Inscribing women and gender into histories and reception of design, crafts, and decorative arts of small-scale non-European cultures

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Introduction

The divide between fine art and decorative art/crafts is a Western construction. This was recognized in 1889 by Justus Brinckmann, director of the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg, when he focused on Japanese culture for his book *Kunst und Handwerk in Japan*. After first discussing the people, their natural environment, dwellings, weapons and more, he wrote: ‘To the Japanese, like the Greeks, this wide gap has remained unknown, that for Western peoples of our time yawns between the so-called high and liberal arts and those forms of material visual design which are designated as industrial art or arts and crafts, as minor arts, as decorative or as technical arts.’¹ The division emerged during the Renaissance and crystallised after the eighteenth century. By Brinckmann’s time, however, it was a live subject of debate.² Historians of fine art either considered decorative art not ‘real’ art or saw it as an anthropological phase in cultural production that could illuminate the habits and customs of peoples in an ethnological way, thus implying that this was an inferior field of study. For example, in a brief observation on Japanese art exhibited in England at the International Exhibition in London in 1862 (its first appearance in Britain), John Leighton, who included non-European cultures in his *Suggestions in Design* from 1853, discussed the fine arts before turning to applied art: ‘Having disposed of the higher elements of genius in Japan, we now come to those phases of


applied art by which people become known to the future historian of art.' [my emphasis]

Around 1870 the historiography of the applied arts was recognized as being important in itself. Working in Vienna, where interaction between male curators and scholars since the 1850s gave rise to a specialist Kunstgewerbetheorie (theory of artistic crafts), Bruno Bucher, curator of Vienna’s K.K. Museum für Kunst und Industrie (Imperial Royal Museum of Art and Industry), justified this split from art history. In his Geschichte der technischen Künste (History of the technical arts) of 1875, he writes: ‘The attempt, to complete the manuals of Art History with an elaborate account of the development of decoration and the minor arts hardly needs any justification these days.’ This historiography of ‘decoration and minor arts’ – Bucher’s own words – occurred at a time when industrialization, materialism, capitalism and colonialism became intricately linked. The scholarly interest in decorative art reflected this: it took a very materialistic and possessive stance, and was implicated in a network of trade, collections, museums, Western city culture, and social class structures.

Acknowledging that significant historical narratives were formed between the 1850s and 1890s, this paper addresses how women as authors, and as recipients and practitioners, can be inscribed into the emerging discourse around decorative art in relation to small-scale non-European cultures. How is historiography affected when the gender of authors, recipients and practitioners is addressed in the context of a confrontation between Western and non-Western artefacts through these authors’ gendered discourses? Female authors, artists and artisans, along with small-scale non-European cultures, have not featured prominently in historical narratives within the field. One example, noted by Jill Seddon, is Isabelle Frank’s anthology of primary source texts The Theory of Decorative Art. An Anthology of European and American Writings 1750–1940 (2000), which offers only one source text by a woman in a total of 392 pages covering a period of almost 200 years. Supporting the established historical narrative on design and decorative art, and without non-European material culture, Frank’s anthology appears to be almost entirely constructed around texts written by men. But by contrasting the gendering in this new historiographical field with other written sources such as travel writing women become more prominent. Before attending to women writers on small-scale

3 John Leighton, On Japanese Art. A Discourse delivered at the Royal institution of Great Britain, May 1, 1863, London: Privately Printed (50 copies only), and Suggestions in Design: Including Original Compositions in All Styles, with Descriptive Notes, for the Use of Artists and Art-workers; Containing Nearly Six Hundred Hints for Workers in Metal, Wood, Ivory, Glass, and Leather; the Potter, Weaver, Printer in Colours, Engraver, Decorator ..., London: David Bogue, 1853. A second edition of 1880 included ‘Ornament of Savage and Early Tribes’.


non-European cultures, I will briefly outline the emerging historiography of the field of decorative arts and design.

**Constructing history and mediating crafts, decorative art, design and material culture**

The field of crafts, decorative arts, design, and ornament is wide and varied. Crafts are handmade objects usually (though not necessarily) related to a practical function. Applied art and decorative arts – perhaps a rather nineteenth-century term – relate to classes of objects that have a practical use or function (eating, drinking, containing) yet surpass this function by being artistically decorated. The use or function remains referential and not intended for proper functionality; also, ‘beauty’ is an added feature. Design is in fact a much older concept and basically means any intentional drawing or plan, whether for an ornament or object form, or for a painting, sculpture or building. Ornament, originally related to military and aristocratic ranking, is decoration on, or embellishment of, any surface or object. Industry indicates serial and mass production rather than a one-off, hence unique, piece of work. All these terms cover objects and/or utensils which are not seen as wholly identical to the Western category of fine art, due to their intrinsic functionality. Bringing all of these objects together to construct one historical narrative is certainly a difficult task, as was noted by Bruno Bucher in his earlier mentioned *History of the Technical Arts*, which was aimed as much at art-scholars and enthusiasts as at workmen.6

Systematic documentation of ornament, design, crafts and decorative arts started when artistic form began to be related to manufacturing and industry: visual examples for pupils, workmen, and the consumer public were required.7 In addition, scholarly accounts appeared. These accounts coincided with the founding of museums: their curators and directors classified objects and institutionalized decorative art, producing museum-narratives as they went. The underlying notion of taste was important in these narratives; many museum displays were intended as guides to good taste.8 It is not hard to defend the notion that the historical narrative of decorative art and design at this time is essentially about taste and aesthetics.9

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6 Bucher, *Geschichte*, IX. Bucher’s account was in fact written by a team of specialist experts, Justus Brinckmann being one of them.
7 Irwin, ‘Art Versus Design’, 231. See also in note 2 the title of Leighton’s *Suggestions in Design*. From c. 1750 on, designers begin to position their own designs in the market for both limited luxury goods as well as more commercial designs through plate volumes (e.g. Ince and Mayhew, Chippendale, Sheraton, and Hope in England, and Percier and Fontaine in France).
9 Also Irwin, ‘Art Versus Design’. Essentially, Semper’s theory is also a theory of taste, a practical aesthetics, but he wanted to do away with the notion of taste through an objective
Indeed, one of the first theoretical publications in the field, two volumes written in 1860 and 1863 by the German architect and art critic Gottfried Semper applied a combination of aesthetic theory with a theory of style to craft techniques (weaving and ceramics) and tectonics (carpentry) – hence its title Der Stil in der technischen und tectonischen Künsten oder praktische Ästhetik (Style in Technical and Tectonic Arts or Practical Aesthetics).

Museum-related narratives also commonly took object-focused approaches. They were subdivided into form, decoration/style, and technical manufacturing the artefacts, and into typological object-focused histories of furniture, textiles, glass, metalwork, and so on. Composed in a descriptive and categorizing way, the object-focused discourse was historical-chronological and linked to high technological skill in making or designing. Names and schools of artists-designers, production and distribution were part of it, and all contributed to the formation of a canon. While users and audiences were almost denied physical presence in these histories, this was less so in books on domestic interior design. Such studies related objects, style, taste and fashions of the day to the female audience’s domestic sphere.

While object-narratives also incorporated notions of taste and beauty, other types of narrative theorized the aesthetics of ornament and decoration in a philosophical manner. The debate, active since classical times and further refined since the seventeenth century, attracted numerous participants and recipients over time. There were architects and painters, art historians, writers, antiquarians and collectors, amateurs, philosophers and theologians. Women were written into the debate as actors, though they were few in number and operated in circles of aristocracy and nobility. The nineteenth century brought some new participants to


All have been admiringly addressed longer ago for the seventeenth and eighteenth-century French discourse on art, architecture and design by the literary scholar Rémy Saisselin in The Rule of Reason and the Ruses of the Heart. A Philosophical Dictionary of Classical French Criticism, Critics and Aesthetic Issues, Cleveland/London: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1970, 26-45 (‘Beauty’) and 192-202 (‘Taste’). Women come to the fore in the context of their ‘salons’.
this debate: designers, museum curators, and journalist-writers. Ornament was often approached as a visual language with a grammar and in fact functioned highly rhetorically in the theoretical debate on design.\textsuperscript{13} Although Europe had different scholarly traditions, historians of decorative art and design generally found it important to contextualize theories on design and ornament within a critique of visual practices of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{14} And, as Philip Steadman had analysed in relation to architecture, the practical purpose of classification was to form theoretical principles for new designs.\textsuperscript{15}

Also theory-focused, but different from philosophical aesthetics, were socio-anthropological, and even psychological, insights into people and material culture in general. Material culture, however, became primarily caught up with observations of, and interactions with, non-European peoples, as in anthropology. The study of Western decorative art and design as material culture therefore implied a distancing from the emerging academic disciplines of ethnography and cultural anthropology, and with these also from many non-European societies. This was most clearly brought about through the debate on style and taste, which ultimately produced the normative stance of early twentieth-century modernism.\textsuperscript{16}

In a social context, taste is linked to psychological feelings of well-being and emotions, as well as distinction and status in class and race; all were observed in early texts but became the focus of historical narratives only later.

