

"Make It Yourself": Home Sewing, Gender, and Culture, 1890-1930

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shopkeeper who purchased her work. So pleased was the owner that not only was LeFort paid the twenty-five dollars, the hooked rug was then sold for fifty dollars and six more were commissioned. This was the beginning of Elizabeth LeFort's life as an artist.

Doucet then traces her rise to preeminence in the world of handicraft. After meeting Kenneth Hansford, a wealthy and powerful businessman who would later become her husband, she began to sell many of her works with Hansford as her art broker. Hansford soon became her most influential supporter because he "became haunted by the idea that Elizabeth's work was absolutely unique. He made it his personal mission to promote her genius and make her famous" (29). With his never-ending support, coupled with her obvious talent, LeFort gained an international reputation. Of particular interest to me is Doucet's discussion of her religiously influenced tapestries. He explains that her favourite works are those with religious themes, a fact supported by the sheer volume of her tapestries dedicated to religious figures and events. Her works have graced the walls of Rideau Hall in Canada, Buckingham Palace and the Vatican. In her later years, Université de Moncton honoured LeFort with an honorary doctorate (in 1975) and in 1987 she became a member of the Order of Canada.

The layout of Doucet's book is impressive. As an entirely bilingual publication, it honours LeFort's mother tongue, with both the English and French text running side-by-side for the length of the book.

This is significant as it allows the reader to enjoy the book in Canada's two official languages. The text is interspersed with beautiful colour reproductions of Elizabeth's work as well as archival pictures of her life, which gives the reader a welcome visual aid. In addition to the pictures found in the body of the text, the book's lengthy appendix is a listing of Elizabeth's works, often accompanied by colour pictures of the tapestries. This is an invaluable tool for those interested in her works and in the history of Cheticamp rug hooking.

The book is presented as both biography and ethnography. Doucet not only tells the story of Elizabeth LeFort, but often does so in her own words. This is definitely one of the book's strengths. Doucet includes multiple quotations from his many interviews with LeFort before her death, and this in turn helps reveal a more complete picture of the woman behind the art. In this way, Doucet has also written a book that can be used as an ethnographic tool for scholars working in the field of Acadian folk art. This book is beautiful to look at; however, the bilingual, picture-filled format emphasizes breadth over depth, which in turn renders a narrow examination of her life. While this book deals with subject matter that has been the focus of previous scholarship, it is a valuable book for both scholarly and popular audiences. What it lacks in the way of analysis, it more than makes up in visual appeal as it offers readers a rare glimpse of legendary Cheticamp rug hookings.

DIANE TYE

Review of

Sarah A. Gordon. 2009. *"Make It Yourself": Home Sewing, Gender, and Culture, 1890-1930*. New York: Gutenberg-e. Columbia University Press.

Pp. 164, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-14244-1, \$60. Gutenberg-e. <http://www.gutenberg-e.org>.

When my twenty-eight-year-old great-grandmother found herself widowed with three young children in 1910, she turned to the only available option to keep her family together: she took in sewing. Later, she helped support her son's family by sewing clothing for her grandchildren and, when my mother was a teenager and the financial pressures eased, Gram made elaborate dresses for her so that she became known as one of the best dressed girls in the vil-

lage. Over her lifetime, my great-grandmother's reputation as a skilled seamstress became a point of pride not only for her but her extended family.

In *"Make It Yourself": Home Sewing, Gender, and Culture, 1890-1930*, Sarah Gordon shows how my great-grandmother's experience was far from singular as she highlights the ways that women blurred the lines of work and leisure to find multiple meanings in their sewing. In exploring the

cultural meanings of sewing in the late 19th and 20th centuries and “examining the dynamics and persistence of home sewing as clothing became increasingly available for purchase and more women worked outside the home” (x), Gordon points to the complexities of home sewing in women’s lives. Although “women just sewed,” she demonstrates how sewing was much more than a cost-saving practice. At once a source of creativity and pride as well as necessity, it could be both a female expression of conformity and individualism.

Although most women sewed because it was cheaper than buying ready-made clothing, Gordon argues that in this time period sewing was central to women’s performance of self-representation. It was key to how they did gender and, as such, women used sewing to demonstrate that they were good wives and mothers, stretching the family dollar, dressing attractively for their husbands and nurturing their children through the provision of home-sewn clothing. As Gordon writes,

home sewing was an important feminine domain. It represented maternal responsibility, financial caution, feminine attractiveness, social connections, and household respectability. Sewing was in a sense a distillation of American ideals about what women should do with their time and for their families. (21)

Beyond the financial and obligatory aspects, however, sewing allowed women across cultural communities to gain respectability and express individuality. It gave them more control over their physical appearance and sometimes provided creative pleasure and a sense of accomplishment. For women in financially strained households, like my great-grandmother, it was often a much needed—and perhaps only available—source of income.

Gordon surveys all of these dimensions of home sewing, drawing into her discussion angles that range from home economics instruction to the gendered marketing of sewing-related businesses. She concludes the book with a case study that examines the burgeoning niche of sports clothing. Because many of the early contested sports outfits were sewn at home, sports clothing offered another outlet for women to use sewing skills creatively.

The strength of Gordon’s work is breadth rather than depth and as she covers a wide expanse, she brings together an impressive and truly eclectic group of sources. Blending traditional and popular culture, Gordon combines personal memories collected in recorded interviews with print sources

that extend from paper dolls to tissue sewing patterns, school curriculum to sewing machine ads, and girl scout badges. Much of this rich primary material is available for viewing and listening on the Gutenberg-e site (www.gutenberg-e.org).

One of the joys of this book for me was that it introduced me to the Gutenberg-e series of history monographs. For anyone else new to the site, you have to check it out. An open access site, it offers readers the opportunity to view digitized primary sources, such as maps, photographs and excerpts from oral history interviews, from a collection of “award winning monographs, coordinated with the American Historical Association.” (The American Council of Learned Societies also carry Gutenberg-e titles on their Humanities E-Book platform). While the print version of *“Make It Yourself”: Home Sewing, Gender, and Culture, 1890-1930* certainly stands on its own, the text on the Gutenberg-e site is brought to life through excerpts from interviews, illustrations and photographs, and a slide show of making a skirt. The format works wonderfully for a material culture study of this kind and makes it especially suited to classroom use.

In uncovering the multifaceted meanings of an activity like sewing, particularly its implications for women’s constructions of femininity during the period 1890-1930, Gordon uses “home sewing and the tensions inherent in its different meanings “[to] gain a broader comprehension and appreciation of changing gender roles, cultural dynamics, and women’s household labor at a critical time in American history” (x). In a discussion that applies to the Canadian context as well as the American, she convincingly shows that sewing was a unifying behaviour that connected women of varying backgrounds in their gender performances but it also separated them, serving to emphasize ethnic, class and geographical distinctions and to reinforce existing racial and social hierarchies.

One finishes *“Make It Yourself”: Home Sewing, Gender, and Culture, 1890-1930* feeling that it represents just the tip of the iceberg; any of the many aspects touched on within this work could constitute a study of its own. Notwithstanding that there is room for more in-depth exploration, this is a great beginning and the excitement of the broad approach is that anyone with an interest in either sewing or gender is sure to find something of value here.