted to give examples of her artistically ambitious photographs to family and close friends, pasted them into albums.<sup>10</sup>

If anything, women's amateur painting makes the orientation of feminine images even clearer because it so often turns its attention to family houses and particularly family portraits. Marguerite de Krüdener (1818-1911, sister of Marie de Krüdener) produced a large body of work that, exceptionally, has been kept together. She sketched often in the Alps or at home, painted or drew each of her brothers, nephews, nieces and many of her friends once, occasionally twice; her mother twice with great care; herself three times [Fig. 4]; her country home repeatedly; her two sisters over and over, from childhood through adulthood, separately or together.

The common belief in the woman amateur who only painted pictures of flowers is a myth. A few specialized in flower subjects,

but even they tend to be the exceptions that prove the rule. Flower-painters often had extensive botanical knowledge, but their work, rather than an exploitation of their professional aptitude, seems to have sprung from private motivations and to have known ultimately private destinations or their facsimile. Marianne North (1830-1890) took up flower painting to console herself after the death of her father, whose constant companion she had been. When she donated her paintings to Kew Gardens, she requested they be assembled into an environment she would design as a home-like refuge for visitors to the gardens, complete with live-in couple, tea and light refreshments.<sup>11</sup>

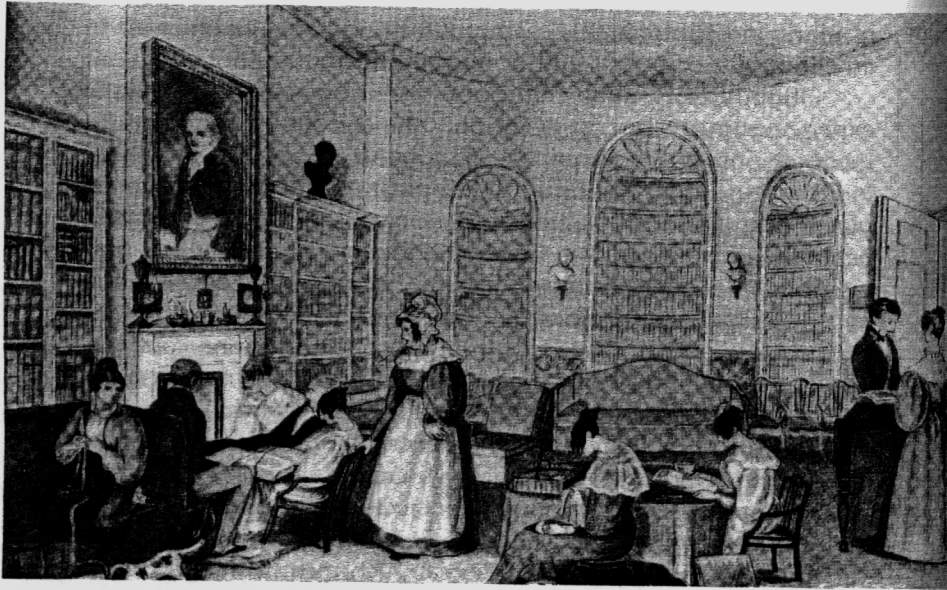


Fig. 2. Watercolor. Henrietta Thornton (English, 1807-1853). c. 1825. Album page: the family assembled in the library. The artist has shown herself at work, sketching with minimal equipment at a work table in the library (the luxurious version of a sitting-room), surrounded by her brothers and sisters, as well as their nurse/mother substitute. To the right, one sister, also an amateur artist, leafs through an album with a brother. Thornton draws the women's occupations, and the portrait of their dead father, in more detail than their individual features. She made this picture as part of a series from memory not long before her marriage, to commemorate her sibling group in its entirety.

### Representations of Social Experience

Women presented in their albums and amateur paintings their version of what bourgeois femininity 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.

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. Values of relaxation and tourism balanced values of labor and office. Album landscapes represent middle-class vacation spots: beaches, lakes, spas, country houses (these last for the upwardly mobile). More exotic scenes represent the places the middle classes went for a change of scenery: the Alps, the Middle East, North Africa.

As rest was to work, so was private to public, feminine to masculine. However ambiguous social reality may have been, middle-class ideology polarized 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 them — indeed, they insist on it. 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 most often read, play the piano, sew or embroider, perhaps pose or draw [Fig. 2], occasionally dance. Men make rare appearances in women's albums, and then as family members, and only in women's territory. Album scenes of bourgeois leisure exclusively depict those in which women participated. The outside world in albums encompasses only the family on vacation or unmarried women on chaperoned excursions — rather than the cafés, boulevards, studios or daring theaters that were favorite Impressionist subjects, along with the brothel. The inside world is also represented by women's places: the park or garden, the ballroom, the parlor — not the office, the smoking room or the billiard room. The objects that recur again and again are women's objects: porcelains, fans, knick-knacks, small pets and, above all, needlework.