While the historical study of ornament, design, craft, techniques and objects was the product of a Western mindset, it did include cultures outside Europe from the start. Studies would attempt to cover a particular visual-material phenomenon worldwide, as with ethnography and ethology; they would describe sophisticated technical skills; and use non-European cultures as good examples in the debate on ornament and taste, supported by plates depicting ornamental designs. The inclusion of cultures outside Europe was, however, selective: essentially, it may be said to have distilled age-old trade contacts into a written historical object-focused narrative. Most often addressed – though with varied popularity between 1830 and 1910 – were Arabic cultures, India, China and Japan.\textsuperscript{17} Various small-scale societies also featured but African societies were only referred to after about 1900.


\textsuperscript{14} Irwin, ‘Art versus Design’, discussed a number of early French texts that are often overlooked. Also Frank, ‘Introduction’, who distinguishes between practicing architects and designers, and theoreticians and historians. England was more practical-theoretical; Germany and Austria were more conceptual-theoretical.

\textsuperscript{15} Philip Steadman, \textit{The Evolution of Designs. Biological Analogy in Architecture and the Applied Arts}, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, 29, 103. The evolutionary approach to decorative motifs and patterns as an analogy of biology was considered by evolutionist anthropologists.


Any primary written sources from cultures outside Europe – if used as sources in these histories – were fitted into the Western framework. This happened almost always in a comparative way. The Western framework of decorative art was even understood by native Hawaiian Queen Kaleleonalani, aka Emma, while she returned the Western gaze from her perspective. Born in Honolulu or Kawaihae (Hawaii) but adopted at a young age by British surgeon Dr T. Rooke, Kaleleonalani encountered Europe’s high society through him. In Paris in the early 1860s, she observed how plants from her native country ‘functioned’ as interior decoration by the empress Eugénie, wife of Napoleon III:

She [Eugénie] laughed very much when I told her that her hot house plant which she was rearing with care in the room we were sitting in on a beautiful little table in a vase of Sèvres was a forest nuisance. It was nothing less than our Ki plant, from which okolehao [distilled liquor] is made. I told her we fed our cattle on it, thatched houses with it, used it instead of paper for cooking fish & cutlets, & never for one instant would we think of putting a valuable Serve vause on our table for such a plant ... 

A common Hawaiian plant was deemed fashionable by Western royal eyes once placed in an expensively manufactured royal porcelain Sèvres vase. Thus, decoration and ornament from non-European cultures were given new value in the Western context of decoration and design, whether observed by women or men.

As a source-text, Kaleleonalani’s diary brings into focus the fact that historiographies are importantly formed by selecting particular types of written and visual texts and their authors. The following relate to the context of this article:

1. Picture books on pattern and ornament design. These are nineteenth-century phenomena. They categorized and subdivided visual ornament into regions, peoples, cultures and times through large colour plates, sometimes accompanied by a foreword or introduction and brief captions on the plates. The emphasis was on two-dimensional motifs, which also connected to architecture. Showing few objects with ornament applied, they were not object-focused but importantly catered for the debate on proper decoration and aesthetics. There are virtually no women designers or authors of these works.

2. Written object-focused historical overviews of crafted and decorated objects, their techniques and their design. These separated and legitimated the field of decorative art in comparison to visual art. They classified by geographical centres, countries, time periods, according to visual style, technique and manufacture. These overall

follows this history-format but outbalances geographical areas through more or less equal-sized chapters on East Asia, India, the Islamic world, Africa, Europe, The Americas. Object-focused, its title interestingly combines the words ‘design’, ‘decorative arts’ and ‘material culture’.

Inscribing women and gender into histories and reception of design, crafts, and decorative arts

Style histories with technical accounts were composed by museum curators from about 1860 onwards. As women were rarely employed as curators, they hardly ever acted as authors although they occasionally wrote on parts of collections. Acknowledging that women’s contributions to overall histories were sparse and gendered at least until around 1910, women did write earlier histories on European decorative art related to particular artefacts and gendered techniques such as the embroidered medieval Bayeux Tapestry. Eliza Stothard discussed this ‘masterpiece-to-become’ in Letters from Normandy of 1820, and in 1840 Elizabeth Stone included it in a history of needlework: The Art of Needle-Work from the Earliest Ages. Though of a different type – letters and historical narrative respectively – both texts were written by women, addressed to an audience of women, and focused on (medieval) female embroiderers and patrons as their subjects.

3. Accounts of the furnishings and design of interior spaces with a secular function. Using the words ‘House’, ‘Home’ or ‘Household’ in their titles, such studies had a contemporary focus and were targeted at a familiar female domestic space, along with women’s magazines. They functioned as guidebooks for taste in interior design. There were female authors, and with the rise of feminist scholarship, their writings began to play a role in historiographical studies of the twentieth century.

4. Diaries, letters, travel journals, and journalistic articles. These texts testified to a personal opinion, were contemporary and observant – perhaps they may be called proto-anthropological. Not aiming for a historical overview they nevertheless were incorporated into later historical accounts. They offered testimonials and viewpoints by women early on, and ego-documents may still be unpublished as well.

19 In the Netherlands, the first female art historians had the best career opportunities through documenting or as curator of decorative art. The first female museum director Ida Peelen was appointed in 1918 in a museum-period house in Delft with a collection of decorative art. See Yvette Marcus-de Groot, Kunsthistorische vrouwen van weleer. De eerste generatie in Nederland voor 1921, Hilversum: Verloren, 2003, 393, and Chapter 8.

20 Two later continental examples are Luise Schinnerer who taught at the prestigious Kaiserlich-Königliche Fachschule für Kunststickeri (Imperial-Royal Vocational School for Art-needlework) in Vienna and wrote Antike Handarbeiten (1895) together with art historian Alois Rieg; and German Hannah Lewin-Dorsch, Die Technik in der Urzeit from 1912 who positioned herself in the historical-theoretical discourse by acknowledging Gottfried Semper on wickerwork as Ur-artform from which developed both architecture and textile art. Dutch female craft-workers and textile ‘Ur-techniques’ are discussed in Marjan Groot, Vrouwen in de vormgeving in Nederland 1880-1940, Rotterdam: 010 publishers, 2007, 234-41. Also Houze, ‘At the Forefront’, 28-29.

21 Carola Hicks, The Bayeux Tapestry. The Life Story of a Masterpiece, London: Vintage books, 2007, 145-50. As Rozsika Parker highlighted in The subversive stitch: embroidery and the making of the feminine, of 1984, the practicing of embroidery formed as well as reinforced traditional gender roles. Also see Houze, ‘At the Forefront’, 21, for a discussion of Falke supporting the gendered nature of embroidery through costume history.
In Europe, women were active as designers and craftswomen, as collectors, and engaged with crafts and ornament through exhibitions and museums for which they were important target groups. However, with male authors composing overall histories on decorative arts featuring male practitioners and workshop-leaders as well as being the generators of a written debate as designer-critics, women wrote their observations in letters, (travel) diaries, catalogues and journalistic articles. For first-hand mediation on non-European cultures, travelling was the means. Travelogues in particular comprise a substantial category of writing by women on the cultures of small non-European societies. These texts have been extensively studied as a separate genre and offer a rich debate on gender roles through the act of writing.

Including women’s travelogues as source-texts for historical study in relation to craft, decorative art, and design from non-European cultures compensates for the general lack of writing by women in this field until about 1920. And, like many other written and visual texts that were not intended for later historical analysis, travelogues could intervene within a Western scholarly historical framework as they mediated other values into issues related to design and the decorative arts. The Austrian Ida Pfeiffer, for example, provides an account of adapting and extending her Western gender role to a non-European culture when, in Kurdistan on one of her world travels in the 1840s and 1850s, she ‘… was not less fortunate with the women; I pointed out their torn clothes, brought needles, and thread, and taught them how to sew and mend. They were pleased with this, and I had in a short time a whole sewing-school round me.’ Throughout her books, Pfeiffer comments on architecture, housing, clothing, adornment, and many sorts of material objects, always comparing different cultures with each other and with Western Europe.

