

The Role of Drawing in the Education of Women of the Romantic and Victorian Periods

A presentation by Adam McCune

Slideshow: <http://www.adam-mccune.com/learning-to-draw/>

- I. Men's education moving from Renaissance ideal of liberal education to empirical and practical educations, to prepare for commerce; women's education takes up the previous ideal (Bermingham 190)
- II. Artistic "accomplished" women as a spectacle
 - a. Miss Beauforts (Austen, *Sanditon*, 1817) - actual art-making replaced by pantomime of the elegantly feminine appearance of art-making (Bermingham 183)
 - b. Growing distrust of large, anonymous town spaces meant unmarried women needed to be seen in domestic spaces (Bermingham 184)
 - c. Hannah More writes (1799):
 - i. Finding fault with "watering places" (More 145ff), More objects to young ladies pursuing drawing in such a location "destitute of a tree, or an herb, or a flower" (More 144-145). Young ladies who wish to draw should do so close to home, in "the field, the woods, and gardens of the paternal seat" (More 144).
 - d. Even in domestic space, accomplishments allow opportunity for women to display selves, and men to gaze at women while pretending not to (Bermingham 184)
 - e. Hannah More metaphorically treats the marriage market as a "White Slave Trade," with accomplishments used to increase the value of the slave/bride as a commodity (qtd. in Bermingham 192)

Illustrations: Heideloff, *Morning Dress* (1795) & *Evening Dress* (1798) (harp and telescope poses)

Illustration: Pickersgill's portrait of Hannah More (1821)

III. Circumstances of teaching: boarding schools, home tutoring

- a. Girls might learn drawing at a boarding school.
- b. Such schools were sometimes viewed with suspicion.
- c. “Originally [female boarding schools] taught English, arithmetic, needle work, bookkeeping, and natural history for a flat fee of between forty and two hundred guineas a year, and for between ten and fifty guineas more a girl could be taught extras such as French, drawing, music, dancing, and writing.” (Bermingham 189)
- d. Education in *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and for Alice Liddell:
 - i. At the undersea school (which is playing off of real-world schools), French and music are still extras (Carroll 97), but “Drawling, Stretching, and Fainting in Coils” is part of the “regular course” (Carroll 98).
 - ii. Alice Liddell and her siblings really did learn drawing, sketching, and painting in oils from none other than art critic John Ruskin, who came to their home once a week (Carroll 98, n. 18). The childrens’ watercolor and oil paintings survive, but unfortunately the book that has the reproductions of them is currently checked out of the library.
 - iii. **Illustrations:** Alice Liddell, John Ruskin
- e. Collins’s *Woman in White* depicts a live-in drawing master for two grown young women.

IV. Methods of teaching: from copying art to copying life

- a. Romney’s painting
 - i. Ly Caroline first copies statue, then sister

Illustration: Nattes, *Mrs. Bavizzetti’s Seminary* (1812) – young girl copies urn, older girls copy living girl

Illustration: Burney, *A Fashionable Academy* (c. 1800) – a less favorable representation of such a school

Illustration: Tenniel, Alice with the Gryphon and Mock Turtle

Illustration: George Romney, *Caroline, Viscountess Clifton, and Lady Elizabeth Spencer*, 1794

- b. “In academic practice, drawing from the antique preceded drawing from life.” (Bermingham 185)

V. Accomplished women are amateurs, artistic but not artists

- a. “Lady Caroline’s... amateur sketching takes its secondary place within the context of the paid professional’s oil painting; the portrait foregrounds Romney’s skill, and it is this that defines the sisters as amateurs and makes their artistry both inferior and coextensive with their femininity.the accomplished woman was understood to be artistic but not an artist... neither original nor a paid professional.” (Bermingham 186)

- b. [See Craig, Landseer – amateur vs professionals]

VI. Accomplished women are consumers, not creators

- a. “...unlike the artist, a creator and producer of culture, she was a consumer and reproducer of culture. ...The accomplished woman was accomplished because she had managed to purchase the artistic skill, and sometimes the style, of others through manuals and lessons, and not because she herself was creative.” (Bermingham 186)
- b. Laura Fairlie’s drawings, taught by Hartright (Collins, *The Woman in White*, 1859-1860)
 - i. Marian: “Drawing is [Laura’s] favourite whim.... Women can’t draw—their minds are too flighty, and their eyes are too inattentive.” (First Epoch, *The Story Begun* by Walter Hartright, Ch. VI)
 - ii. Laura: “Fond as I am of drawing, I am so conscious of my own ignorance that I am more afraid than anxious to begin.” (First Epoch, *The Story Begun* by Walter Hartright, Ch. VIII)
 - iii. Hartright not disposed to “serious criticism on the drawings” (First Epoch, *The Story Begun* by Walter Hartright, Ch. VIII)

Illustration: Nattes, *Mrs. Bavizzetti’s Seminary* (1812) – young girl copies urn, older girls copy living girl

Illustration: George Romney, *Caroline, Viscountess Clifton, and Lady Elizabeth Spencer*, 1794 (her sketching vs. Romney’s painting)

Illustrations: Two *Woman in White* illustrations depicting Laura’s sketchbook.

