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A Textile Narrative Through the Eye of a Camera/Through the Eye of a Needle

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When I began to research needlework in the early 1980s the *Library of Congress Catalogue* directed me not to needlework, or even embroidery, but to the letter “W” – *Women’s Work* – the first step in a long and tangled journey. When I recently came across an 1890s photograph of a Canadian woman and her embroidery by Hannah Maynard all I had to do was turn to Google to be directed to the BC Archives. My first reaction was glee – my second dismay – with 300+ hits how could I not know Mrs. Maynard?

To date, Hannah Maynard (1834-1918), remains a relative unknown. Her work came under scrutiny in the late 1970s – for what one author described as its “freakish, goofy, and often grotesque quality” and the designation “eccentric” continues to be used in describing both the artist and her photographs.¹ Most of these references are limited to books on Canadian photography.² However, *eccentric* suggests that she deviated from conventional practices or patterns and as a textile historian I disagree. There is a pattern here. It is my intention to show that Maynard’s photographs, with their repeated images and lavish embellishments, are closely linked to contemporary needlework – fashionable domestic embroidery and crazy quilts – and to suggest that it was this familiarity with the decorative and the domestic that allowed Hannah Maynard to move between the private and public spheres.

While the British Columbia Archives in Victoria hold a large collection of Maynard negatives and several original photographs there are few business or personal documents to provide insights into the life and work of this artist. Of the images themselves, the majority fulfil contemporary expectations regarding portraiture and photography. I have identified these as her public images and include the studio portraits, group portraits, documented events, and landscapes. That these were truly in the public domain is underscored by an American journal of 1887 which proposed that “Photographers would not lose anything were they to send to [Mrs. Maynard] and secure a set of these views, and frame and hang them in *their* reception rooms...”³

The Archives also hold a number of less conventional photographs. Many are autobiographical – of herself and her immediate family – some within a studio setting and some within the family parlour. Others defy description but are equally insightful – presenting fastidiously manipulated images that utilise innovative techniques and unexpected imagery judiciously balanced by the familiar – the decorative language and accoutrements of domesticity. It is the latter that I will discuss. But I will begin with a formal introduction:

Hannah Hatherly Maynard (1834-1918), was eighteen when she and her husband immigrated to Canada from England in 1854. They settled in Bowmanville – east of Toronto on Lake Ontario – and Richard established himself as a boot maker before leaving for the BC gold

1 Peter Wollheim, “Hannah Maynard: Participant and Portent,” *Canadian Forum*, (March 1981): 35-36.

2 David Mattison, “The Maynards: A Victoria Photographic Couple”, *Photographic Canadiana*, 11(March-April 1986): 2-4.

3 “Our Photo Album,” *St. Louis And Canadian Photographer I*, 12 (December 1887): 400.

rush of 1858. When he returned to move the family west he found his wife studying photography.⁴

In 1862, with *his* boot-making equipment - *her* photographic supplies – and *their four* children – Hannah and Richard set off for the Colony of Vancouver Island. She and the children settled into a house on Johnston St describing her new community as made up “tents, gullies and swamps and the inhabitants mostly miners.”⁵ When Richard returned from mining in 1863 Hannah was installed as a professional photographer of portraits and had hung out her shingle - *Mrs. R. Maynard’s Photographic Gallery*. Richard established his boot and shoe business, and began to learn photography from his wife. He would become a successful photographer, *in his own right*, documenting Mountain and Island landscapes.⁶

Hannah Maynard worked concurrently in a variety of genres and in 1878 was identified by the *Seattle Weekly Pacific Tribune* as a “leading photographer of Victoria” with a “commodious gallery ... in front of which may be seen hundreds of specimens of her skill and handiwork.” The author concluded that *this* is what “women can do when there is necessity or ambition or the incentive.”⁷ A year later *The St. Louis Practical Photographer* enthused: “Mrs. Maynard is one of the most industrious and persevering ladies we have in our business.”⁸

Hannah was indeed industrious – she entered competitions, experimented with new techniques, and aggressively marketed herself and her work. Given her drive it was not surprising that she was a successful photographer of children ... and families ... and landscapes; but to discover that she was the official photographer to the Victoria Police Department (1897) capturing not only the officers but “mug shots” of prisoners was a revelation. Upon her retirement in 1912 (age 78) she boasted of having photographed “just about everyone who passed through Victoria.”⁹

I was drawn to Maynard’s photographs because of her sly self-deprecating humour. I continued to be intrigued because not only did she incorporate fashionable textiles in her self-portraits but in her most widely disseminated works – those defined as eccentric – she appropriated the language of textiles. By doing so she endorsed her role as a professional photographer – and still managed to retain her status as a lady. A slippery slope in this outpost of the British Empire; however, Mrs. Maynard made few false steps – hers was a carefully orchestrated performance as she set about creating objects for an emerging market of female consumers desiring to create tasteful interiors.