More generally, travelogues could broaden the historical understanding and contribute to a well-rounded analytical fusion of historical decorative art, craft and design, and anthropological material culture.

The types of document categorized above (1 to 4) are therefore important resources for historical study. Category 4 has the most impact, above all when inscribing women into the historical narratives of design, craft and decorative arts of small-scale non-European cultures. Much less ‘constructed’ than factual, specialist histories, formalist ornament discourse, and picture books – and just a bit closer to ‘house and home’-books – those texts falling under category 4 bring up socio-anthropological issues. They also offer cultural comparisons while meeting practical craft-making demands and addressing design-aesthetic notions of taste and fashion.


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The Dutch-English lady Alexine Tinne, for example, noticed the fashion-consciousness of Central African Bari people, when she used glass beads (which she called *nenotinies*) as a currency to pay for her travel supplies in Gondókoro in the early 1860s:

We have been in contact with nearly all river tribes to buy sheep, milk etc. These transactions for *nenotinies* were not easy. Each tribe has its preferences and fashion changes quickly. A negro no more wants a *nenotinie* that is out of fashion than a European woman a hat of the previous year. There are 2 to 3 hundred current sorts of *nenotinies* and each sort has a name that one must know.

Texts such as these primarily focused on peoples, and the travel narratives in particular are an entertaining read, though also openly colonialist and discriminatory.

Hereafter, a number of different ways in which women addressed non-European cultures will be discussed. I will touch upon: women and the Western debate over ornament; women observing handicrafts from Ceylon, the ‘savage woman’, Brazil, and ‘fieldwork’ in Japan; Indonesian peoples and Dutch women’s craftwork; and travelling women on ‘design’ and crafts in small-scale societies in Africa. In so doing it must be noted that, as Sara Mills has shown, narrative structures and voices in travelogues by female authors reveal varying author-positions in a discourse of femininity and colonialism. While these texts are united by the theme of design, crafts and decorative arts for the purpose of this article, they do, of course, differ as to the colonial situations in specific geographical areas.

**Women and the Western debate over ornament**

Although they did not put together lavish ornament picture books women did address the aspect of ornament and taste, which was vital to the history of decorative art. Taken up by Arts and Crafts designers and craftsmen in England

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25 For this duality see also Mills, *Discourses*, 153-60.

26 Mills, *Discourses*, 1-23, 197.
from around 1860 onwards, the debate continued. One such Arts and Crafts supporter was Lucy Crane. Crane followed an art education and worked mainly as teacher. She also wrote the rhymes for the children’s drawings by her more famous brother, the designer Walter Crane, who was a spokesman for the Arts and Crafts movement. A lecture text by Lucy from the 1870s, published as *Art and the formation of taste* by her brothers after her untimely death in 1882, is a relatively rare example of a publicly expressed woman’s opinion on decoration and ‘savages’ at the time.

Like other authors, Crane considered the ‘Art Decorative’ as the second phase in artistic development, a step towards high art. But she of course gave it attention. Interestingly, she referred to Thomas Carlyle’s novel *Sartor Resartus* (Tailor Retailored) of 1836. Crane welcomed both Carlyle’s critique of the early capitalist exploitation of labourers and his denunciation of decoration as a characteristic of ‘barbarous men’ in his own society. Arguing for education in taste and beauty, she wrote how decoration ‘… began to develop itself ages before the time of which we have any certain record; and the same thing is still to be observed among tribes of savage men at the present day’.27 She found it an obvious fact that useful objects should be adorned, because ‘… as man extracts a use from every material substance, and makes it serve his purpose in some way, so hand in hand with every use comes also a desire for beauty, so that every useful object has its appropriate, or what should be its appropriate, ornament.’ And,

... it adds an interest to life to notice those things, and to ascertain for ourselves by continued observation that there is no object, for whatever use intended, but has something bestowed on it – either colour or pattern laid on, or form added, not conducing to its use in any way – that something being Decoration. I said *not conducting to its use*. (22, emphasis in original)

But in her time (‘these later days of civilization’), ornament hindered use. This was ‘clear waste and folly, and wrong from the very beginning.’(26) Here ‘savages’ did better:

The instinct for ornament in earlier stages of civilisation is never found to lead to such a sacrifice. The savage does not so over-decorate his paddle, his knife, his tomahawk, as to render it useless, and a real and capable workman or workwoman has the same instinct. (28)

Tellingly, women were active agents for Crane, and by attributing to both Western male and female craft-makers an ‘instinct’ equal to that of ‘savages’, she strengthened her statement on good ornament.

Looking further into Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, however, also exposes a critique of historiography in general. Even though overall histories of decorative art and design tended to exclude clothing and costume, this is arguably the most anthropological ‘element’ of all material culture and was certainly very prominent in travel writing. Yet Carlyle satirized the all-inclusive historical and ethnographical overview by way of an ‘Orbis Vestitus of the costumes of all mankind, in all

countries, in all times’ as composed by a German philosopher-professor Diogenes Teufelsdrockh, a professor of ‘Things in General’ at ‘Weissnichtwo University’. Carla framed this costume history as intellectual philosophy and as a positivist listing of information, methodologically following ‘practical Reason, proceeding by large Intuition over whole systematic groups and kingdoms’. Associated with a German approach, Carlyle’s professor represented the rationally observing scholar, showing ‘such indifference, malign coolness towards all that men strive after’. This part of the satire can be recognized in picture books on costume and fashion history, such as those by French publishers and scholars since the late 1840s. But Carlyle brought in ‘savages’ and Aboriginal ornament when considering philosophical and anthropological aspects. Mocking decoration as such, he suggested an evolution:

The first purpose of Clothes, as our Professor imagines, was not warmth or decency, but ornament. “Miserable indeed,” says he, “was the condition of the Aboriginal Savage, glaring fiercely from under his fleece of hair, which with the beard reached down to his loins, and hung round him like a matted cloak; the rest of his body sheeted in its thick natural fell.” … Nevertheless, the pains of Hunger and Revenge once satisfied, his next care was not Comfort but Decoration (Putz). … for Decoration he must have Clothes. Nay, among wild people, we find tattooing and painting even prior to Clothes. The first spiritual want of a barbarous man is Decoration, as indeed we still see among the barbarous classes in civilized countries.

Some forty years later, Lucy Crane’s statement on ornament, taste and handicraft twisted Carlyle’s satirical catch: ‘The first spiritual want of a barbarous man is decoration’, and supported statements made by William Dyce and designer and architect Owen Jones around 1850. Crane’s admiration of the ‘Savage’ who

28 ‘Weissnichtwo’ means ‘Dontknowwhere’. Teufelsdröckh may be translated as ‘God-Born Devil’s-Dung’.


30 Auguste Racinet, Le costume historique: cinq cents planches, trois cents en couleurs, or et argent, deux cents en camaieu: types principaux du vêtement et de la parure: rapprochés de ceux de l’intérieur de l’habitation dans tous les temps et chez tous les peuples (…), etc, Paris: Librairie de Firmin-Didot et Cie, 1888. This was an encyclopedic discussion of all forms of clothing in context with furniture and other decorative arts with 500 plates published between 1876 and 1888, in chronological order and per geographical area, including Asia, India, and (North) Africa. It was preceded by Paul Lacroix, Le Moyen Age et La Renaissance, histoire et description des moeurs et des usages, du commerce et de l’industrie, des sciences, des arts, des littératures et des beaux-arts en Europe, 1847-51; and by Charles Louandre and M. Hangard-Maugé ed., Arts Somptuaires, Histoire du costume et de l’ameublement et des arts et industries qui s’y rattachent, Paris: Hangard-Maugé, 1857-58 (Sumptuary Arts, History of Costume and Furniture and the Arts and Industries therewith connected).

