

Women, Work and Commerce in the Creative Industries: Britain, 1750-1950



Friday 8th – Saturday 9th February 2019
Victoria and Albert Museum and University of Westminster

‘Women, Work and Commerce in the Creative Industries, Britain 1750 – 1950’ is supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and organised by Collaborative Doctoral Partnership students Erika Lederman (De Montfort University/V&A) Hannah Lyons (Birkbeck, University of London/ V&A) and George Mind (University of Westminster/National Portrait Gallery).



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Image Credit: *Art Students, South Kensington* by Florence Claxton. © Victoria and Albert Museum.

Friday 8 February, 10.00am - 5.00pm

Learning Seminar Room 5, Level 3,

Victoria and Albert Museum, Cromwell Rd, Knightsbridge, London

10.00 - 10.30 Registration and Coffee

10.30 - 10.45 Welcome and introduction from conference organisers (Erika Lederman, Hannah Lyons George Mind)

10.45 - 11.45 **Keynote Papers:**

Dr Patricia Zakreski, University of Exeter

Creative Labour: Women Writers, the Decorative Arts and the Art of Fiction

This talk will explore how women writers in the second half of the nineteenth century looked to the decorative arts to forge a new model of professional artistic work. Throughout the nineteenth century, a particular construct of creative labour developed in relation to the decorative arts. Based on the structure of repetitive, physical and labour-intensive industry combined with artistry, this model served a bourgeois ideal of that was positioned between a Romantic conception of individual genius and the socialist programme of Arts and Crafts. In this model of creative labour, creativity is conceived as embodied knowledge, developing through the process of making, rather than preceding it, and the creative object is characterised by repetition, rather than uniqueness, and expansiveness in terms of both the labour expended on it and the potential extent of the finished product. Material considerations drive creativity rather than impeding it, and cultural capital is invested in spreading as widely as possible education about the relationship between beauty, industry and discipline for the middle classes. This talk explores the connections that were made between fiction and the decorative arts in the period and traces how this model of creative labour appealed to and was developed in a specific way by women writers in the second half of the nineteenth century who sought to combine the disparate demands of artistry and industry.

Dr Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi, Bath Spa University

[title and abstract coming soon]

11.45 - 12.35

Panel 1 – Commerce and Print

Johanna Holmes, Royal Holloway, University of London

From connoisseur to commercial publisher: women's working careers in wood-engraved illustration, 1820-1860.

In the 1830's, Charles Knight (1791-1873) spearheaded the transformation of the printing industry in Britain, producing for the first-time printed material which was pictorially or decoratively illustrated and affordable to a middle-class mass market. Wood-engraving enjoyed both a cultural and commercial renaissance on an industrial scale. By the later 1830's, it was recognised that there were insufficient skilled wood-engravers to meet demand, and there were even calls for women to train and pursue this 'art' as a career. This paper explores, through the careers of four female wood-engravers working between 1810 and 1860, the effects of the transition from connoisseurial to mass markets for the training, work opportunities, financial reward and status of skilled female practitioners: Mary Byfield (born 1795), whose engraved work was foundational to the decorative quality of the output of the Chiswick Press, Mary Ann Williams (born c.1788), the "exquisite delicacy" of whose work Henry Cole in 1838 held up as an inspiration to other female practitioners, Annie Waterhouse (born c.1826), teacher of wood-engraving to women in the Government School of Design from 1843 to 1856, and "Miss Waite" (born c.1830), the only graduate of that class known to have been offered a job as an engraver. Together, their working lives offer an insight into the implications for women's careers of changing cultural expectations, markets for visual imagery, technological 'advances' and working practices in the metropolis.

Deborah Sutherland and Ruth Hibbard, Victoria and Albert Museum

"Of course... anyone who has a good sense of design can make the grade if they know their stuff - whether he or she is a man or a woman"; excavating women's work in the NAL's Jobbing Printing Collection

The Jobbing Printing Collection - small commercial 'jobs' solicited from British, European and American graphic designers and companies - held in the National Art Library (NAL), provides a fascinating glimpse into 20th century commercial printing. The Collection was developed between 1936 and 1939 by Philip James (then Deputy Keeper at the NAL).

