



Fig. 1. Charles Huot, *The Sewing Lesson*, 1886,
oil on canvas, 66 cm x 126 cm, loan, Claude de Lorimier family,
Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Charles Huot's *The Sewing Lesson*:

Education and Womanhood in Nineteenth-Century Representations of Needlework

Georges-Étienne Carrière

Paris was the foremost art centre in the nineteenth century, with numerous artists working there and studying at art schools associated with renowned academic painters such as William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905), Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904) and Alexandre Cabanel (1823–1889). During this period, it was considered essential for artists to be educated in Paris. Charles Huot (1855–1930), a painter of religious and historical subjects, became the first Canadian artist to train in Paris by dint of funds raised by the local Abbé in Quebec City. He attended the École des Beaux-Arts and studied in Cabanel's workshop at a time when diverse art movements such as Realism and Impressionism were challenging officially sponsored academic art.¹ In 1885, after numerous exhibitions in Paris, Huot briefly returned to his native Quebec to decorate the Church of the Holy Saviour. Other religious and historical commissions followed, most notably *Sovereign Council* and *Debate on Languages* (1910–13) and *Je Me Souviens* (1914–20), painted for the Parliament Buildings in Quebec City upon his permanent return to Canada in 1907 following the death of his wife.² Although Huot is best known for these large-scale public commissions, he favoured genre painting,³ his mastery of which is evident in *The Sewing Lesson* (1886) (fig. 1). By examining this work and others of the same theme from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this essay will reveal the importance of sewing as part of a girl's domestic education in this period and the purposes that sewing served for women of different social classes.



Fig. 1. Charles Huot, *The Sewing Lesson*, 1886, oil on canvas, 66 cm x 126 cm, loan, Claude de Lorimier family, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

In Huot's *The Sewing Lesson*, a woman is teaching a group of girls how to sew in a room typical of the era. To the left within the circular arrangement of the composition is an older blonde girl in a fine blue and brown ensemble with lace trim, bending over to diligently pull her thread and needle through a long, satiny white fabric falling to the floor. This motion of sewing is echoed by a girl in a light pink dress to the right. In the centre is a girl in a black dress, the back of which is partially undone to reveal a glimpse of her skin. She is seated on a step stool with her back facing the viewer and her head lowered. Near the window to the right is a young girl in a light blue dress threading her needle. Meanwhile, the youngest girl, about six years old, is attentively watching the sewing teacher beside her work on a ruffled piece of fabric. The girls in the centre and to the left are the eldest among the group, as their hair is arranged in the mature style of a bun.⁴

The setting of *The Sewing Lesson* is a spacious room with terra-cotta tiling, wood furniture and greyish walls in a middle-class home. The various chairs and stools in the room contribute to the

painting's circular configuration and the sense of intimacy the home provides. The domestic environment is further made evident by what appears to be a bed behind an open curtain and a china cabinet to the right. The blue and white Chinese porcelain on display matches the colours of the girls' dresses.⁵ The informal atmosphere is emphasized by the spool of thread on one chair, fabric on another, the partially unbuttoned dress of the girl in the centre, the spools of fabric falling to the floor and the sewing supplies in a basket on the table. In this comfortable setting the woman and the girls bond through their collective sewing.

The Sewing Lesson illustrates Huot's rigorous academic training. The artist illuminates the interior scene with sunlight coming from the window, naturalistically rendering contrasts of light and shadow within the room. The painterly technique is varied: thick brushstrokes are used for the pleats formed by the fabric of the dresses and pieces of cloth, while thin brushstrokes capture the minute details of the Chinese porcelain, transparent lace of the blonde girl's dress and pink and the rosy flesh tones of the girls' faces. Every detail of the work is captured with precision. The back spine of the girl in black, for example, is accurately represented, as well as the creased blouse underneath her frock and the fine texture of her hair. Even the different footwear is carefully rendered: the girl at the window is wearing leather boots with muddy brown spots, while the oldest girl has on a pair of elegant black flats.