Albums and paintings 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, used other objects; the ones they chose to use as visual self-expression are the ones

that stand for their roles as daughter, sister, wife and mother—as home-maker. 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 work table in the parlor, by window or hearth, was the place thought to be the center of feminine gravity, the spot from which the values of home and family emanated. A particularly blunt short story, written by Mme. Emmeline Raymond, and published in the popular women's magazine *La Mode Illustrée* in 1871, articulates the work table'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>12</sup> The wife inquires how she shall learn. He answers: "Have, I beg of you, a work table, at which you will acquire the habit of sitting for a few hours each day."<sup>13</sup>

The variety of female experience has been edited to highlight archetypal feminine experience. That experience, as album makers represent it, is not what we might expect. Album pictures and their constituent amateur paintings turn away from privacy, intimacy, individuality, and domestic concerns. That is, album imagery turns away from those supposedly feminine subjects as they would be defined by normative standards, and more particularly by mainstream pictorial practice.

Feminine imagery only represents the most social aspects of domestic life. Middle- and upper-class apartments had their public and their private areas; feminine imagery concentrates on the public. The solitary and the intimate are excluded. Albums contain almost none of the introspective musing or personal reaction so common in verbal diaries and journals. Nor do women depict natural functions or household chores. While albums may include dining room scenes, they virtually never represent preparation of food. Images of bedrooms or bathrooms are exceptional, and nothing occurs in them except preening for social functions. If servants, who performed most household chores, appear, which they do very rarely despite their omnipresence in the middle-class household, then they do so as members of an extended family. The only servant who ever gains pride of place in album imagery is the maker's nurse or her child's nurse, for the nurse is a mother-substitute.

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 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. Feminine imagery makes weak or distorted sense if approached picture by picture; albums and amateur painting make little sense on opposed terms of public and private, society and individual, despite their adherence to an initial bourgeois polarization of masculine and feminine. Instead, 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 values of social harmony and emotional bonds, and through depiction of those values, to cultivate their memory and their continuation. The subjects of albums and amateur painting represent shared experience. Travel souvenir albums and paintings contain many pictures of landscapes, but many, as well, of the author's fellow-travelers and their common amusements. A recurrent theme in travel souvenir images and especially captions is the interaction, serious or comic, between the group of travelers and local inhabitants.

Self is understood as it affects others. Albums and amateur paintings dwell on women's presentation of themselves to mutual scrutiny. At resorts, at balls, in the loges of theaters, on balconies (the domestic theater loge) women go on display—to arrange marriages, conduct affairs, introduce their children to others of the same social circle—for the pleasure 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 painters used male family members as subjects. But women preferred to picture each other, their relationships among themselves, their meeting places. Many of the captions to their images are addressed to the subject. Their pictures celebrate the bonds between artist and subject, especially those between the artist and her mother, sisters, daughters or nieces.

Album pictures dwell on the places of feminine sociability—above all the parlor. There, on the corner of a sofa, on chairs next to the chimney or the window, surrounded by green plants, the mistress of the house received and made calls. There women met

their friends, cultivated their acquaintances, courted their husband's colleagues via their wives. Information was exchanged, alliances forged, business conducted. And there, we learn from images and texts, mothers trained their daughters in the graces and rituals of their condition. City gardens or country house parks transposed the parlor into a naturalist mode.

In their albums, women assembled images that seemed pertinent to a sense of social self. Shortly after the invention of photography, Disdéri devised the photographic calling card, which enabled the making and infinite reproduction of portraits for a sum within the financial means of the middle class. Women began to send each other calling card portraits of themselves and their families, which they would then collect, making their albums microcosmic versions of their social networks.<sup>14</sup>

The social concern of feminine imagery extended to the conditions of its creation and presentation. Women rarely painted or drew alone, but tended 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 the piano or embroidered. Across generations, too, women transmitted visual interests and skills, 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 in the parlor, where they could be leafed through or added to by callers. Occasionally women would even have themselves photographed with an album, [Fig. 1] indicating the degree to which albums could constitute a part of their willed self-image.