James' intention was to create an "open reference collection of commercial typography so that the trend of typographic design, both in this country and abroad, could be appraised by students". He may have been responding to Beatrice Warde - sometimes referred to as the first lady of typography - describing an imaginary box of 'jobs' that would "display noteworthy new developments in printing".

The Jobbing Printing Collection was meant to be a 'snapshot', mainly considered until now in the context of significant male designers. Neglected for some decades we have been uncovering the collection through research, displays and presentations. We are interested in unearthing how well something that claims to be representative reflects the reality of women's roles in commercial design at the time. Using case studies of women we have succeeded in identifying, we will describe the approaches we have used to make sense of the collection. Because it is barely catalogued, and some of the original organisation has been lost, we have had to dig through and sift information from a variety of sources particularly from the objects themselves. In doing so we hope to interrogate BW's statement that: "anyone who has a good sense of design can make the grade".

12.35 - 1.35

Lunch

1.35 - 2.25:

Panel 2 – Photography I: The Campaign for Suffrage, Activism and Exhibition

Barbara Cohen-Stratyner, Independent Curator

“Modern Women Photographers” in The Women’s Kingdom exhibition, April 1914

The illustrated presentation will investigate women photographers' transitions from socially acceptable to professional by looking at the 28 women whose work was selected to appear in the photography gallery of The Women’s Kingdom, the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies’ exhibition at the Olympia, April 11- 30, 1914. Described in the *Souvenir and Handbook* as “A representative exhibition of the best work of modern women photographers,” it was situated between “women in the professions” and sections on fine and applied arts.

What they exhibited illuminates how they defined the place of women in photography and other professions. They included two women who ran photography studios and developed major careers – Olive Edris, who had successful portrait studios in Surrey and London and experimented with color techniques, and Florence Vandamm, a Regents Street Polytechnic graduate who became the preeminent documenter of the performing arts in London (to 1923) and New York (to 1960). Missing, possibly due to her well-known affiliation with the rival Women’s Social and Political Union, was Lena Connell, although her portrait of Millicent Fawcett appeared on the cover of the program. Mrs. W.N. Shaw, a mathematician, who also featured scientists using photography in their meteorology and ornithology, organized the gallery. She also showed botanical and landscape studies, including work by well-known explorer, Mrs. Arthur Schuster, and mountain climber, Mrs. Aubrey Le Blond. Additional participants exhibited works entitled “Child Study” or “Fancy Dress Portrait,” more in keeping with the Victorian tradition, maintained by Royal Photography Society tastes.

Helen Trompeteler, Royal Collection Trust

Norah Smyth: Photography and The Woman’s Dreadnought

This paper examines the importance of photographs by suffragette Norah Smyth (1874-1963). Despite the efforts of rare champions of her work such as Val Williams in *The Other Observers* (1986), Smyth’s work has been historically overlooked. This paper seeks to address this omission, and coincides with a new interest in Norah Smyth following the first monographic exhibition of her work at Four Corners Gallery.

This paper will begin by outlining Smyth’s photographic record of the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS) from 1913-17. I will argue that Smyth’s photographs provide an unparalleled visual testament to the activism of the ELFS. My reflection on Smyth’s legacy will investigate her role in the creation and production of the ELFS’ newspaper *The Woman’s Dreadnought*, which Smyth largely self-financed from her own inheritance. I will demonstrate how Smyth created powerful photographs that raised awareness of ELFS campaigns and expanded upon the documentary practice of her predecessors. Smyth’s photographs documented the physical spaces of women’s work - including the East London Toy Factory in Bow, which provided work and a decent wage to local women as well as a crèche for those with young children.