decorated ‘his paddle, his knife, his tomahawk’ (28), recalls Dyce in 1849, who argued that savages painted ornaments on their skin before they covered their bodies with clothing, and observed that ‘their bows and arrows, their spears and war clubs, their canoes and paddles’ were all decorated with ornamental painting and sculpture. And Owen Jones’ *Grammar of Ornament* of 1856, offering a hundred full-page colour plates with additional small figures, illustrated ‘Savage Tribes’ on the first plate with the adorned spears and paddles of Oceanic and Maori people while other plates showed ornamental designs varying from classical Egypt, Greece and Etruria, the appearance of Islamic architecture, to India, Arabia, China, European Celtic ornament, and motifs from nature. Beginning with ‘Savage Tribes’, suggested an evolution in the artistic decoration of ‘primitive’ tools as well as a high quality of design. Jones detached the visual from its socio-cultural and anthropological context by admiring the logical and apt application of tattoos to the skull of a woman from a New Zealand ‘Savage Tribe’. He argued that compositional design principles in this ornament pointed to the highest ornamental art. Likewise, Gottfried Semper considered tattoos historically in an essay written in 1856 on the ‘formal laws of jewellery and its importance as symbol of art’. Semper understood ‘pierced lips and heavy bone pendants’ of the Botokuden, then called South-American ‘Indians’ from East Brazil, as rudimentary forms of aesthetically important ear slings – a type of jewellery. Arguing that the cannibalistic custom of painting and tattooing of the body had evolved into a more civilized form and had finally reached the ‘most cultivated peoples’, he also suggested that tattoos were closely linked to polychromy in ancient art and to the beginnings of art in general.

Whether concerning tattoos or other forms of decoration, the debate on ornament always had an ethical and moral incentive. In the nineteenth-century, the practices of applying European styles from previous ages without thought to an object was seen as being in bad taste. The many picture books on ornament, such as those by Jones, offered visual support on the proper use and application of ornament. As expressed by Lucy Crane, the debate valued a search for so-called ‘honest’ ornamental designs, which were not simply revived European styles. Therefore artefacts from non-European cultures became of great interest, with the suggestion that non-industrialized (and so-called non-civilized) peoples represented a ‘pure’ stage in human artistic development with un-naturalistic – almost abstract – decorative designs. The moral stance supported simplification through stylization of motifs.

The debate had its impact through laws and rules for design and decorative art by the first advocates of ‘good design’. This was addressed by the female author and art critic Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer in an essay on ‘Decorative Art and Its Dogmas’ of 1880, when she remarks: ‘The virtues of simplicity of all kinds were preached through the gospel of “sincerity”, for so bad had been our habits that

elaboration and insincerity were indeed synonymous terms.35 Like Lucy Crane, Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer supported the design reform and her essay proved her to be a true exponent of the debate on taste and beauty:

For … the preachers could not say in the beginning, “Leave your worship of ugliness and pursue beauty in its highest shapes, each man as it seems good to him.” They dared not say, “Shun conventionality: let each man express his own taste in his own way.” (278)

However, she defended the value of practical use as well as appeal to beauty through genuine luxurious materials against a too rigid following of dogmas.36

In her critique of design principles, Griswold van Renselaer left aside any cultures outside Europe and North America, unlike Crane and other women, who debated taste and beauty by offering comparisons with ‘savages’: peoples from Brazil, Japan, peoples from the Indonesian archipelago – in the case of the Netherlands – and others.37 I shall now turn to some of these female authors and to the gendered nature of their observations and texts.

Observations on handicrafts: Ceylon, ‘the savage woman’, Brazil, and ‘fieldwork’ in Japan

A recurrent issue besides ornament in this body of literature was the ‘gendering’ of crafts and women’s work. The issue was addressed by women commenting on countries other than Europe and North America, who were exposed at world and national exhibitions. As is well known, these exhibitions featured stands dedicated to colonies, on which were displayed artefacts, crafts and products, while native peoples demonstrated their craft and performed their music or dance as objectified curiosities alongside the material objects. Women visited these exhibitions in great numbers. When observing crafts and design, they mixed anthropology and aesthetics; for example, the writer and suffragist Maud Howe Elliott offered an evaluation of the pavilion for women in Chicago in 1893. In an official exhibition publication of 287 pages, Art and Handicraft in the Woman’s Building of the World’s Columbian Exposition Chicago, 1893, she addressed Ceylonese women:

Ceylon’s contribution is most precious. She sent us not only the work of her people’s hands but a band of her citizens. The Ceylon pavilion has two departments; one representing a temple, the other a resting-place near the temple. The beautifully carved pillars and arches of ebony are constantly surrounded by a group of admirers. The temple is adorned by a painting of

35 Frank, The Theory, 276-83, and quote on 279.
37 In the same vein, folk art from unindustrialized parts of Europe became much valued towards the end of the nineteenth century. Also Ottillinger, ‘Jakob von Falke’, 213-5 (who referred to Hegel); Houze, ‘At the Forefront’, 26-8, and 36-8.
Buddha and a marriage scene from a popular romance. … One afternoon when I crept into this haven [the Women’s Building] … a slender, dusky-skinned Ceylonese offered me a cup of fragrant tea. The picturesque costumes, the refinement and grace of these silent servitors, their delicate hands and refined, intelligent faces make a deeper impression than the richest of the embroideries or the most artistic of the jewels shown in their pavilion. Man is more interesting than the noblest of his works.38

Ceylon, which was characterized by Ida Pfeiffer in around 1850 as ‘being a second Eden; some go so far as to affirm that our common father, Adam, settled here on his expulsion from Paradise …’39, clearly also impressed Howe Elliott. She took a more anthropological stance when she lauded the Women’s building, in which work by ‘women savages’ was displayed in a separate ‘Scientific Room’ (thus indicating a physical-anthropological rather than an artistic classification):

Nowhere in the Exposition can we find so complete a history of the industries of the human race as in the Woman’s Building: beginning with women’s work in savagery (a very wonderful collection of which is to be seen in the Scientific Room) and ending with a modern woman’s idea of that primitive woman as shown by Mrs. MacMonnies in her decoration.

She compared handicraft by ‘savage women’ to the artistic representation of these women on the panel The Primitive Woman by Mary Fairchild MacMonnies (fig. 1), which was positioned opposite a panel entitled Modern Woman by Mary Cassatt. And, while the display began with anonymous ‘savages’ and ended with Western ‘high art’, she found the work of ‘savage women’ superior to some of the fine art by Western women:

39 Pfeiffer, A woman’s journey, 129-30.
We thus see in one department the tools of the savage woman, and in another the representation of their use. Judging by her handicraft, the primitive woman worked earnestly and well. With here and there a few brilliant exceptions, the work of modern women in the higher fields of art has been less earnest, less thorough, than the work of these savage women.

However, Howe Elliott continued by blaming the unprofessional level of women’s craftwork in Oriental cultures on the discriminative nature of their non-Western religions:

The religions of the Orient, which teach that man only is capable of civilization, and have made a woman man’s slave, are partly responsible for the long period of triviality in women’s work. The savage woman is a dignified figure. On her falls the burden of weaving and basket-making, of sowing and reaping, of feeding and clothing her family. The legacy she has left us is infinitely precious and touching. Orientalism is responsible for the idea that woman is the inferior of man, and when I hear women lightly professing a belief in Buddhism, I always feel like reminding them that one of the fundamental ideas of that religion is that the female principle in the universe is the principle of evil. (43)

In her brief evaluation, Howe Elliott used art and design to address socio-cultural relationships between the sexes and the awkward position of women under a particular religion. Comparing non-European cultures with women from her own culture, her empathic writing did not express the ‘indifference, malign coolness’ of Carlyle’s male professor.40 This more empathic attitude of writing from a subject-experience is similar, albeit more critical, to Dutch journalists’ admiration of the craftswomen from the Dutch Indies in 1913. They appreciated these women’s skilful batik craft and felt that this work was full of ‘effects of Oriental feelings and a related understanding of beauty’. This was described in the section dealing with work from the colonies of the women’s exhibition De vrouw 1813-1913 (Women 1813-1913).41

The empathic attitude is also reflected in women’s travel observations, such as those by Austrian Ida Pfeiffer who, among many other things, also addressed the making of crafts by women. Pfeiffer compared Brazilian craftsmen and women around 1850 to Europeans, noticing at the same time how Europeans had already changed the nature of craft making and living:

In the Brazils, every kind of dirty or hand work, whether in doors or out, is performed by the blacks, who here, in fact, replace the lower classes. Many, however, learn trades, and frequently are to be compared to the most skilful