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. Of the women who continued to paint and draw throughout the rest of their adult lives, a majority were 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 vast majority of women who made albums and amateur paintings did so at transitional moments in a feminine role. Most worked on pictures between being primarily daughters or sisters and being wives or mothers. Many started albums when they left school, fell in love, or gave birth to their first child. Women's travels usually functioned as an interlude, often coinciding with the transitional moments in social life; the most common examples are a trip between school and marriage to finish off an education, a honeymoon trip or a wedding anniversary trip. These women actively represented feminine conventions during periods when they had to redefine themselves and their social role. Picture-making served as a rehearsal of social obligations. Feminine imagery was self-representation in a fundamental way; it was a means by which a woman took on her social persona. Through pictures a woman could come to terms with a model of behavior, and transform it into something tangible, as well as reduce it to personal scale. Creation was a form of control, a form of understanding, that enabled women to claim feminine roles as personalities.

Ironically, the most telling, because least rewarded, tribute to the adjustment provided by visual self-expression came from women seemingly released from feminine obligations: unmarried adult women. 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 stood apart from. Spinsters remained in a state of liminal femininity—neither daughters nor mothers—all their adult lives. Yet they devoted their pictures primarily to their mothers, to their sisters as mothers, and to the sister's daughters.

Women's albums and amateur painting 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 drawing and painting. Small in size, rapid in execution, women's painting squeezed into corners the moments spared by other preoccupations, which seemed more imperative. These little objects 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 continues, 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 reflect each other. 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 honing of vision to a domain both social and intimate, selfless and selfish. Even the styles match. The figures of fashion illustration, like most figures in albums and amateur paintings, hover large and flat in the foreground, accompanied by a few strongly delineated objects and pieces of furniture, placed well in front of a vague background, which itself floats nimbus-like 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, Anaïs, and Laure Colin (1820-1873, 1822-1899, 1827-1878), who signed their plates with their married names of Leloir, Toudouze, and Noël. For decades the Colins endured among the dominant artistic forces in fashion illustration, especially Anaïs, who outdistanced all the others in sheer output. Their work provides the clearest demonstration of feminine imagery's projection into fashion illustration, for in addition to their professional work, the Colins maintained a parallel practice, creating pictures for themselves and their families, images much like those by other album-makers and amateurs.

Fashion illustration answered women's image 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 the Colin's feminine imagery when thrust among the interlocking gears of the fashion and publishing industries? In 1866 Anaïs Toudouze designed a fashion illustration for *La Mode Illustrée* [Ill. 5] that shows one woman leafing through an album and another, formally dressed, checking her appearance in a mirror. The picture, more than most of it consciously or unconsciously kind, reveals the vulnerability of feminine vision 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, therefore, 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. 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 vigorously 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 were opposed to the values of a capitalist economy inasmuch as they stressed the virtues of affective bonds and family nurture, or, more basically, an altruism diametrically opposed to individualistic 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 faster production rates coupled with ever faster consumption rates. These production rhythms threatened to turn feminine appearances into spectacles. What had been extensions of a feminine sense of self easily became ephemeral displays of purchasable goods. In a studio photograph [Fig. 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: silken expanses, clear skin, a family album. In the fashion plate, her confident outward gaze and firm gesture have disappeared—only the dress and the album remain. There is no longer



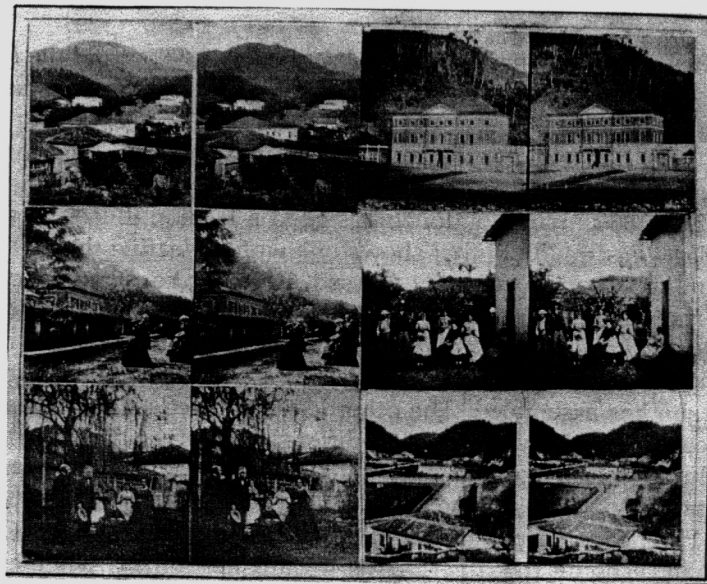


Fig. 3. Marie de Krüdener (Swiss-Russian, 1823-1910). 1863. Album page assembling six stereoscopic photographs. The pictures represent the most frequent outdoor album or amateur painting scenes: the family home, views from the home, family and friends on the terrace or in the garden.