Ultimately, by exploring the case study of *The Woman’s Dreadnought*, this paper aims to illuminate more broadly, how the suffrage movement intersected with the development of photographic and printing technologies. Lastly, this paper will contemplate the potential causes of Smyth’s historic anonymity, and consider how this reflects some of the challenges of contemporary research.

2.25 - 2.35

Comfort break

2.35 - 3.25

Panel 3 – Professional opportunities: Networks and clubs

Pamela Glasson Roberts, Independent Scholar
The Halcyon Club (1911-1939) & its members

The Halcyon Club, 13-14 Cork St, London, was founded in November 1911 & open to women engaged professionally in medicine, science, arts, crafts, music, literature, research, education, the public services, agriculture, horticulture, photography and other branches of women's work judged acceptable by the founding committee. It was initially stated to be non-political although many of its members were strongly affiliated with the Suffragette movement. Registered as a limited company, it was financed and controlled by its members. One of the Halcyon's founder members was photographer Agnes Beatrice Warburg (1872-1953) who also co-founded the Royal Photographic Society's Colour Photography Group in 1927.

Less than a year after opening, the Club had attracted a membership of 507 made up 292 town, 185 country, 30 foreign & colonial members & 17,457 meals were served in the club in the 11 months period after its opening. The clubhouse contained rooms to which guests of either sex could be admitted, a top-lighted gallery for the exhibition and sale on commission of members' work in fine arts, colour prints, etchings, illustration, handicrafts and photography, and a large room available for lectures and concerts.

A number of bedrooms, at three shillings and six pence per night, were frequently used as accommodation by members visiting London including Boston Autochromist Helen Messinger Murdoch (1862-1956), a friend & colleague of Warburg. Murdoch also used the Halcyon as a portrait studio & exhibition space. This paper will mainly concentrate on the work of Warburg and Murdoch and several other Halcyon Club members.

Rachael Chambers, Victoria and Albert Museum
Collaboration, fellowship and professional networks among women in the Royal Photographic Society

My research will focus on the distinctions between professionalism and amateurism in the Royal Photographic Society and how membership, or being awarded an honour, affected women. I will question the validation that could be given by the society and investigate the organisation and intentions of its splinter groups. This will be achieved through two case studies. The first will examine Minna Keene (1861 -1943), a photographer working in Britain, South Africa and Canada from the 1890s onwards. She was an early female member of the Linked Ring, and the first woman to be appointed a fellow of the RPS. The second is Agnes Warburg (1872-1953), who was a founding member of the RPS's Pictorial Group in 1920 and helped found its Colour Group in 1927. Warburg also established the Halcyon Women's Club. This club for professional women counted active suffragettes among its members, and welcomed prolific female artists such as Helen Messinger Murdoch.

I will investigate what it meant to be a fellow of the RPS, and if this would elevate a photographer's status. I will also look into members of the RPS Pictorial and Colour Groups, to determine who might be attracted to such a membership, and what membership entailed. Keene and Warburg are likely to have overlapped in some capacity, and so I will also investigate if involvement with the RPS potentially fostered and encouraged networks between female practitioners, such as in the forming of Warburg's club for women.

3.25 - 3.45

Coffee break

3.45 - 5.00

Panel 4 – (In)visibility and the archive

Caroline Douglas, Royal College of Art

'The Woman Who Was Alive There': Hill and Adamson's portrait of a Newhaven Fishwife

David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson's calotype portrait of Elizabeth (Johnstone) Hall is a foundational work of photography, and it is also one of the first to have been self-consciously presented as art (Stevenson, 1981:23). Nine decades after Benjamin's declaration to know the woman who was alive there, Johnstone Hall remains largely unknown to us. This ought to come as no surprise: the history of photography has long been crafted in such a way that many of the living, breathing participants of its earliest period are written out. Principal among them are women. We are only now coming to terms with how photography was gendered from its very inception. Photography's close association with the female body has been accompanied by the historical erasure of the agency of actual women: their hands, their thinking and self-activity that helped shape the medium through its fin de siècle phase.

