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Needlework Mania and Nineteenth-Century Dutch Magazines for Women*

During that same time I often sighed, while doing endless embroidery and washing cups: "Oh, if only I were a boy. Then I could study, like my brother, and become a minister!"¹

These are the words of the nineteenth-century writer and feminist Codien Zwaardemaker-Visscher (1835-1912)², who on the occasion of the Dutch National Exhibition of Women's Labor (1898)³ reminisced about a half century of women's emancipation. She concluded that much had changed for the better, but she was definitely not enthusiastic about the countless hours that she had spent, as a girl, doing embroidery. How she would have preferred to trade that "endless embroidery" for study! If she had had her way, she would have followed in her father's footsteps and become an ordained minister.

Zwaardemaker-Visscher's reaction is not hard to understand if we go back to the year 1850. The acclaimed writer, then a fifteen-year-old girl, had just finished her schooling. She spent the following years at home until, at the age of twenty-one, she married the publisher Cornelis Zwaardemaker. Codien Visscher followed the generally accepted path for girls in her time. They usually went to school until the age of fifteen or sixteen at the very most. Their education was then deemed complete because their true destiny was to marry, run a household, and bear and raise children. Professional education or other advanced studies were not yet considered necessary⁴. In the years prior to marriage, young women were supposed to spend their time in a manner that prepared them to be useful and accomplished. They were expected to read, make music, take walks, and, whether they liked it or not, to do embroidery, endless embroidery.

Needlework Mania

In 1850 young women like Codien Visscher did not have to fear that they might run out of patterns, because the market was inundated with all kinds of needlework publications. Every week, if not every day, new embroidery

books were published, as well as books with tatting or knitting instructions, or tapestry patterns, thus providing inexhaustible sources of inspiration⁵. Considering the number of publications at that time, one can only conclude that there must have been a true needlework mania.

It should be noted that the rise of a press dedicated to women, which started around that same time, was a significant factor. It was, in part, thanks to magazines for women that needlework was able to establish itself as a socio-economic factor, and vice versa, it was precisely thanks to needlework that these magazines were able to develop into one of the most flourishing and successful media of the nineteenth century.

In the overview that follows, I shall briefly describe the needlework mania as it manifested itself in nineteenth-century Dutch magazines for women. I do not intend to discuss technical aspects related to needlework (e.g., materials, types of instructions). Rather, I wish to consider the cultural-historical integration of these magazines, and I shall also try to explain their great success.

Needlework in Dutch Nineteenth-Century Magazines for Women

The oldest Dutch-language magazines for women date from the end of the eighteenth century. They resemble moral weeklies, contain advice on keeping house, and also some anecdotes. Most magazines lasted only a very short time: they often disappeared after just a few issues, for lack of success⁶.

The first women's magazine that achieved a certain level of success was *Elegantia of tijdschrift van mode, luxe en smaak voor dames* [Elegantia, or magazine for ladies about fashion, luxury, and taste] (1807-1814). To a large extent, this magazine was based on the French *Journal des dames et des modes*⁷ and paid much attention to the latest trends in fashion. In addition, it contained short stories, essays, articles, and occasional theater reviews and embroidery patterns. Between 1811 and 1813, however, publication had to be stopped for political reasons⁸, and the attempt to start again in 1814 lasted only a short time.

The real breakthrough of Dutch magazines for women occurred in 1821, when *Penélopé of maandwerk aan het vrouwelijk geslacht toegewijd* [Penélopé or monthly magazine devoted to the female sex] appeared. During the next fourteen years, a new issue rolled off the press every one or two months. The editor, Anna Barbara van Meerten-Schilperoort, knew how to attract large numbers of loyal female readers: the magazine had more than 450 initial subscribers, among whom the Queen of the Netherlands. In light of the rather high subscription cost, fifteen Dutch guilders per year, that figure was quite respectable. One may also conclude from the high fee that the magazine's intended audience was one of well-to-do women and girls. The key to the magazine's success was its combination of reading material and needlework: two forms of leisure that were compatible with readers' tastes.

As much as one third of each issue (on average, sixteen pages) was devoted to needlework patterns and instructions (see fig. 1).