Huot's *The Sewing Lesson* provides insight into the education of young girls in the nineteenth century. Although schools were gradually being established to cater to the education of upper- and middle-class young women, the instruction was elementary and of a low standard.⁶ The common belief was that a girl's education should focus on moral improvement rather than on intellectual growth. In the widely circulated *De l'éducation des filles* by Bishop Fénelon (1651–

1715), originally published in 1687 and reprinted in at least thirty editions from 1810 to 1882,⁷ the author expounds on the Catholic views of femininity and the need to ensure that the education of a girl focused on innocence and piety. Fénelon argues that girls should be “given an education which would prepare them for their role as ‘the soul of the home’.”⁸ That a girl's instruction should be restricted to the domestic sphere is also the underlying message of Huot's *The Sewing Lesson*.⁹ Serious public education in France began in the 1880s but the Catholic bourgeoisie still often preferred to educate their girls at home or send them to religious boarding schools.¹⁰ In these religious institutions women received intensive catechism instruction and were taught the rudimentary skills of reading, writing, Latin and arithmetic, a little botany and the domestic arts of cooking and sewing.¹¹¹² To prepare for their future role as proper housewives, the girls in Huot's *Sewing Lesson* are being taught to sew by a teacher—who is perhaps one of their mothers—since most clothing was made at home by female members of the family.¹³ Huot's other paintings of girls also reflect the expectation that women remain in the domestic sphere to manage household tasks like sewing, cooking, cleaning and childrearing. Huot's *The Potato Peeler* (fig. 2), probably painted between 1880 and 1900, is a picture of a girl peeling potatoes in front of a fireplace. This setting signifies the warmth and comfort of the home and the child's early training in household chores.



Fig. 2. Charles Huot, *The Potato Peeler*, n.d. (probably between 1880 and 1900), oil on canvas, 32.6 cm x 24.1 cm, National Gallery of Canada.
<http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=44315>.

The theme of young women sewing is typical in nineteenth-century genre painting, along with pictures of everyday life in domestic interiors and rural outdoor scenes. Bouguereau, Huot's contemporary, presents a very different interpretation of this theme in *The Knitting Girl* (1869) (fig. 3), in which a young woman is knitting in an idyllic outdoor setting. Sitting upright on the wooden pole of a fence, barefoot and in an impeccably clean peasant dress, the woman pauses in the act of knitting to gaze in the direction of the viewer. Unlike this rigidly posed scene where the knitting appears to simply be a pretext for displaying a beautiful, young peasant woman, Huot's work shows young bourgeois girls actively learning how to sew.



Fig. 3. William Adolphe Bouguereau, *The Knitting Girl*, 1869, oil on canvas, 145 cm x 99 cm, Joslyn Art Museum.

Whereas this skill was a necessity for families who could not afford to buy clothing, in Mary Cassatt's *Young Mother Sewing* (1900) (fig. 4) a finely dressed mother—who could surely afford a seamstress to make her clothes—is sewing as a pastime.

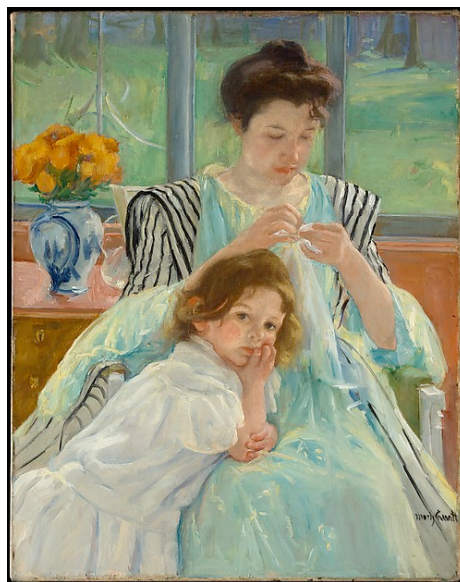


Fig. 4. Mary Cassatt, *Young Mother Sewing*, 1900, oil on canvas, 92.4 x 73.7 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

She is most probably indulging in some form of decorative needlework that an affluent woman could practise in her leisure time. The little girl's expression of bored relaxation indicates that she does not need to learn to sew but can be a child with the freedom to rest and play. This painting suggests that upper-class women had leisure time and thus were not entirely restricted to governing the household.