This paper explores the history of women in early photographic practice in Victorian Scotland through the case study of the voiceless subject Elizabeth Johnstone Hall - one of Hill and Adamson's Newhaven 'Fishwives'. The paper takes the form of a dialogue between archive and image; empirical research and studio practice. It explores the ethics and possibilities of recovering one of photography's 'unknown women', and interrogates her experience of being photographed into the canon.

Amy Goodwin, Norwich University of the Arts

'Lizzie: Striding Along' and 'Martha: Mesmeric Subject'

Embedded within fairground heritage my upbringing has established an appreciation for its rich history, reflected in my practice which blends traditional signwriting and illustrative storytelling. My practice-based PhD is concerned with re-establishing the identities of five fairground females through the construction of *archives as illustrated spaces* - this critically developed system exists as a development of thinking where illustration may be used as a tool in the archive, demonstrating how illustrative research can contribute to the expansion of the historical record.

Within this PhD many points of contention are being addressed, specifically the absence of these fairground females in existing archival documentation - despite the pivotal roles they played amongst their families and in the artistic, economic and public success of the fairground, during the first half of the 20th Century, their identities are lost (or hidden) in the archive. The grounding of this is through the unveiling and collation of fairground newspaper fragments, archival photographs and oral history memories.

This paper will be used as a platform to re-establish the identities of two of the fairground females, through a dissection of the works created and exhibited as their archives as illustrated spaces: Lizzie, who played a pivotal role during WWI, and whose space was exhibited at the National Fairground & Circus Archive, Sheffield, in 2018; and Martha, who drew on the Suffragette plight and WWI to succeed, whose space is to be exhibited at Dingles Fairground Heritage Centre, Devon, from March 2019.

(continued...)

Christine Slobogin, Birkbeck, University of London

‘What Did You Do in the War, Mummy? Surgical Drawings?’

Plastic surgery may not typically be considered a creative industry, but for Dickie Orpen, who drew these operations during the Second World War at Hill End Hospital in St Alban’s, it was an indubitably artistic field. Surgical illustration is also not usually considered women’s war work, but it was a demanding and honourable job for Mollie Lentaigne, who was a contemporary of Orpen’s working at Queen Victoria Hospital in East Grinstead.

These two women devoted their wartime years not to nursing or to factory work but to illustrating the stages of surgical reconstruction. Both worked tirelessly in operating theatres to draw multiple surgeries a day. Orpen would do six days of overtime in one week, and Lentaigne was so prolific that she had to retire from the work before the war ended because of failing eyesight.

During this period, both medical textbooks and the history of war art have neglected the role of the medical illustrator—even though surgical teaching relies on artists’ products and the work that they did is often as dynamic, beautiful, and relevant as the pieces included in World War II art histories. It may come as no surprise, then, that this hidden but vital profession of art and war is mostly staffed by women. Surgical illustration was unusual wartime work for a woman. But this paper will aim to place this job back into narratives of a woman artist’s place, wartime production, and art history.

5.00 Closing Remarks

Saturday 9 February, 9.30am - 5.00pm

Fyvie Hall, University of Westminster

309 Regent St, Marylebone, London W1B 2HT

9.30 - 10.00 Coffee

10.00 - 10.15 Welcome

10.15 - 11.15 **Keynote Paper:**

Dr Jan Marsh (National Portrait Gallery)

Women, Men and Money

Between 1850 and 1950 attitudes to money and earning were heavily gendered in all sections of society. I am currently curating an exhibition about women in the Pre-Raphaelite circle and searching for details of their financial situations as models, artists, wives. With a particular focus on gendered behaviour in regard to income and spending power, this paper looks at general questions within British socio-economic history of the period, and some case studies exploring who-earned-what and how in the art world.

11.15 - 12.30: **Panel 1 – Photography 2: Commerce and Class**

Rose Teanby, Independent Scholar

Mrs Cooke and Miss Wigley: The First Women Commercial Photographers in England

In the 1840s only two women appear in the list of English commercial photographers, one indomitable single lady, the first on Fleet Street, and a widow in Kingston upon Hull with nine children to support.