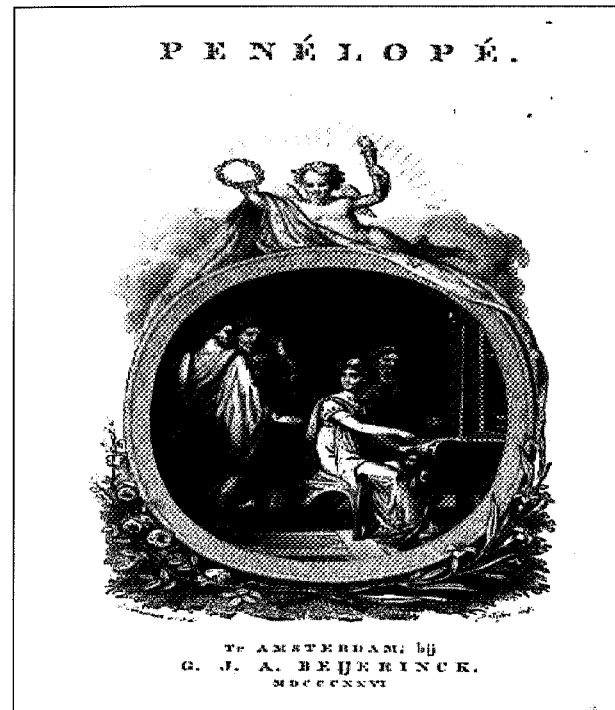


Fig. 1. Title page of *Penélopé* of maandwerk aan het vrouwelijk geslacht gewijd (1821-1835) (Utrecht University Library).

Penélopé's needlework department contained beautiful patterns, black and white as well as colored, for a variety of objects, such as pillows, slippers, hearth rugs, baskets, letter cases, and small storage boxes. All these objects belonged to the domain of "fancy needlework", which is to say that the decorative rather than the functional aspect was emphasized. Needlework

served to decorate and embellish a home. In one issue, the clever editor presented a pattern to decorate "a portfolio for reading groups", in which past issues of *Penélopé* could be saved.

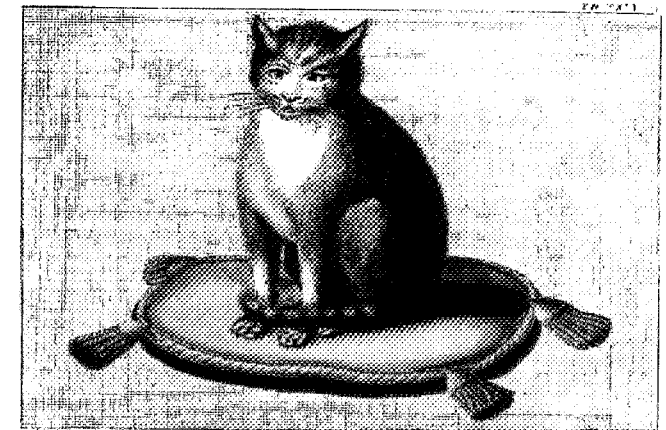


Fig. 2. Needlework pattern from *Penélopé* 2 (1823): "A grey cat in 'turkish tapestry'" (Utrecht University Library).

The needlework department illustrated an ethos that emphasized the importance of being occupied: the industrious housewife should not be idle for even one minute. Instead, she should apply herself to making a "dance shoe embroidered with gold thread", or a "grey cat in *tapisserie turque* for a fireplace screen" (see fig. 2). The diligent young woman was expected to decorate the various rooms of her home as beautifully as possible. The following passage describes the editor's ideal living room:

On the floor was a rug on which she had sewn a border. The chairs and sofa, made of purple-colored merino yarns, proudly showed their embroidered borders. On a small, neat work table one saw, underneath a glass, a piece of white velvet, with a bouquet of red roses. Several vases, containing hand-made flowers, and a few baskets, filled with fruit made of wax, decorated the room, while the walls displayed scenes that she had painted or embroidered. The small border around the purple curtains and the elegant draperies

made of fine East-Indian materials and embroidered with gold thread, also were the result of her handiwork.⁹

In order to realize this ideal, one had to do needlework without pause. The reference to Penelope, Odysseus' perennially busy wife, was deliberate, even though the editors did not assume that their readers would unravel their work each night.

Despite *Penélope's* success, the editor felt compelled to cease publication in 1835. She did not give specific reasons for stopping, but mentioned, some years later, the fact that needlework had become "a mania". The readers had submitted so many new patterns that Mrs. Van Meerten-Schilperoord had become unable to stay on top of things:

Yes, the desire to do needlework almost became a *mania*, so much so that in the final years I sometimes wondered whether I should accuse myself of having encouraged our readers to go too far in all of this.¹⁰

Yet, after *Penélope* was no longer published the needlework "mania" in the Netherlands kept growing, instead of showing signs of weakening. Almost immediately after *Penélope's* cessation another magazine, exclusively devoted to needlework, made its appearance, namely *Aglaja. Tijdschrift voor dames. Verzameling van de nieuwste borduur- en tapisserie-patronen* [*Aglaja. Magazine for ladies presenting the newest embroidery and tapestry patterns*] (1835-1836). In the decades that followed, needlework's share would grow explosively in magazines for women: the 1840's, 50's, and 60's show an increasing supply of needlework magazines that became less and less expensive, were issued in larger and larger numbers, and thus were able to reach an ever growing audience¹¹. It should be noted that we do not have extant copies of all of these magazines. Because of their intensive use most issues were damaged over time and have been lost.