The 1880s ushered in a period of economic prosperity in Canada and the urban elite adopted art and culture as their leitmotif. This was manifested in a desire for the promotion of good taste within the domestic interior, and it fell to the lot of Canadian women to acquire and proselytize this taste within their homes – specifically the parlour, for it was here that family and friends and

4 Possibly with R&H O’Hara of Bowmanville, who advertised themselves as: Photographers, Booksellers, Insurance Agents, Etc.

5 There were 37 brick buildings in Victoria at this time.

6 Hannah and Richard took several “working” holidays – Vancouver Island, the Queen Charlottes, Banff – where both practiced landscape photography. Though their work was marketed under separate imprints it is not always clear exactly who took which photographs – and at times this vagueness appears calculated.

7 “A Woman Photographer” *The Weekly Pacific Tribune* (Seattle), (29 May 1878): 1

8 “Editorial Chit Chat,” *The St. Louis Practical Photographer*, 9 (Sept 1879).

9 “Worked Here for fifty Years.” *Victoria Daily Colonist*. (Sept. 29, 1912): 10

carefully screened strangers were permitted to enter. It was here that the “angel of the household” and her domestic and decorative skills were on display – photographs and embroideries alike becoming, what Pierre Bourdieu termed, an accumulation of cultural capital. An attractive, tastefully appointed parlour was a sign of respectability. Taste was not personal; instead it was something sanctioned by society. Taste had moral values and ignoring the taste of the period was a sign of something very wrong. Detailed advice was plentiful – and the display of embroidery, crazy quilts and photographs was considered essential. In *Treasures of Use and Beauty* (1883) one reads:

Care should be taken in arranging that the room is not overcrowded. There should be a few good pictures, or painted plaques mounted in plush, hung on the wall ... A sash made of small pieces of bright colored plush or silk in crazy work may be flung across the table, the ends drooping very low. The mantle-piece may be covered with a corresponding sash, over which place a small clock as center piece, and arrange ornaments on each side – statuettes, bannerettes, flower holders, small Japanese fans, pieces of odd china, painted candles in small sconces, may all find a place on the mantel.

In 1888 Mrs. Panton advised that:

*next [to] the fire place, put your own particular chair, leaving room for a stool of some kind, [that] can hold your work-basket ... and on the desk ... your favourite photographs, and any pet piece of china or ornaments you may fancy. One of mine consists of a mandarin’s fan and case; the case is embroidered in silk, and gives a very pretty bit of colour ...*¹⁰

Yet fancywork was more than a signifier of taste, it served as a generic symbol of “industry of a female sort” and it under lined other womanly accomplishments, since, according to arbiters of female decorum, one could take up “fancy work only when all other duties had been discharged ... Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe in *The American Women’s Home* (1869) admonished that none had “a right to put a stitch of ornament on any article or dress of furniture ... until she is sure she can secure time for all her social, intellectual, benevolent, and religious duties.”

Hannah Maynard’s photographs function as an encoded interface between the public and the private. She conscientiously marketed and re-presented a life-style that was respectable. Her clothing suitable; her studio accoutrements – from painted backdrops to upholstered chairs and aspidistras - accurate reflections of middle-class aspirations; *her own family* gazed out from *cartes de visites* and portraits – overt references to propriety – she was always Mrs. Richard Maynard – Photographic Artist. Even her studio – despite its separate street entrance – was physically part of the family home – the parlour (and respectability) only a *portière* away.

The works that inspired this paper are autobiographical and self-reflexive and have overt domestic narratives. Typically the viewer is encouraged to recognize Hannah’s hand in the manipulation of the form and the content. She was innovative, masking the lens to create “double photographs”¹¹ creating what one writer described in 1894 as photographs “on the freak order ... showing Mrs. Maynard in different positions on the same plate.”¹² Note two things here: first, that *freak* meant whimsical or curious; and second, that these images *were sent* out for critical engagement.

10 Mrs. Panton, [Jane Ellen], From Kitchen to Garret: Hints for Young Householders 4th ed. London: Ward and Downey, 1888

11 Val Starnes, “Doubles Simplified” The American Annual of Photography and Photographic Times Almanac. 1895

12 “Our Photo Album,” The St. Louis And Canadian Photographer 12 (July 1894): 341.