England's plethora of patent restrictions necessitated the purchase of licences, and contracts had to be signed before operating as a commercial Daguerrotypist. This automatically excluded English married women from the profession who, by law, were permitted to do neither.

Single or widowed women had a perverse freedom, free from these restrictions but had the double challenge of competing in a man's world without any of their social privileges.

Ann Cooke was widowed in 1843 and chose portrait photography to put food on the table. Her photographic talents earned her a place in history, becoming the first woman to appear in an English census as a "Photographic Artist".

Fellow Daguerrotypist Jane Nina Wigley didn't conform to the Victorian stereotype, refused to be intimidated, establishing herself in two different cities. Jane's lone foray into commercial photography between 1845 and 1855 exposed her to acerbic criticism and even litigation from William Henry Fox Talbot.

Ann Cooke and Jane Wigley were independent explorers on a shared journey into unknown territory at different ends of England. They turned endemic discrimination on its head, turning obstacles into stepping stones. Their pragmatic determination and entrepreneurial spirit paved the way for the subsequent swathe of women able to choose photography as their career in the future.

Sarah French, University of Sussex / Hastings Museum

Who's Holding the Baby? The Ideology of photographs produced at Alice Hughes' Studio, 1891-1910.

Borrowing its title from the Hackney Flashers' feminist-photographic invention of the 1970's, this paper explores the collective experience of women working in one London photography studio at the turn of the 20th century, as perceived by their employer, Alice Hughes.

Alice Hughes, marketed as 'A Lady photographer Who Never Photographs Men', was a successful studio portraitist. Her props and poses conformed to the preconceived notions of feminine beauty within the natural environment, and she became highly popular amongst the aristocracy and the upper middle social elite. As discussed during interviews and written in her memoir, *My Father and I*, she employed a vast number of employees to help with the day-to-day administration of the business as well as the practical photographic tasks, such as spotting and retouching. Contrary to what we might expect, Hughes did not speak favourably of this collective of female workers, writing dismissively of their lack of aptitude towards their work.

Opening up the wider discussions around women and work across class boundaries, rather than focusing on one iconoclastic figure, this paper will explore the correlation between the two groups of women participating at the studio - the clients and the staff. It will consider the ideology of the visual imagery that was placed on the workbenches before the employees, considering the effect this may have had on their behaviours and aspirations.

(continued...)

Catlin Langford, Royal Collection Trust

Lost and found: Discovering and revealing the histories of women photographers, 1850-1950

During a project to scope the Royal Collection's photography holdings, a large collection of works by women photographers were discovered. The collection provides an important reflection of women's relationship with photography: as a creative hobby, outlet for expression and an independent means of generating income. Yet, research on the women photographers represented in the collection proved difficult owing to the lack of records that survive and the scarce investigation on women's photographic practice. The history of women photographers is often sidelined in dominant histories, and once prominent, popular and famous women photographers have been lost in historical accounts and neglected in scholarship. This paper will consider the possible reasonings behind this, including women's lack of credit, their use of pseudonyms and a historical and scholarly disregard for commercial studio portraiture, a practice often undertaken by women. This paper will draw on examples in the Royal Collection, with a focus on the studio photographer Eva Barrett. Despite her contemporary anonymity, Barrett enjoyed a highly successful thirty-year career in the early twentieth century and her photographs of royalty, writers and inventors were regularly published and exhibited. This paper will exemplify the importance of researching and sharing the work and histories of women photographers to ensure their stories are recorded, shared and preserved. In doing so, a greater appreciation of the photographic medium and history is formed.

12.30 - 1.30

Lunch

Isobel Cockburn, Independent Scholar

'Fingers as clever as can be yet': Shetland Lace and Women's Craft in Victorian Britain.