- iv. When it comes time to “get money by drawing,” her work is no more than “poor, faint, valueless sketches.” (Hartright; Third Epoch, The Story Continued by Walter Hartright, Ch. VIII)
 - v. [Gilpin – sentimental value of your drawings]
- c. Perhaps one would not want women’s drawings to be published or sold—accomplishments supposed to be private (Austen's negative counterexamples) (Bermingham 188-189)
- VII. Why draw? Improves taste (ultimately for beautifying self).
 - a. Erasmus Darwin, writing (1797):
 - i. On the one hand, drawing informs taste: “Drawing... greatly facilitates the acquirement of Taste.” (Darwin 27)
 - ii. On the other hand, taste is important because it informs everything else, including drawing: “The rudiments of taste are too much neglected in most boarding schools; these should be taught with some care, as peculiarly belonging to Ladies; since taste enters into their dress, their motions, their manners, as well as into all the fine arts, which they have leisure to cultivate; as drawing, painting...” (Darwin 25)
 - b. John Burton writes [1793]:
 - i. “drawing... may be useful in improving the female taste with respect to dress” (Burton 117)
 - ii. quotes Rousseau to the effect that women should not paint landscapes or portraits, but limit themselves to “whatever is capable of giving an embellishment to Dress” (qtd. Burton 118)

Illustration: Wright’s portrait of Erasmus Darwin (1770)

VIII. Why draw? Contributes to morality.

- a. Bermingham: “accomplishments were often seen as in competition with virtue for a woman’s very soul” (Bermingham 189).
- b. John Burton writes [1793]:
 - i. “Drawing... may prevent you from misemploying your leisure hours.” (Burton 118)
- c. Hannah More writes (1799):
 - i. (Questions whether drawing necessarily leads to good use of time)
 - ii. the “true purpose” of “these elegant talents” is “to embellish the leisure of a life actively good” (More 144).
 - iii. Defending “intellectual accomplishments” (More 151) and “acquirements truly rational” (More 152), More writes, “Whatever... rectifies the judgment, ...whatever purifies the taste, and raises the understanding, will be likely to contribute to moral excellence: to woman moral excellence is the grand object of education” (More 152).
 - iv. [compare Burke’s man of taste – discern good from bad, moral as well as aesthetic]

Illustration: Pickersgill’s portrait of Hannah More (1821)

IX. Why draw? Amusing and technically useful.

- a. John Burton writes [1793]: “Drawing is also an elegant accomplishment; and, where there is a natural inclination for designing, you will have recourse to it with pleasure” (Burton 118)
- b. Erasmus Darwin, writing (1797) about women learning such “elegant as well as useful arts” (Darwin 27) as drawing and embroidery, gives two advantages:
 - i. “they may afterward cultivate [these arts] for their amusement” (Darwin 28) [cf. Laura Fairlie’s “whim”]

Illustration: Wright’s portrait of Erasmus Darwin (1770)

- ii. “another advantage... consists in using the pencil as a language to express the forms of all visible objects... For this end it may be sufficient to draw in outlines alone” (Darwin 28)
- c. Lady Frances Vernon Harcourt’s drawings amateurish, but useful
 - i. When Frances is nearly 16 (11 Jan 1821), her sister Jane says she “draws all day” and calls her “an excellent artist” (disegna tutta la giornata... brava artista) (Scotti 235)¹
 - ii. “A clever painter in water-colors, she had made drawings of the best examples of the Herefordshire timber-houses.” (“Obituary” 95 [Jan 1873])
 - iii. “[Robinson’s] capital book is aptly illustrated by Lady Frances Vernon Harcourt; sketches which, without pretending to great skill and pictorial effect, are valuable as recording the present condition and aspects of many sites and buildings which were once important and famous.” (The Athenaeum, 20 Aug 1870, p. 249)
 - iv. Her “faithful sketches give value to his [the writer’s] work which it would not otherwise possess” (Robinson ix)

Illustrations: Harcourt’s castle sketches, from Robinson’s *History of the Castles of Herefordshire* (1869).

X. Final remarks

[More, etc. use rhetoric of earlier generation (formerly used to justify formation of ?Royal Academy, etc. – morality (of citizens) produced by art]

¹ Special thanks to Harold Reeves for his translation of the Italian.

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² Attribution in the Preface, page ix.