Europeans. I have seen blacks in the most elegant workshops, making wearing apparel, shoes, tapestry, gold or silver articles, and met many a nattily dressed negro maiden working at the finest ladies’ dresses, or the most delicate embroidery. I often thought I must be dreaming when I beheld these poor creatures, whom I had pictured to myself as roaming free through their native forests, exercising such occupations in shops and rooms!}

Ida Pfeiffer began to travel after raising her children and divorcing her husband. She travelled on her own and without a regular travel companion (fig. 2). She wrote as many as thirteen books on the places she saw and the peoples she met; her books were hugely successful in her own time and translated into many languages. She even received recognition from scholarly circles for exploring cultures and areas that had not been visited by a European before, and she sent collected naturalia and artefacts back to Vienna where they became incorporated into scholarly classifications and museum collections. Alexander von Humboldt supported her honorary membership of the geographical Gesellschaft für Erdkunde in Berlin, of which she became the first female member. She also became an honorary member of the zoological societies in Berlin and Amsterdam, participated in meetings of the Société de Géographie in Paris, and got a stipend from the Royal Geographical Society in London for her last voyage in 1856 to Mauritius and Madagascar. Despite

42 Pfeiffer, A woman’s journey, 18.
this, she claimed to have no scholarly knowledge or intentions in her writings.\textsuperscript{43} Mary Kingsley, who travelled in West Africa – and, like Pfeiffer, largely on her own – adopted a similar attitude forty years later by comparing her observations to a Cambridge scientific method, though importantly she also took an ironical view. For example, when comparing umbrella trees and the term for umbrella, \textit{engombie-gombie}, in the Ogowé, she wrote: ‘I always get myself mixed up... in my attempts to “contemplate phenomena from a scientific standpoint” as Cambridge ordered me to do. I’ll give the habit up.’\textsuperscript{44}

By contrast, a more ‘objective’ report on craft production in Japan was conducted through ‘fieldwork’ by the British collector Mrs Hart around 1890. From about 1870 onwards, the European debate on visual ornament also focused on Japan. Although Japan was not a small-scale society, many Japanese decorations and designs shared the stylization of ornament for which other non-European peoples and smaller-scale ‘savage tribes’ were admired as well.\textsuperscript{45} A few decades after the appearance of Arabian ornamental designs in picture books, Japanese ornament also began to be published (after the 1880s). Several books reproduced stencils from the sophisticated craft of \textit{katagami} textile printing, a technique which had begun to be practised around 1200 by using paper stencils and a rice paste-resist to produce pattern-dyed motifs. Andrew Tuer, entrepreneur, publisher and writer, collector and antiquarian, published full-page plates of blackened paper \textit{katagami} stencils in \textit{The Book of Delightful and Strange Designs, Being One Hundred Facsimile Illustrations of the Art of the Japanese Stencil-Cutter} of 1892. De-contextualized from textile dyeing, the stencils were suggested for acquisition by European museums as well as designers, offering direct examples for design. They were also suggested as particularly interesting to women, though less so than more popular items such as fans and folding screens, which, as Kazusa Kume discussed, were marketed primarily to a female audience.\textsuperscript{46} To Western eyes, the items were visual and decorative art all in one.

Andrew Tuer made reference to Mrs Hart, who visited Japan around 1890 with her husband Ernest, a British medic, where she studied the women’s kimono and collected \textit{katagami} stencils while he collected Japanese prints.\textsuperscript{47} She lectured on her stencils for the English Japan Society in London, of which they were members, and exhibited specimens from her collection (fig. 3).

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{43} Mary Somers Heidhues, ‘Woman on the Road. Ida Pfeiffer in the Indies’, \textit{Archipel} 68: 2004, 289-313, here 296.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Mary H. Kingsley, \textit{Travels in West Africa. Congo Français, Corisco and Cameroons}, London: Macmillan & Co, 1897, 141 quote, and 435.
\item \textsuperscript{45} See for example Brinckmann, \textit{Kunst und Handwerk}, ‘Vorwort’.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Andrew Tuer, \textit{The book of delightful and strange designs, being one hundred facsimile illustrations of the art of the Japanese stencil-cutter}, 18-9. Similar \textit{katagami} plate-books were published in France and Germany.
\end{itemize}
The Society’s chairman William Anderson introduced Mrs Hart as having ‘devoted herself to a painstaking investigation of the process employed in the art industries of the country, and, more especially, of the economic condition of the skilful, patient workpeople – one should, perhaps, rather say artists – by whom these industries are carried on’. Her talk, attended by 114 people, proved her scholarly competence. Having observed the craftsmen at work, she expressed her admiration for Japanese craftsmanship as something to be cherished in the Arts and Crafts manner, ‘even in the present day of competition and European civilization’ (49). She also questioned the relative positions of the concepts of civilized and barbaric, and equated ‘new’ Western values of modernity with an honest mindset of unindustrialized people:

Every day I stayed in Japan I found how much there was to learn from the simple, joyous, artistic workers of the Land of the Rising Sun, and this not only in arts but in ideals. Japan is a nation of such great antiquity that it was civilized when we were barbarians, and of such modern development that it was, so-called, barbarian when we were civilized. (50-1)

Although Japanese designs and ornament were popular with designers and female consumers, few women engaged in producing scholarly accounts of Japanese arts and crafts. Mrs Hart certainly was early in presenting *katagami* designs in Europe as objects for intellectual study. She was, in fact, a contemporary of Justus Brinckmann who collected stencils for the Hamburg Museum and whose *Kunst und Handwerk in Japan* even had a cover design suggesting a stencil. Reporting on craft, design and style, collectors such as Mrs Hart contributed to knowledge of, and Western inspiration for, Japanese craft and design. The Japan Society welcomed more women: Mrs. Charlotte Salwey lectured as an expert on Japanese fans.\footnote{Mrs. Charlotte M. Salwey, ‘On Japanese Fans’, *Transactions and Proceedings of the Japan Society*, 2: 1892-1893, 30-63. She collected these fans.} Even forty years since Ida Pfeiffer’s contributions, such involvement with an official scholarly Society was still exceptional for women at the time.\footnote{For Mary Kingsley and societies for ethnography/anthropology, see also Ulrike Brisson, ‘Fish and Fetish: Mary Kingsley’s Studies of Fetish in West Africa’, *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 35: 3, 2005, 326-40, here 334.}

### Indonesian peoples and Dutch women’s craftwork

While the Dutch lost Ceylon to the British in 1796 and no longer held trade privileges in Japan either, they further colonized the Indonesian Archipelago. This was ongoing when lone-traveller Ida Pfeiffer – prepared by a visit to the Great Exhibition in London in 1851 – left for Borneo (present-day Kalimantan) and Sumatra (then partly under Dutch rule), then to Java, Sulawesi and Maluku, as the title of her travelogue from 1855 indicates.\footnote{Ida Pfeiffer, *A lady’s second journey round the world, From London to the Cape of Good Hope, Borneo, Java, Sumatra, Celebes, Ceram, The Moluccas Etc. (…)*, London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1855 (2 volumes); Gabriele Habinger, ed., *Ida Pfeiffer Abenteuer Inselwelt. Die Reise 1851 durch Borneo, Sumatra und Java*, Vienna: Promedia, 1993; Somers Heidhues, ‘Woman on the Road’, 294.} Observing the islands’ many different peoples, Pfeiffer’s vivid account of Dayak ‘domestic life’ and women’s craft alluded to European readers’ female realm of the house:

> Each hut had a spacious covered hall or vestibule, with doors all round, leading to the chambers of the several families, most of which have one and sometimes two little rooms to themselves. These contain places adapted for sleeping and cooking, and serve to stow away the little household utensils; but the large hall is the actual dwelling-place. Here, they carry on their various occupations, here the children tumble about, and here the aged people rest. There is, indeed, quite the appearance of what we may call domestic life among these Dyaks. The women work at plaiting mats and baskets, and the men cut very pretty little boxes for tobacco or Siri, as well as handsome handles for parangs.\footnote{Pfeiffer, *A lady’s second journey*, 69-70.}
After this almost soothing description, however, there followed a confrontational shock:

There are fire-places in this hall as well as in the private chambers but they seem used rather for lighting that [sic] cooking. A few years ago the fresh human heads used to be hung up over them to dry and smoke, after which they were carried in great state to the place of honour in the hut of the chief!