Shetland fine lace knitting was an industry which grew from a marginal place, run by impoverished, matriarchal women living in a barter society, to become a popular handicraft patronised by aristocrats and royalty and marketed internationally. This presentation will consider the promotion of the lace from outside Shetland, and demonstrates how this case-study complicates narratives of both gender and of craft in the nineteenth century. Establishing the socio-economic background in the early years of the industry between Queen Victoria's patronage in 1837 and 1850, it will explain why, in the context of industrialisation and failing handicraft industries, Shetland lace succeeded in becoming a popular commodity.

Female patronage of Shetland lace, prevalent throughout the period but at its height in the 1880s, when some of the richest women in Britain chose Shetland lace as their philanthropic focus, will be discussed, particularly in the context of Victorian and subsequent discourses around the significance of craft in an increasingly mechanising society. As a commodified product which was never under threat of mechanisation, Shetland lace knitting poses important and challenging questions about the nature of craft and about women's creativity.

This study provides an art historical study of Shetland fine lace knitting in the Victorian period, drawing on a wide range of sources, including contemporary travel writing, newspapers, histories, theoretical works, and pattern books produced for English readers, as well as engaging closely with the materiality and design of the lace itself.

Benjamin Schneider, University of Oxford

The Rise and Fall of Hand Spinning

This paper describes and quantifies the growth and decline of hand spinning as a major occupation for women and children in 18th century Britain. It presents new estimates of employment numbers in spinning based on archival evidence and outlines the organization and experience of this occupation. The second half of the paper examines the destruction of outwork spinning caused by the rise of the factory system. I use a novel method to estimate women's and children's technological unemployment following the introduction of mechanized spinning and discuss the implications for women's labor force participation and the household economy.

The employment estimates suggest that there was substantial growth in hand spinning from 1700 and that more than 600,000 people, or about 15% of women and children, may have been employed in spinning by the 1770s. This is based on a combination of archival evidence about worker productivity from Humphries & Schneider (forthcoming) and fiber inputs. The quantitative and descriptive evidence demonstrates the widespread availability of spinning work before the advent of mechanization and its particular importance for rural families. The paper uses a new method to estimate technological unemployment in a period before the collection of government statistics. Contemporary manuscript evidence about the number and throughput of spinning factories is used to calculate the diversion of fiber away from hand spinners and their loss of employment opportunities. The breadth and duration of this technological unemployment is supported by contemporary qualitative sources from the 1780s up to the 1830s.

2.20 - 3.10 **Panel 3 – Design, entrepreneurship and professional identities**

Zoe Hendon, Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture, Middlesex University.

“Widow of the Artist”: Grace Lovat Fraser as female entrepreneur and design expert in the 1920s

Between 1923 and 1925, a company called Fraser, Treleven and Wilkinson supplied fashionable dress, theatrical costume and scenery. Though short-lived, this company provided one of the partners, Grace Lovat Fraser, with an opportunity to establish her expertise and reputation in the fields of theatrical and historic costume, stage design and interiors, which would inform her later work as broadcaster, writer and consultant to the textile, wallpaper and paint industries.

Grace Lovat Fraser’s husband, the artist Claud Lovat Fraser, died in 1921; hence in this period she sought to develop a professional identity separate to that of “widow of the famous artist”. She subsequently had a long career as design consultant and expert advisor, navigating the highly gendered spaces of dress, furnishings and interiors as well as the theatre.

As an historian and feminist I am motivated to explore the achievements of Grace Lovat Fraser, but the evidence is fragmentary. She consistently sought to promote her husband’s legacy through exhibitions and publications, and ensured that his work survived in museums and archives. However, she seems to have attached less importance to documenting her own work.

This paper will look at what surviving sources can tell us about this early period in the long and varied career of Grace Lovat Fraser, and suggest that gendered assumptions have worked at multiple levels to obscure the history of this important figure within twentieth century design.