One magazine that deserves special mention is a publication also called *Aglaja*: like its predecessor, it was named after the youngest and most beautiful of the Three Graces. Its subtitle was: *Maandboekje voor dameshandwerken* [Monthly booklet for ladies' needlework] (1848-1864). Without any doubt, this magazine, that cost only a quarter per issue, was by far the most popular of all needlework publications. Printing numbers hovered around 5000 and the magazine clearly was much more commercial in its approach than *Penélope*. This is obvious, for example, in the strategies that were developed to attract new readers. Premiums were offered, such as an *Aglaja* almanac for the New Year, a free picture, a tapestry pattern, or a sheet of music. Furthermore, the editors introduced all kinds of "tools" they had invented themselves, such as "new types of Crochet Needles and Crochet Needle Holders", a special *Aglaja* device for older ladies who, because of poor eyesight, could not thread a needle, and "*Aglaja* scissors" for relief and

tapestry work. The readers were then invited to place their orders at the magazine's own "Sales Office" in Amsterdam¹².

Explaining Success

The explosive growth of the number of needlework magazines between the 1840's and 60's invites us to ask *why* these links between women, needlework, and women's magazines were established in such a matter-of-course fashion. What was the basis of this successful triangle? To many contemporaries the link between women and needlework was obvious: one would refer, among other things, to the biological-natural ("needlework suits a woman's domestic nature"), ethical ("it keeps women from being idle"), and educational aspects ("women can read and do needlework simultaneously")¹³.

But why was needlework considered to be so suitable for publication in *periodicals*? Unlike, for instance, fashion and reading – two other important ingredients of nineteenth-century magazines for women – the notion of "time" or "trendiness" seems to be playing a less prominent role where needlework is concerned. When leafing through needlework periodicals one encounters an endless stream of what, at first glance, seems to be the same thing, over and over again: patterns frequently presented small variations on well-known themes, and various magazines simply copied them from each other over time. While fashion was constantly subject to change and while the publication of new books required a review department, needlework seems to have been less influenced by time.

Yet, this observation turns out to be based on an a-historical perspective because needlework, too, was in fact very much subject to trends. This is obvious, for example, in the disapproving responses *Aglaja's* editors gave to requests from readers: "What you are asking for is too old-fashioned for us to wish to include it now in our magazine. Most likely, you will find some information about it in one of the earlier women's magazines", or "the little collars that you are looking for, are completely out of fashion"¹⁴. Moreover, *Aglaja* strongly emphasized that precisely because it was a periodical its readers could remain up to date regarding the "most recent, most beautiful, and most tasteful samples of needlework", and, in this manner, "maintain their interest in them"¹⁵.

As a result, we may conclude that just like fashion and reading, needlework was sensitive to trends and therefore was an excellent candidate for presentation in periodicals. Yet, this does not explain sufficiently why it was specifically needlework that became such a stimulating force in the development of Dutch magazines for women. Perhaps the historical context offers explanations. Josine Blok has argued that, when in the 1850's and 60's an ideal of bourgeois life began to dominate, the incompatibility between women and paid work became a central principle of Dutch society. The increasing success of this ideal of bourgeois domesticity, which manoeuvred

women into a position of economic dependency, was coupled with an increase in the number of women who were condemned to "idleness" (domestic work was, in principle, done by maids)¹⁶. Against this background it is possible to explain the wave of needlework magazines in those years: the never-ending flood of sewing and embroidery patterns served also to prevent this "idleness". Through the monthly supply of needlework patterns readers always had at their disposal a domestic activity that was associated with both virtuous and industrious behavior. As was appropriate for the intended audience, the emphasis was on "fancy needlework" that had primarily a decorative function. Thus, the needlework periodicals fitted into a larger system of moral-economic principles that supported this ideal of bourgeois life.