By contrast, Robert Redgrave's *The Sempstress* (1846) (fig. 5), originally painted in 1844, shows a poor seamstress sewing a man's shirt into the early hours of the morning.

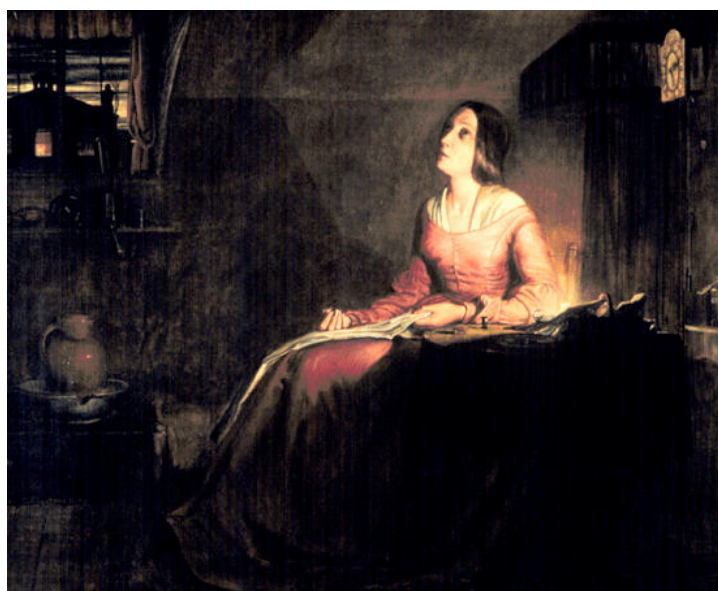


Fig. 5. Richard Redgrave, *The Sempstress*, 1846, oil on canvas, 63.9 x 76.9 cm (unconfirmed), Tate. Courtesy Forbes Magazine Collection, New York.
<http://www.netnicholls.com/neh2000/paper/pages/txt06.htm#>.

There is a tiny portion of food on the table and a bottle of medicine on the mantelpiece. This sickly working woman, alone in a tiny attic apartment in the city, is looking towards the heavens in despair.¹⁴ When the painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy, Redgrave included in the

catalogue a stanza from Thomas Hood's poem (1799–1845) *Song of the Shirt* (1843) about the death of a seamstress from illness and exhaustion: "O! Men with Sisters dear! / O! Men, with Mothers and Wives! / It's not linen you're wearing out / But human creatures' lives.... Stitch! stitch! stitch! / In poverty, hunger and dirt, / Sewing at once with a double thread, / A shroud as well as a shirt."¹⁵ The painting is an almost direct visual translation of the poem. A seamstress was usually a displaced middle- to upper-class woman who, due to misfortune, was forced to sacrifice her traditional roles as a good wife and mother in order to earn a living.¹⁶ The figure in Redgrave's painting is thus meant to elicit pity from the viewer.

Huot's *Sewing Lesson* and other paintings of the same theme illustrate the varying importance of sewing as a domestic skill among women of different social classes. Huot's work shows a middle-class housewife dutifully teaching a group of young girls how to sew. This intimate and tranquil scene of domestic life reveals how sewing was not only a domestic skill expected of girls and women, but was also a form of bonding between girls and women of different ages. In Bouguereau's *The Knitting Girl*, the act of knitting serves as a pretext for the display of an attractive and classicized peasant female figure in a landscape setting. In Cassatt's *Young Mother Sewing*, a wealthy woman engages in needlework as a leisure activity, while her daughter relaxes on her mother's lap because she is not required to learn this skill. Unlike the bourgeois ideals of respectability that underscore these various manifestations of the sewing woman, Redgrave's *The Sempstress* offers strong social commentary on the dire circumstances of the working-class seamstress, alone and struggling to survive in the industrialized city. By depicting the passing on of a domestic skill from one generation to another, *The Sewing Lesson* reinforces the relegation of women to the domestic sphere. Huot thus depicts prevailing conservative bourgeois ideas

regarding the divide between the public and private spheres and the roles of each gender within them.

NOTES

¹ Jean-René Ostiguy, *Charles Huot* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1979), 1–9.