Rebecca Luffman, Victoria and Albert Museum

Marion Richardson: ‘a common tradition and style has grown up among the girls’

Quoted in the title is Marion Richardson, the art mistress of Dudley Girls High School in the early 20th Century. Richardson turned her conventional role into unconventional international success by developing an independent style of teaching art. Encouraging the personal visual imagination of her pupils, prioritising their own creativity, her results rippled into the wider world of commercial design as Richardson put their work on public display across the country. Roger Fry, the acclaimed art critic and co-founder of the Omega Workshop, exhibited drawings by the Dudley girls at the Omega studio in 1917. The Calico Printers’ Association bought pattern designs by her students from a display in 1928. In 1929 her student’s work was shown in a crucial exhibition for the Victoria & Albert Museum, in association with the British Institute of Industrial Art.

This paper will explore the idiosyncratic impact of Richardson’s career on what was later termed the ‘Child’s Art Movement’, and how she used her typically gendered position to traverse the gap between “amateur” and “professional” art and design, by and for her young students. In 1934 those objects featured in the V&A 1929 exhibition were officially acquired by the Museum, alongside works by renowned artists such as Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant. Focusing on these objects, some of which remain in the collection today, this paper will demonstrate the recognition that Richardson brought her young – the youngest being 4 ½ - mainly female students, in a world typically prescribed by the older and male.

3.10 – 3.30 Coffee break

Michael Pritchard, Royal Photographic Society

The role of women within the photographic industry to 1914

This paper defines the ‘photographic industry’ as the photographic studio and ancillary trades such as retouchers and printers, the manufacturers of photographic equipment and sensitised goods (plates, film and papers) and photographic retailing. It will not look at the amateur women photographers. It examines the role of women working within the photographic industry from 1841 to 1914 and reviews their roles and how these evolved to reflecting the economic, business and technical changes within the industry over the period. It will also review how the photographic press viewed the role of women working within the industry and sets it within the wider changing perception and role of women within British society.

Grace A. Williams, Independent Scholar

Nibs & Swallows: Women’s work in The Jewellery Quarter, Birmingham c.1880-1941

The Jewellery Quarter of Birmingham is often referred to as the workshop of the world. Decades worth of production in the Gun, Silverware, Pen and Jewellery Trades, made it the creative heart of the second city for centuries. Yet, little has been written about the fundamental role women played in the dirty, deafening and often dangerous conditions of the metalworking trade.

Focusing on the history of Smith and Pepper (Jewellery), JW Evans (Silversmithing) and the various nib making factories of the Birmingham pen trade, this paper discusses the vitally important creative work that women fulfilled in the Jewellery Quarter factories from the late 1800’s onwards – critically exploring the spaces of women’s work. In addition, the press work, polishing and enamelling that fell to women in the metal working industry also flourished as the central mode of production for suffragette jewellery and badges, indicating that many ‘unskilled’ female workers were, unsurprisingly, incredibly talented designers and makers – lost to history.

Katie Lloyd Thomas, Newcastle University.

‘On the Artistic Side’: Women and the promotion of building products in the interwar period

In her book *Women Assemble* Miriam Glucksmann argues that in the 1930s, ‘because women both produced and consumed the new goods, were wage earners as well as spenders, they became indispensable to the extension both of commodity production and of the wage economy.’¹ To lubricate the sale of these new goods – particularly gas and electrical appliances – to the female market and to explain their emancipatory potential, a third group of women were recruited as intermediaries. Less well known is that women also took these roles during the interwar expansion of the building products industry. Numerous mechanisms emerged to market these products – roofing materials, patent floors, boilers, paints, bricks and tiles, amongst them, The Building Centre (opened 1932) – a four storey building products showroom at the heart of London’s West End that was more like its neighbouring boutiques and galleries than a materials library. This paper looks at the women who worked there (such as manager Alma Dicker who was responsible for many of its displays) and at the roles they took on in and around the building products industry. It proposes that women’s work facilitating other consumers’ interest in these products drew them into new technical arenas, and importantly, ‘feminised’ the expert world of building products. In these new environments, men as well as women architects became ardent ‘shoppers’ of building products, further complicating the binary of (male) producer and (female) consumer.