Feminist Embroidery

Paradoxically, the successful alliance of domestic needlework, bourgeois women, and women's magazines manifested itself also in a different way: it led, simultaneously, to an increase in the number of women who entered the public domain. Thus, editorial committees of needlework magazines included a relatively large number of women and, even more importantly, needlework was to become one of the most distinctive foci of the first associations of women, *Arbeid Adelt* [Labor Ennobles] and *Tesselschade* (named after seventeenth-century woman poet Tesselschade Roemers Visscher, famous for her skills in a number of crafts – not only typically female ones). Both organizations strove to increase opportunities for the acquisition of income by women belonging to the higher social classes, and they served, among other things, as agents for the sale of needlework. Thus, doing needlework was "upgraded" and became a means for women to earn their own income.

At this point I return to the woman whom I introduced at the beginning of this essay: Codien Zwaardemaker-Visscher. I have pointed out that as a feminist she objected to being condemned to endless embroidery during her adolescence. What, after all, was the use of those countless stitches, those never-ending movements of the needle? For what purpose did she do decorative embroidery, while she actually wanted to study and become a minister? Doing embroidery even made her sigh: "Oh, if I only I were a boy!"

Yet, Zwaardemaker-Visscher's opinions were not as one-sided as I have just characterized them. Although she saw her hours spent on embroidery as an unbearable waste of time, she and many other feminists also believed that needlework could contribute to women's emancipation¹⁷. From the beginning, she supported the initiatives of the women's association *Arbeid Adelt*, and time and again she sided with women who attempted to earn some money through the sale of their needlework¹⁸. Zwaardemaker-Visscher thought indeed that *Arbeid Adelt* was doing important work, but she was also critical. Many "female workers" offered their products anonymously because they were ashamed to work for money. She thought that these "female work-

ers" should identify themselves and that they as well as their families should be proud of their handmade products: "the same relatives who at first were so narrow-mindedly opposed to this first step into the public domain, often find it a source of pride later on". A sense of pride and self-worth was, moreover, part of the higher goal that *Arbeid Adelt* strove to realize, namely "the development of a woman's mental strength and her happiness in life", as Zwaardemaker-Visscher put it¹⁹. And for her this strength and happiness came from a public and material recognition of a woman's work.

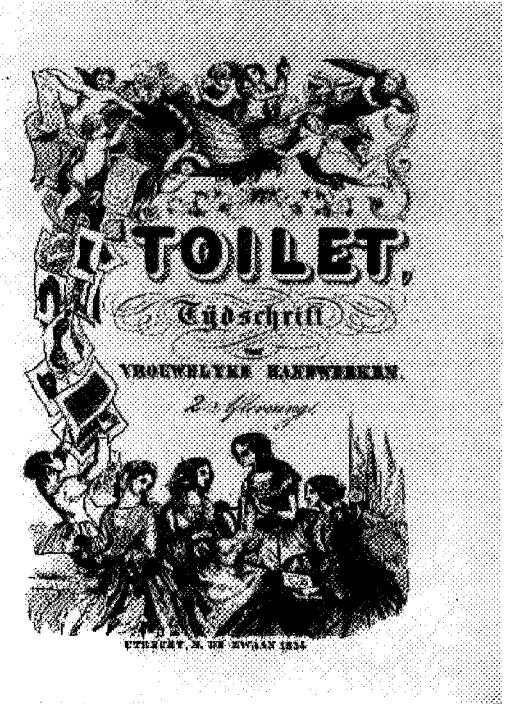


Fig. 3. Title page of Toilet. Tijdschrift voor vrouwelijke handwerken (1848-1854) (Amsterdam University Library).

It is noteworthy that she made these statements supportive of women's emancipation in one of the popular fashion and needlework magazines of the time, *Het Toilet. Het grootste en goedkoopste Modejournaal van Nederland* [Apparel. The largest and cheapest fashion magazine in the Netherlands] (see fig. 3). Zwaardemaker-Visscher strongly encouraged the readers of this magazine to be proud of their needlework. And, so she added, if women wanted to sell their embroidery products, they should have the courage to do it using their own names. Although Codien Zwaardemaker-Visscher herself did not enjoy the "endless embroidery", it was nevertheless an activity in which women should take pride.

Translated from the Dutch by Margriet Lacy-Bruijn.

Lotte Jensen (University of Amsterdam) wrote her doctoral dissertation on the history of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Dutch women's press. She is currently preparing a study on national heroes and heroines as they are represented in nineteenth-century Dutch historical novels.

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Notes

* An earlier version of this article was published in Dutch: "De manie van het handwerken. Handwerken in negentiende-eeuwse Nederlandse vrouwen tijdschriften", in: *Jaarboek van de Stichting Textielgeschiedenis* (2005).

¹ J.B. Zwaardemaker-Visscher, "Toen en nu", in *Vrouwenarbeid*, (September 17, 1898), pp. 246-249. Quotation on p. 246.