Fig. 4. Pencil, watercolor and gouache. Marguerite de Krüdener (Swiss-Russian, 1818-1911). c. 1846-48. Self-portrait of the amateur artist at work. Marguerite de Krüdener was the sister of Marie de Krüdener (Ill. 3). Marguerite took lessons from Ingres, but never sold or exhibited any of her work. This picture never left her family.

any exchange between subject and spectator. Her gaze, and her partner's, have turned aside with narcissistic fixity. Album pages used captions—descriptive, humorous or fond—to explain the relevance of the image to its maker. The fashion plate uses captions to list where both magazine and outfit can be bought.

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. Only surfaces, social connotations, and shopping information subsist. 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 captions close the small gap between image and intimate viewer by situating the image specifically 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 through 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 lifespan 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 in many cases merged. 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. Shells of feminine visual culture might persist, but not always with their inner substance intact.

### Marginal Status

Economic and gender constructions interact to limit the means of women's self-representation. High art, on the other hand, did not escape the mechanisms of consumer culture, but dominated

them, or at least profited from them. Painting used its aura to win for itself not only money, but also 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. Feminine visual culture never had the time to unfold its 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 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 should they have wished to join the profession of painting. Even more fundamental obstacles lurked within, keeping women from even wishing 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 not been contrasted with "masculine" imagery, rather than with "high art." High art is "high," that is dominant, precisely because it so completely elides 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 rejected the isolation and self-promotion that granted painting its margin of freedom. Feminine images were utterly different from the images of high art, dominated for more than three-quarters of the century by academic painting.<sup>16</sup> Album pages and amateur pictures were small images perused in intimate settings; ambitious paintings were so large they could only hang 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. Albums and amateur paintings were destined for a secluded family life, within which they would be understood as memorials to emotional bonds and private history. Paintings were meant for public exhibition and sale, for interpretation by art critics who would extend their signifi-

cance as far abroad as possible. Albums and amateur paintings shunned the market and its values; paintings sought the market as an objective indicator of worth. Feminine imagery recorded the trace of social situations, which it hoped to perpetuate, while painting 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. Albums and amateur paintings make no pretense of an aesthetic or intellectual self-sufficiency; they intend to trigger feelings and sustain reflection, not to be sentiment or idea themselves. No one album picture makes much sense by itself—its meaning only emerges 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. Paintings concentrate as much of their meaning as possible within themselves, which enables them to function in any setting, for any audience. More than any other kind of art object, the painting is independent of context; whether or not it is possible, the goal of painting is intellectual and formal self-sufficiency. Each kind of image has its own kind of reach: feminine imagery dips briefly into aesthetic considerations but finds its continuity in affective relationships or external social situations; painting may or may not have any social staying power and stakes its claim elsewhere, on an internally coherent aesthetic construction.

Unfortunately for feminine imagery, art history understands 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 judgement. 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 recuperation 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.

I think it does; it teaches us several things. 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 recreated social values: other definitions of public and private, other forms of self-assertion, another kind of picture-making.

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, stake out theoretical turf, or "capture reality." The women who made the albums and amateur paintings discussed in this essay made pictures as integral parts of family life and



Fig. 5. Fashion plate. Engraving after a watercolor by Anaïs Toudouze (French, 1822-1899). Published in *La Mode Illustrée*, 1866.

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>17</sup> Decades passed, family memory faded. Two heirs inquired whether Sotheby's might auction Best's watercolors. At first, "expecting a sheaf of amateur doodlings," Sotheby's hesitated.<sup>18</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>19</sup> Sotheby's broke up the albums and sold Best's work as individual paintings. The high art market searches relentlessly for new fodder. In order to use women's albums and amateur paintings, it will repeat its treatment of Mary Ellen Best, ignoring the meanings and denying the integrity of women's pictorial practices.

#### Notes

1. England provides some exceptions to the rule. English definitions of professional and amateur have long been less rigid than others. Consequently, museums and publishers have brought the work of several woman 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); 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); 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, c. 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. Bibliotheque de l'Arsenal, Paris.

6. Private collection, France.

7. See Hayden.

8. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

9. Private collection, England.

10. Helmut Gernsheim, *Julia Margaret Cameron: Her Life and Photographic Work* (Millerton, NY, 1975), pp. 175-77. Harry H. Lunn, Jr., *Julia Margaret Cameron, An Album* (Washington, DC, 1975).

11. See Brenan, et. al.

12. p. 214.

13. p. 215.

14. 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 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.

15. Private collections, France.

16. 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 profoundly 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 the professional high art models.

17. Davidson, p. 9.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

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