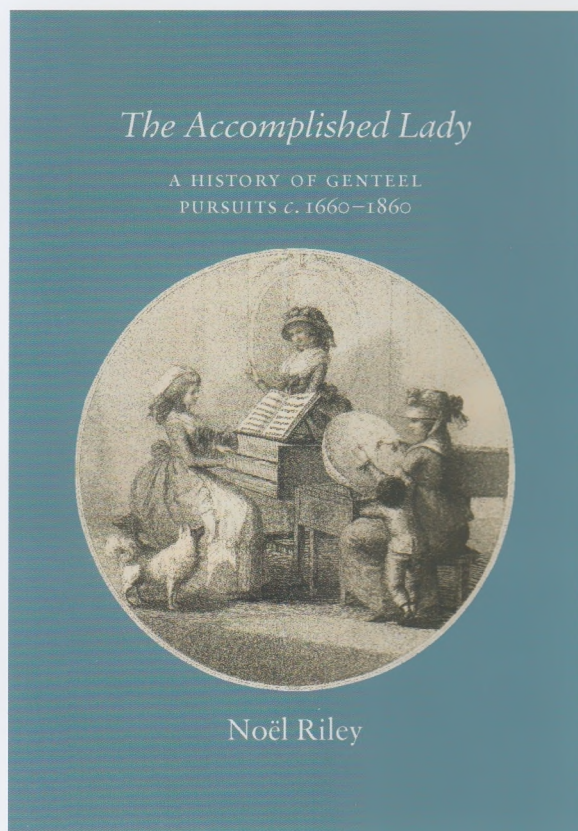


Book Review



Noël Riley, *The Accomplished Lady: A History of Genteel Pursuits c. 1660-1860* (Oblong, 2017). Hardback, 468 pages, 415 illustrations, ISBN 978 0957599. Distributed by D&M Heritage Ltd. £47.50

This book should be essential reading for social historians, academics and anyone interested in women's studies, demonstrating as it does the expectations and restrictions imposed on upper class women's art, craftwork and pastimes over two hundred years. Noël has drawn extensively from contemporary journals, diaries, periodicals, pastime manuals and many other sources. These sources have been interwoven to give an informative and lively text which complements the artefacts illustrated. The author has collected and studied fine handiwork made by gentlewomen, using many of these examples to illustrate her book, in addition to using a wide range of art and craftwork from private and public collections, museums, country houses and antique dealers' stock.

The author has written and lectured extensively on the decorative arts for decades, has produced several books including one on penwork, writes a regular column in *Historic Houses*, and is a consultant at Sotheby's Institute of Art. Noël Riley is also a long-standing member of the RFS, has served on the Council and was our *Newsletter* editor for several years.

The Accomplished Lady is divided into twenty-one chapters. The first three chapters: a woman's lot, educating a lady, and reading and literary pursuits, set the scene for the huge number of pastimes expected of a genteel lady. Subsequent chapters include: cards, indoor games and theatricals, the sporting lady, embroidery, threads and ribbons, beadwork, shellwork, nature into art, paperwork, drawing and painting, printmaking, japanning, and many more activities. The chapters are then subdivided into sections under appropriate headings such as knitting, tatting, or netting. The book is beautifully illustrated with examples of the particular art or craft carefully placed, normally on the same page as the relevant text, which makes for easy reference. Noël Riley gives us fascinating information on the time-consuming and often messy preparation for art and craftwork in previous centuries. Oil colour, for example, was an arduous process involving buying powdered pigments from artists' colourmen tied up in bits of animal bladders about the size of a walnut; the pigment was then ground and mixed with oil. However, in the late 1770s, Josiah Wedgwood produced terracotta 'paint chests' complete with ready mixed pots of colour expressly for ladies' use. The introduction of such products helped to make oil painting an easier and more popular occupation for ladies. Yet, even in the 19th century, Queen Victoria discouraged her eldest daughter from painting in oils for several practical reasons. Dyeing yarn was another messy process which stained delicate hands as well as the yarn. Noël emphasises the high standards expected and achieved by so called lady amateurs. Some high-born women had the time, dedication and talent to receive tuition from professional drawing masters and leading artists, which enabled them to produce work equal to many professional artists. Two hundred years ago the word 'amateur' did not have the negative vibes it has today. The line between amateur and professional work was very narrow, and proof of this can be seen in the many fine examples illustrated in *The Accomplished Lady*.

The restrictions and expectations of ladies of leisure at this period make fascinating and, at times, appalling reading. Imagine the unskilled needlewoman condemned to hours of tedious work each day on her 'plain work', which involved making her own and family's underwear, dozens of men's shirts, and night dresses. However, Lady Anne Coke became addicted to plain sewing. It was recorded that: 'year after year, she went on making chemises ... piles of dozens of them, which she gave away, & then made more'. Many high-born ladies took to making and especially embellishing their gowns, which gave them more satisfaction than plain sewing. Lady Sarah Banbury in 1764, for example, remarked that she had embroidered her dress using French gold thread, which was: '... vastly

pretty ... the stripes go on like lightening, but the flowers are a little tedious'. All the skills learnt from as young as four years of age were valuable experience for any lady who ran and organised a large household. Even if she did not need to make items or carry out all these activities herself, the practical experience was necessary in order to supervise others.

The Accomplished Lady, though not intended primarily for furniture historians, does contain some useful insights on the subject. An example is the enormous time and tedious effort involved in furnishing embroidery, which was especially popular in the 17th and early 18th centuries. It was not unusual for old embroidered chair covers to be transferred from old worm-eaten chairs to new chair frames designed to fit or accommodate the old embroidery in later years. Therefore, as Noël Riley remarks, '... needlework upholstery of an earlier period than the furniture it covers may sometimes be found'. This is food for thought when taking the layers of old fabric off such chairs before restoration.

Finally, I have no reservations in recommending this beautifully produced, fascinating, well-written and researched book to any reader, male or female, who is interested in the role of women, in addition to the history of art, crafts, music and pastimes. Every University library, art department, women's studies course, and country house library should have a copy.

Susan Stuart