(70)

Whilst visiting ‘one of the independent tribes of Dyaks in the neighbourhood of Scaran’, Pfeiffer saw many wonderful goods in a storage hut, a ‘great hut, at least 200 feet long’: ‘There were cotton cloths, and stuffs made of bast; superb mats; beautifully plaited baskets; the costly vases, the value set on which had so much perplexed me; parangs, drums, gongs, all kinds of treasures, in short, displayed … ’ (81) She also collected artefacts herself and exhibited these at her home in Vienna, recalling a Naturalien- und Kunstcabinet in a seventeenth-century manner. These included costume pieces from the Dayak of Borneo; jewellery from kings; ear slings; a woven cloak; and a highly valued divining Tungal Panaluan stick from Batak of Sumatra, used to display enemies’ decapitated heads, which must have seemed curiously macabre to Ida’s Viennese audience (it is now held in the Museum of Anthropology in Vienna). Ida would entertain people with her travel stories whilst holding the artefacts, rather than by offering scholarly lectures on them. The objects encouraged her to allude to the imaginary and poetic rather than to the prosaic, and, as Dianne Sachko Macleod observed, it is important to realize that object-collections also satisfy the imaginary.  

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Figure 4 Women dyeing batik sarong-cloth. Photo from Augusta de Wit, Java Facts and Fancies, with 160 illustrations, London: Chapman & Hall Ltd, 1905, 279.

Sketching a far more idyllic picture of colonial life and less confrontational on the habits of the peoples, was the Sumatra-born Augusta De Wit’s account of life on Java: *Java Facts and Fancies*, first published in English as a newspaper series in 1898. Writing in a simple and poetic style, De Wit discussed the crafts of women and men and pictured them in posed photographs, for example when dyeing batik *sarongs* (fig. 4): ‘Yonder she was, at her batik-frame, painting the sarong cloth with flowers and butterflies. The girl looked up as he spoke; turning a pretty face on us, and smiled.’

De Wit used an almost advertorial tone when describing the benefits of living in colonial houses in Batavia (now Jakarta). She compared the grace and ease of people’s manner with the ‘frigid reserve of the typical Hollander: as forcibly as a seventeenth-century family mansion on the Heeren-gracht, solid, imposing, and gloomy as a fortress, contrasts with an airy Batavia bungalow’ (91). She said furnishing a house in a climate where ‘to be cool or not to be cool, that is the great question’ (66), meant: bare, white-washed walls and ceiling, red-tiled floor with a coarse mat in the centre, and cane-bottomed chairs and settees. And, finding the stone floor ‘deliciously cool to the feet, and the bare walls distilling a freshness as of lily-leaves’, she ‘delighted in the absence of carpets and wall-papers’ (25), and the presence of ‘velvet-covered furniture’ and ‘gauze hangings’ rather than ‘draperies of silks and brocade’ (66).

Augusta de Wit compared Indonesian homes with typical nineteenth-century Western furnishings with stuffed upholstery and many textiles. When, however, Dutch artistic circles began discussing Indonesian crafts in around 1900 they did so in the context of their national debate on craft reform. Like Maud Howe Elliot, the Dutch journalist Elisabeth Rogge compared women’s roles when evaluating artefacts and crafts of Dutch women with those of Indonesian peoples. Keeping in mind the principle of a logical application of ornament (which she also advocated in her role as principal editor of an upper-middle class women’s magazine), she reviewed a booklet on the craft of beadwork by a Dutch female art needle-worker. Rogge compared Western women’s beadwork with work from the Moluccas, Java and the Dayak and so-called ‘Kaffer’-peoples, and echoed Lucy Crane when she argued that artefacts belonging to cultures in ethnographic and colonial museums were of ‘so much higher artistic expression’ that they could serve as good examples for modern European ornament in beadwork, partly because of the logical design principles:

Those wild, native tribes are ahead of us in their inborn, good understanding of decorative art, which is closely connected to the object to be decorated; it is so inseparable and logically connected to it, that the one is unthinkable without the other.55


55 The quote is from 1909, in Groot, ‘Crossing the Borderlines’, 130. The derogatory ‘Kaffer’ had roots in Arabic kāfir; it was later used by English missionaries for black South-African, non-Christian Bantu. In Dutch it also relates to African slaves from Madagascar who were shipped to Batavia.
Marjan Groot  Inscribing women and gender into histories and reception of design, crafts, and decorative arts ...

So as to let them judge for themselves, she advised ladies to visit the gallery-shop of N.V. Boeatan in The Hague, where arts and crafts from the archipelago were on display and craftwork by indigenous women were sold. The founding of this Boeatan-gallery (boeatan means ‘product’) was actually triggered by the first National Exhibition of Women’s Work in the Netherlands in 1898 (the Nationale Tentoonstelling van Vrouwenarbeid), and the gallery’s director was a woman. Appropriating the work of their East Indies sisters, Rogge argued that Dutch women could reclaim the lost ‘dignity’ of their own handicrafts, which had been devalued by machine-work.

The small galleries offered tangible spaces for the sharing of knowledge about non-European artefacts. In addition to museums and (perhaps even more so than museums), they became gendered places and spheres for Dutch women and non-European cultures. There is not much documentation about these galleries, but they do gain in importance in the Netherlands after 1895; in other countries this presumably happened earlier. The Boeatan-gallery, which in the 1920s was claimed to be unique in Europe for the popularisation of Indonesian industrial arts, also provided a meeting place for Dutch who had lived in Indonesia. Recurrent displays of the same types of artefacts between 1900 and the late 1930s kept alive the past. In 1928, a female commentator for the monthly De vrouw en haar huis (The Woman and her Home) wrote: ‘Recently, with the help of many, a special exhibition in “Boeatan” was devoted to twenty of these Kendaoeris [bead installations for a funeral procession], the arts of the Toradjas of Rante Pao and surroundings.’ In the context of this women’s magazine, the writer suggested a personal appropriation of kandaoeri from Celebes people (presumably women), by adapting them as artistic furnishings: ‘Originally made as ornamental costumes, to use in religious ritualistic festivities, they can now serve us, Europeans, wonderfully as lampshades and flower holders.’56 Other well-informed writers on colonial Dutch material collections, however, strongly disapproved of this idea.57

Women’s journals also shared non-European cultures with a female audience through photographs of ‘authentic’ exhibits, and by documenting work of contemporary designers who adapted the designs and techniques of these cultures. Figure 5, for example, two photos published with an article in the De vrouw en haar huis of 1925, aptly shows the hybrid appropriation of other cultures: wooden furniture with decorative ornaments applied through the batik technique.

56 F. Wolf-Roodschild, ‘Boeatan’, De vrouw en haar huis, 22: 11, March 1928, 527-30, quote 529: ‘Met veler hulp werd onlangs in “Boeatan” een speciale tentoonstelling gewijd aan een twintigtal dezer Kendaoeri’s, het kunstwerk der Toradja’s van Rante Pao en omgeving. Oorspronkelijk gemaakt als sierkleeding, om te gebruiken bij godsdienstig-rituele feestelijkheden, kunnen zij ons, Europeanen, prachtig dienen als lampekappen en bloemenhouders.’ Rantepao is in middle Celebes (today’s Sulawesi) while Toradja live in the mountains of south Celebes. Dutch missionaries were active in these areas.

Figure 5, left and right: Pieter van Gelder, Batik-decorated furniture, the left pieces with batik on leather after a design by the architect J.B. van Loghem. Photo from De vrouw en haar huis 20 (mei 1925) 1, 4.

Writing about how the designer-craftsman was interested in ‘exotic products of foreign peoples, Japanese, Chinese, Negroes and Papua’, the female author exposed an amalgam of cultures. Examining the furniture – clearly of European type – reveals a combination of Indonesian batik, originally used for textile printing, ornament resembling textiles from New Guinea, leather surfaces suggesting craftwork from North Africa, and perhaps an ‘African robustness’ of form. The unique pieces were exhibited in a gallery in the town of Haarlem, which was, once again, aimed at a female audience.

In the practical field, batik was the most fashionable of all Indonesian craft techniques between about 1895 and 1930. It was a technical challenge for male and female European craft-designers and only a few Dutch women and men succeeded in maintaining a lifelong career as batik artists. However, female journalists discussing the work of Dutch female batik artists evoked idealized impressions of Indonesian women working with traditional batik wax reservoirs on textiles. A pertinent example is the society writer Jacqueline Reyneke van Stuwe’s review of the art-batik by artist Agathe Wegerif-Gravestein, published in a women’s journal in 1917:

It was mostly women who spanned the threads and made the hasps fly, women who let speak their small poetic souls on the white clath, who cried their grief or laughed away their beatitude, while their hands regularly moved the wax boat up and down.