In this group from the mid-90s we find her most fascinating narratives. Here Hannah – with tongue in cheek – critiques a familiar domestic ritual – the “at home.” (fig. 1) The painted back drop, tea set, fringed table cloth, and embroidered stool and carpet reference a tasteful parlour. A respectable Victorian lady (Hannah) pours tea – another (Hannah) with saucer in hand looks towards us expectantly – while the third (Hannah) causes havoc ...



Figure 1 (left). Hannah Maynard, c. 1895 At Home Multiple Exposure print from original negative BC Archives F-02852.

Figure 2 (right). Hannah Maynard, c. 1895 Thread Multiple Exposure print from original negative BC Archives F-05096.

In another, (fig. 2) the focus has moved from tea to textiles. The taunt thread (of life?) created as Hannah rolls a ball of yarn drawn from the skein she holds on the left. The four Hannahs are surrounded by fashionable domestic textiles – lace panels, table cloth, bobbin-lace, an unfinished embroidered runner and cut work tea cloth. The unfinished square of fabric in the foreground features a *cyanotype* with a portrait of her youngest daughter Lillie (d.1883). The photograph resonates with the values of these “objects of association.” Whether it is the references to the deceased, or needlework as a signifier of virtue, respectability and maternalism, these are multi-layered narratives.



Figure 3. Hannah Maynard, *Gems of British Columbia* c1891.
 Manipulated print from original negative BC Archives F-05094.

Her debt to popular textile techniques becomes obvious when we consider the promotional cabinet cards she created and distributed between 1880 and c.1895 (fig. 3). In these elaborate montages Mrs. Maynard combined diverse photographic images of babies and children to produce new works – re-constructing, re-positioning, and re-photographing the various elements. Each year the number of faces multiplied – from hundreds to thousands - by far outstripping the population growth – and putting a mockery to the idea that these were the children she had photographed that year.¹³ She called her babes the “Gems of British Columbia. They were local marketing tools – and they were celebrated internationally. The editors of the *St. Louis and Canadian Photographer* published the 1885 version writing: “This is the fifth year of the gathering, and they increase in number and variety year by year. Mrs Maynard is deserving of much praise for her skill and patience in the arrangement of these precious gems.” There followed an 11 verse laudatory poem.¹⁴

13 Carol J. Williams. *Framing the West: Race, Gender and Photographic Frontier in the Pacific Northwest*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

14 The poem concludes: With all its charms both grave and gay,/ We now will send it on its way,/ Adown the sunny path of fame, / To bless the artist Maynard’s name.

Hannah Maynard's "Gems" reference familiar quilt genres: patchwork (repetition of blocks, squares, diamonds ...); organic images associated with appliqué (such as wreaths, vases of flowers, crowns ...); and most particularly crazy quilts. Those precious constructions that consisted of small and irregular pieces of delicate and heavy weight dress silks joined and embellished by embroidery. Like these decorative quilts, the cabinet cards were constructed to fit comfortably within Victorian parlours – celebrating contemporary sensibilities and sentimentality.

The 1892 gem takes the form of a wreath – while it has been suggested that this was a tribute to personal loss – her daughter-in-law Adelaide had died that year – we should remember that wreaths were popular in Victorian parlours. The authors of *Treasures of Use and beauty* (1883) include not only directions for crazy work but also provide directions for a wreath of preserved flower which “takes only two days’ of steady work to embalm it. The B.C. Archives have an image of one of Hannah’s portraits framed in a wreath and we know that Mrs. Petronilla Bossi, who was photographed at her easel by Hannah Maynard (c.1890), created an elaborate wreath of leather flowers in mid-century. At the same time the wreath certainly afforded Maynard (and her clientele) a perfect opportunity to reflect on the memorial nature of photography – especially given the high rate of childhood deaths.

My discovery of Hannah Maynard was serendipitous – I was looking for images of fashionable domestic embroidery in 19th C Canadian photographs and my research is ongoing. Hannah Maynard continues to speak to me and I only presume to have unravelled her messages correctly. While at times slyly mocking the rituals of middle-class domesticity she consistently drew on fashionable domestic textiles as indicators of good taste and respectability – reinforcing her own position within the community. Through manipulation, repetition, and embellishment she acknowledged an aesthetic that celebrated pattern and ornament. In doing so she added another thread to an ongoing narrative – one that pandered to the symbiotic relationship between middle-class women and fashionable needlework in the nineteenth century; but at the same time the clarity of her message is underpinned by her success as a business woman. Through the eye of the camera and through the eye of the needle these photographs carried the conversation well into to the new century.

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