



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

French-Canadian painter Charles Huot (1855–1930) was trained by French academic artist Alexandre Cabanel (1823–1889) at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Combining an academic style with a realist sensibility, Huot's *The Sewing Lesson* (1886) documents the domestic education of girls in late-nineteenth-century France. In a domestic room typical of the era, with terra cotta-coloured tiling and grey walls, a standing woman is teaching sewing—an essential skill for proper nineteenth-century women. To the left within the circular arrangement of the composition is an older 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. 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 various pieces of wood furniture scattered across the spacious room to accommodate the lecture suggest a middle-class home. The domestic setting is further made evident by what appears to be a bed behind an open curtain in the left background and a china cabinet to the right. The informal environment 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. This painting reveals that the education of young girls in the nineteenth century was often limited to the domestic sphere.

Georges-Étienne Carrière