² Huot married Louise Schlachter, the daughter of a Protestant pastor residing in Northern Germany, in 1883, but his desire for marriage had less to do with starting a family than with the fact that his father-in-law provided him large spaces to use as studios where he could complete commissions. The death of his wife did not affect his productivity, as he was a rather hard worker and a loner and not much of a family man. In painting *The Sewing Lesson*, Huot demonstrated that women belonged to the domestic sphere and that he, as the work's creator, was a working man within the public sphere. See Ostiguy, 12–13, 25–29.

³ Unlike his large-scale public commissions, Huot's genre paintings are rendered in a realist and naturalistic style. Also, Huot dealt with the theme of the seamstress in an earlier painting titled *The Seamstress* (1884). See Ostiguy, 12–13.

⁴ Heather Audin, *Making Victorian Costumes for Women* (The Crowood Press Ltd, 2015), 67.

⁵ Catherine MacKenzie, "ARTH 365 – Studies in 17th and 18th Century Art & Architecture," (lecture, Concordia University, Montreal, Winter 2015).

⁶ By mid-century, of twenty-four boarding schools in Bordeaux, 50% of schools had good standards of teaching and only two had excellent standards. See Christina de Bellaigue, *Educating Women: Schooling and Identity in England and France, 1800-1867* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 193.

⁷ De Bellaigue, 195–97.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 195–96.

⁹ Between 1800 and 1870, about 83% of teachers in girls' establishments were men. See De Bellaigue, 184.

¹⁰ Rebecca Rogers, "Culture and Catholicism: France," in *Girls' Secondary Education in the Western World: From the 18th to the 20th Century*, ed. James C. Albisetti, Joyce Goodman, and Rebecca Rogers (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 25, 33–35.

¹¹ According to Fénelon, Latin could be taught, but students were meant to keep it only to themselves. The education of girls was limited because society believed that women shouldn't know too much. Furthermore, what was called botany then was nothing more than picking out flowers in nearby fields and looking at them, showing a rather simplistic approach to teaching girls the sciences. See De Bellaigue, 192–95.

¹² Meanwhile, young boys were given an education based on classics, which was seen as appropriate to their role within the public sphere. See De Bellaigue, 192–95.

¹³ Gérard Cholvy, "Une École Des Pauvres Au Début Du 19e Siècle: 'Pieuses Filles', Béates ou Soeurs Des Campagnes," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions historiques* 7, no. 2/3 (été–automne 1980): 137.

¹⁴ Susan P. Casteras, "'Weary Stitches': Illustrations and Paintings for Thomas Hood's 'Song of the Shirt' and Other Poems," in *Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Beth Harris (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005), 35.

¹⁵ Hood's poem was first published in *Punch*, or the *London Charivari*, on December 16, 1843.

See Rewey Belle Inglis and Josephine Spear, *Adventures in English Literature* (Toronto: W.J. Gage, 1952), 436–37; Casteras, 25–33.

¹⁶ Casteras, 25–36.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alexander, Lynn M. *Women, Work, and Representation: Needlewomen in Victorian Art and Literature*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003.

Audin, Heather. *Making Victorian Costumes for Women*. The Crowood Press, 2015.

Casteras, Susan P. “‘Weary Stitches’: Illustrations and Paintings for Thomas Hood’s ‘Song of the Shirt’ and Other Poems.” In *Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Beth Harris, 13–39. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005.

Cholvy, Gérard. “Une École Des Pauvres Au Début Du 19e Siècle: ‘Pieuses Filles’, Béates ou Soeurs Des Campagnes.” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions historiques* 7, no. 2/3 (été–automne 1980): 135–41.

De Bellaigue, Christina. *Educating Women: Schooling and Identity in England and France, 1800–1867*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Inglis, Rewey Belle, and Josephine Spear. *Adventures in English Literature*. Toronto: W.J. Gage, 1952.

Ostiguy, Jean-René. *Charles Huot*. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1979.

Rogers, Rebecca. “Culture and Catholicism: France.” In *Girls’ Secondary Education in the Western World: From the 18th to the 20th Century*, edited by James C. Albisetti, Joyce Goodman, and Rebecca Rogers, 25–39. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.