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This Dutch artist had been actively practising batik since 1899, and in later years also presented her batik art to an American audience at the Panama Pacific International Exhibition in San Francisco of 1915 and the Panama California Exhibition in San Diego of 1916.

In the same artistic circles Dutch women actively practised non-European crafts when reconstructing techniques for scientific publications. They first experimented with batik around 1895 in a ‘colonial laboratory’ at the decorative art museum in Haarlem, but were soon after working on other techniques as well.60 The wife and sister of the bookbinder J.A. Loeber, for example, plaited mats to illustrate his study on plaiting from the Indonesian archipelago. However, unlike with European needlework, men wrote the scholarly analyses, either working in ethnographic museums or observing collections as ‘armchair anthropologists’.61 Loeber was an ‘armchair anthropologist’ who studied arts and crafts from the archipelago from 1899 until the 1920s; he explored the National Ethnographic Museum in Leiden and collections in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, as well as museums in Batavia, Berlin, London and Vienna.62 He published on bamboo objects, textile techniques of batik, ikat dyeing and plaiting, ceramics, decorations with beads and shells, and objects made from leaves, bone, horn, tortoise, leather and parchment, with a special focus on the Amarasi on the island of West Timor, Dayak on Borneo, and Atoni (Meo warriors) on West Timor. Mixing ethnohistory and ornament analysis, in particular through decorated tibaq or tibak (bamboo tobacco boxes from South-West Timor), the author represented the debate on ‘good’ decoration. He was especially fascinated by mathematical principles of ornamental design:

This proper use of the geometrical proportions of planes is thus the key to an understanding of the W. Timorous ornament, the basis of this ornament. It is so consistent, that this is a remarkable phenomenon; how peculiar and strange it may seem in the work of uncivilized, where coincidence and randomness

61 For example, the early overview of Dutch batik collections by G.P. Rouffaer and H.H. Juynboll, De batik-kunst in Nederlandsch-Indie en haar geschiedenis: op grond van materiaal, aanwezig in ’s Rijks etnographisch museum en andere openbare en particuliere verzamelingen in Nederland, Haarlem: Kleinmann, 1899-1914 (The batik-art in the Dutch Indies and her history: based upon material, in the National ethnographic museum and other public and private collections in the Netherlands). For the ‘armchair anthropologist’ see Wilfried van Damme, ‘Siberian Ornaments, German Scholars, and a Transitional Moment in the Anthropology of Art, c. 1900’, Art History, 38:3, 2015, 512-535.
Loëbèr argued that Dayak ornament was superior to Western decoration through its humane authenticity: ‘It is faithful, honest, beautiful by simplicity, it reminds of the beautiful, old songs, also from the peoples, free from shallow make-up.’ He projected onto Meo ornament the Western values of rationality and regularity in the logical construction of a design, thus framing the artefacts through the most abstract form of theorizing. He also explained that indigenous peoples had words for circle, figure, design, and square, and showed surprise about how ‘illiterate tribes’ expressed regular and logical systems of ornament. Loëbèr occasionally addressed the provenance and meaning of ornamental motifs, such as when he connected the spider-web motif on Timor with an Indian tribe in Peru.

In 1927, the female teacher Jo de Jong, who was in fact the first author to record the recent history of the Dutch arts and crafts reform movement between 1880 and 1925 in a book from 1929, further underscored the (by now) historical view that primitive folk art had guided modern decorative art towards ‘healthy concepts’ as a basis of rationalism. She called beadwork, mat-plaiting, weaving, knitting and knotting – all considered women’s work – primitive yet sound techniques. By implication, Western women’s handicraft now connoted ‘primitiveness’ in modern Western culture as well.

Women on ‘design’ and crafts in small-scale societies in Africa

So far, the examples of texts by women authors who described decorative art, craft and design of small-scale non-European societies both in and outside Europe, alter the historiographical approach to design and decorative art from an object to an object-subject approach, despite the fact that virtually all authors are Western and white. I will now turn to the decorative arts of Africa, which has only been addressed so far, to further demonstrate this. In general, African artefacts were noticed early on, for example by South Kensington Museum director Henry Cole, when he praised African ‘design’ in a speech on the ‘Art of Savage Nations and People considered Uncivilized’ at a Missionary Exhibition in Manchester. Cole wished his recently established museum to have a section for this ‘humbler kind of

65 J.A. Loebèr jr., ‘Het “spinneweb-motief” op Timor’, Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indië, 7; 6, 1908, 93-6. This was also published as a German essay.
67 For such changes in attitude, also Van Damme, ‘Siberian Ornaments’.
art’ but it was not to be. The majority of newly-founded museums of Western decorative art had, in fact, few objects from Africa, Polynesia or other small-scale non-European societies. If a city or town had an ethnographic museum, artefacts from these cultures were more likely to be found there. Combining collections of Western decorative arts with these ethnographic artefacts in new museums could, however, happen later on. But travel accounts make one aware of the omission of Africa in the emerging histories of decorative arts and crafts.

With regard to artefacts and collections, this is reflected in the Dutch-English Alexine Tinne’s early exploration of Central Africa. Together with the German zoologist-ethnographer Theodor von Heuglin, Tinne was among the first Europeans to travel south along the Nile in Sudan, around 1860. She also was one of the first female photographers. A photograph, taken in 1866 near Algiers, shows Alexine in profile in the middle with her female staff on the sailboat ‘De Meeuw’ (fig. 6).

Figure 6 ‘L’Equipage feminin du Meeuw’. Group portrait of twelve women and a girl with Alexine Tinne in profile in the middle, in the courtyard of an Eastern building (probably Tinne’s lodgings in Mustapha near Algiers). Names of the people and the note ‘The female crew of the Meeuw’ written by Tinne, 1866. National Archives, The Hague.

Alexine Tinne, around thirty years of age and unmarried, was accompanied by her mother. Being descendants of Dutch-British sugar and coffee traders in Guyana (Demarara) and ship-owners, their enormous wealth did not pose any financial restraints and their decadent manner of travelling – with a magnificent crew of assistants and dogs, on camels and by boats (dahabiyah and steamer) – made Alexine an eccentricity among ethnographers and geographers who were searching for the

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68 Burton Vision, 78-80, quotes 80. This is now the Victoria and Albert Museum.
source of the Nile at the time. She also featured favourably in writings afterwards (albeit not always).\textsuperscript{69} Alexine Tinne saw the dancing Shillook, whose headdresses made them simultaneously ‘terrifying, awful and ridiculous’, and the related Dyoor (or Lwoh, locally considered savages because they do not breed cattle), and Kresh peoples.\textsuperscript{70} She saw the straw huts of the ‘needy and naked Kitsjnegroes’, a village of the Kher tribe ‘very remarkable for its nice barter’, and the ‘quite educated and prosperous’ Bari-people.\textsuperscript{71} She also bought artefacts as an amateur collector and as souvenirs. In her house in Cairo she kept rare weapons, stuffed birds, antelope and rhinoceros horns, tools from the Sudanese peoples, all piled haphazardly on top of each other, and she sent ‘2 large boxes full of Africana curiosities’ to Liverpool in 1865.\textsuperscript{72} While most female collectors – who numbered relatively few – focused on European fine art and decorative art, it is noticeable that Tinne, as well as Ida Pfeiffer, collected artefacts from cultures outside Europe.\textsuperscript{73} By 1869, Tinne’s English relatives had helped transfer 349 of her objects to the Liverpool Museum (now the World Museum). Tinne focused mainly on the appearances of people and barely wrote about the design of artefacts. The researcher Robert Willink, however, has recently characterized her collection as the African equivalent of European crafts and decorative arts, rather than as fine art. He suggests that, at the time, the artefacts were also regarded as decorative art. Theodor von Heuglin, who actually recorded more than Alexine Tinne, evaluated objects from African peoples such as the Azande from the point of view of aesthetics, craftsmanship, technical skill, decoration and style. And Georg Schweinfurth in his German-English Artes...
Africanae of 1875, an illustrated ethnographic description of the material culture of Sudanese peoples, understood the Artes as ‘Erzeugnisse des Kunstfleisses’ (‘products of the industrial arts’); they included jewellery, household utensils and tools, weapons, furniture and even dwellings (which he calls huts). The objects bought by Tinne and Heuglin thus became artefacts in German ethnographic studies of the time. Tinne’s own Cairo house impressed the ‘material gaze’ of the German traveller and artist Wilhelm Gentz, who discussed the ancient harem which she had turned into a salon/reception room. On the outside, he described it as a ‘dilapidated ruin’, but inside it evoked a multicultural experience, with an inlaid floor of coloured marble and a wooden ceiling decorated with Turkish ornamental carving. It was furnished with Turkish divans, sculptured stools from Azande (‘Niam-Niam’ or ‘Zandey’), and one European table:

All around the walls were the usual Turkish divans, instead of chairs, the frames of which were formed of wood of the palm tree. In the centre of the room were a few peculiar low seats, resting on three supports, and most whimsically carved; these were from the land of the Niam-Niams. The only piece of European furniture was a small, modest wooden table, on which was a large Arabian lantern, such as are today in use among the Turkish Pashas. By the side of this were scattered the books and drawings of Heuglin.