² This is the Dutch way to name a married woman (i.e., husband's name followed by maiden name). The reverse order is observed in many other countries: Codien Visscher-Zwaardemaker.

³ See Maria Grever and Berteke Waaldijk, *Transforming the Public Sphere: The Dutch National Exhibition of Women's Labor in 1898*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2004.

⁴ See Johanna Naber, *Van onze oud-tantes en tantes*. Haarlem, Tjeenk Willink, 1917, pp. 192-195.

⁵ *Brinkman's catalogus der boeken, plaat- en kaartwerken, die gedurende de jaren 1833 tot en met 1849 in Nederland zijn uitgegeven of herdrukt* (Amsterdam, Brinkman, 1858) gives an impression of the quantity and diversity of these periodicals. On the basis of an inventory of the titles listed in this catalogue one may conclude that the number of needlework publications in the Netherlands increases significantly as of, approximately, 1840.

⁶ For a historical overview of Dutch magazines for women see my doctoral dissertation: "Bij uitsluiting voor de vrouwelijke sekse geschikt". *Vrouwen tijdschriften en journalistes in Nederland in de achttiende en negentiende eeuw*. Hilversum, Verloren, 2001.

⁷ Regarding this magazine and its international character see Annemarie Kleinert, *Le Journal des Dames et des Modes ou la conquête de l'Europe féminine* (1797-1839). Stuttgart, Thorbecke, 2001.

⁸ During the period of Holland's annexation by the French Empire (1810-1813), Charles-François Lebrun being appointed governor general, the number of periodical publications had been significantly reduced. See for details: Maarten Schneider and Joan Hemels, *De Nederlandse krant 1618-1978. Van "nieuwstydinghe" tot dagblad*. Baarn, Wereldvenster, 1979⁴, pp. 110-11.

⁹ "Elize of de gevaren der werkloosheid", in *Penélope* 1 (1821), "Lektuur", pp. 79-106. Quotation on p. 105.

¹⁰ A.B. van Meerten-Schilperoort, *Uitspannings-uren voor ligchaam en geest; der Nederlandsche jeugd aangeboden*. Schoonhoven, S.E. van Nooten, 1838², pp. iii-iv.

¹¹ For detailed information on the location and composition of these publications, see the bibliography concerning magazines for women in Jensen, 2001, pp. 242-261.

¹² Regarding *Aglaja*, see Lotte Jensen, "'Geheel aan de Vrouwelijke Kunne toegewijd'. Nederlandse vrouwen tijdschriften in de achttiende en negentiende eeuw", in *Van Zeep tot Soap. Continuïteit en verandering in geïllustreerde vrouwen tijdschriften*. Catalogue of an exhibition bearing the same title at the Dutch Press Museum Amsterdam, April 22-September 26, 2004, pp. 22-37 and. 84-85.

¹³ For an extensive discussion of ethical notions pertaining to needlework, see Jensen 2001, pp. 99-107.

¹⁴ See the "Letters to the Editors" departments in *Aglaja* vol. 9 (1856) and vol. 17 (October 1864), p. 5.

¹⁵ *Aglaja* vol. 2 (1849), "Preface", p. i.

¹⁶ Josine Blok, "Hemelse rozen door 't wereldse leven. Sekse en de Nederlandse burgerij in de negentiende eeuw", in Remieg Aerts and Henk te Velde (eds.), *De stijl van de burger. Over Nederlandse burgerlijke cultuur vanaf de middeleeuwen*. Kampen, Kok Agora, 1998, pp. 123-156.

¹⁷ Regarding the "ambivalence" of needlework, see also Mineke van Essen, "De ambivalentie van het handwerken", in *Historica* 19 (1996) 2, pp. 9-11.

¹⁸ In 1870 Betsy Perk encouraged her readers, in one of the first "feminist" magazines *Onze Roeping* [Our vocation], to express support for the founding of *Arbeid Adelt*. On the roster of potential members that was thus established, one also finds Zwaardemaker-Visscher's name. See *Onze Roeping* (November 5, 1870), supplement.

¹⁹ Quoted in *Het Toilet. Het grootste en goedkoopste Modejournaal van Nederland* (October 15, 1878), p. 7.

Résumé

A partir du cas de l'écrivaine néerlandaise Codien Zwaardemaker-Visscher, cet article montre l'importance prise, depuis l'époque de Belle de Zuylen, par le travail de l'aiguille dans la vie des femmes. Cette omniprésence a été favorisée par le développement, au cours du XIXe siècle, d'une presse périodique spécialisée. Malgré tout, un lien se laisse établir, grâce à Zwaardemaker-Visscher, entre broderie et féminisme.