While their language did suggest a sense of cultural superiority, these travellers also criticized Europeans. Tinne, for example, wrote from Khartoum: ‘... if there is one thing more peculiar than the wild people in this country, then it is the Europeans and the traders who live here. Once being on the Nile, they consider themselves outside any divine and human law. They rob, kill and do whatever comes into their heads.’

Equally well known in women’s travel studies as Alexine Tinne, British-born Mary Kingsley published various accounts from her travels in West Africa between 1893 and 1895. These accounts conflated scientific anthropological research with direct and appealing personal evaluations of the peoples she met. Some scholars have discussed how Kingsley’s gendered style of writing operates somewhere between a systematic scientific ethnological style (as mainly practised at the time by male authors), and a personal observational manner, which almost serves to

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74 Schweinfurth, *Artes*. Like Semper, he begins with jewelry and also takes up Semper’s comparison with the Botokuden in Section III fig. 3.


characterize her as a woman unable to enter the scientific field as an equal to men. Kingsley’s texts clash with discourses on the colonial, the feminine and feminism.\(^{77}\) The difference between object-oriented and subject-guided narration on design and craft is clear from Kingsley’s ‘anthropological’ observations. For example her remarks on the tattoos of the Bakwiri in West Africa show them to be more than mere designs in a Western analytical discourse on tattoos as ‘good’ ornament, as earlier exemplified by Owen Jones and Gottfried Semper:

Both men and women among these Bakwiri are tattooed, or rather painted, on the body, face and arms, but as far as I have seen not on the legs. The patterns are handsome, and more elaborate than any such that I have seen. One man who came with the party had two figures of men tattooed on the region where his waistcoat should have been.\(^{78}\)

Mary Kingsley used the vocabulary of taste (with words such as ‘handsome’ patterns), as did Pfeiffer, and Alexine Tinne in her observations on the fashion-consciousness of Bari people in Gondókoro thirty years earlier. But their accounts on tattoos could also be less descriptive and more emotional on women, for example when Pfeiffer met an angelic ‘young gazelle’, one of the wives of a Persian prince, whose ‘hands and arms … were slightly tattooed.’ The girl explained to her ‘… that this shocking operation was performed upon her when she was only a child, a custom which is also practised by the Mahomedan women in Bagdad.’\(^{79}\)

Mary Kingsley occasionally addressed clothing, crafts, decorative art, and housing; for example, she observed the use of furniture types by ‘Igalwa ladies in the Lembarene village sitting on the sunny sandy street on their low, wood country stools’, and contrasted this with chairs: ‘The chairs I have mentioned before are “for dandy” not for use!’\(^{80}\) Kingsley let African women become subjects at the level of European women through reference to their furniture objects. By contrast, she happened to notice how a Bakele woman made ‘fire by means of a slip of raffia palm drawn very rapidly, to and fro, across a notch in another piece of raffia wood’ (600). In first-hand observations of cross-cultural dressing, Kingsley aimed for an empathetic response from female readers back home:

In addition to the cloth there is worn, when possible, a European shawl, either one of those thick cotton cloth ones printed with Chinese-looking patterns in dull red on a dark ground, this sort is wrapped round the upper

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\(^{79}\) Pfeiffer, *A woman’s journey*, 253.

\(^{80}\) Kingsley, *Travels*, 222. Gendering of craftwork is noted as well, as seen in the work of male anthropologists such as A.J. Duffield. On factual writing by Kingsley and objects see also Shapple Spillmann, ‘African skin’, 307.
part of the body: or what is more highly esteemed is a bright, light-coloured, fancy wool shawl, pink or pale blue preferred, which being carefully folded into a roll is placed over one shoulder, and is entirely for dandy. (223-4)

The shifting from the use of ‘ladies’ to ‘women’, the concept of ‘dandy’, and the focus on textile production and familiar dress accessories, made Kingsley’s vocabulary appeal to women, within a masculine world of geographical discovery. When letting the reader know of her lack of privacy in her simple lodgings, she hinted at her familiarity with the sophisticated British Arts and Crafts designs of William Morris (in the form of a ‘dado’) with a comical reference to his designs in contrast with Cameroon ‘furnishing’:

So as it is now growing dark I return to my room and light candles, and read Dr. Günther on Fishes. … Room becomes full of blacks. … You look at a corner one minute and it is empty, and the next time you look that way it is full of rows of white teeth and watching eyes. (538) … But it is no use trying to get any sleep until those men are quieter. The partition which separates my apartment from theirs is a bamboo and mat affair, straight at the top so leaving under the roof a triangular space above common to both rooms. Also common to both rooms are the smoke of the fire and the conversation. Kefalla [her servant] is holding forth in a dogmatic way, and some of the others are snoring. There is a new idea in decoration along the separating wall. Mr. Morris might have made something out of it for a dado. It is composed of an arrangement in line of stretched out singlets (559; i.e. belonging to the Africans).

The quotation also shows how Mary Kingsley the scientist, referring to studies by Dr. Günther, and Mary Kingsley the woman positioned herself between geographical and spatial locations of Africa and Britain and between a simple room and the artistically decorated female realm of the house, with a preference for the first.81 Even more scientific in nature was her Appendix, in which she recorded Eboe people telling her about their ‘Invention of the cloth loom’ which wove a very fine cloth (fig. 7).82 Kingsley wrote down their tale, actually telling men how to make their wives happy through weaving cloth of a good quality: ‘For it is good for a man to be a great hunter, and it is good for a man to please women’, whereas the story in the end not only revealed the cloth loom’s history but also the object-mediated history of their subordinated, disappearing native culture: ‘This is the origin of the cloth loom. It was in the old time, and men have got new thread on spools from the white man, for the white man is a great spider; but this is how the black man learned to make cloth.’ (736)

81 These conflicting voices and female-male positioning can also be found in Mills, Discourses, 155-7.
82 Kingsley, Travels, Appendix V, 734-6.
While many more examples of this nature deserve further study in the context of design historiography, more objectified contributions by female authors in voluminous historical overviews do not seem to appear until the early twentieth century. This is exemplified by a small section on the prehistoric ‘Art Industry of North Africa’ by archaeologist Elise Baumgärtel, in the German series History of Art Industry of all Times and Peoples, published between 1928 and 1935.83

In conclusion

This article’s question – ‘How is the historiography of design and the decorative arts affected when the gender of authors, recipients and practitioners is addressed in the context of a confrontation between Western and non-Western artefacts?’ – grappled with the differences between nineteenth-century scholarly studies of design and

decorative art history, as well as ornament picture books, and written sources by women at the time. This argument demonstrates – perhaps unsurprisingly – that by calling something ‘art’ or ‘design’, and by describing a scholarly field as being ‘historical’, ‘design-historical’ or ‘anthropological’, one is singling out objects, histories, theories, and not least the authors themselves as agents. The gendered nature of these actions became clear: the history emerging in the second half of the nineteenth century was male territory. This history writing shaped, expanded and appropriated fields of knowledge and led to acclaim as author and scholar on a prestigious part of Western material culture which was publicly displayed in museums.

Women did not write such scholarly overviews. Their writing relating to the field of decorative art and design were of a different nature: private diaries, unpublished and published travelogues, journalistic articles on exhibitions and galleries, and guidebooks. Though entering the public realm as published texts as well, they were more openly connected with personal experiences and were therefore more subject-oriented. Whilst following the general debate on ornament, beauty and taste, there is a difference in the form of women’s appropriation of female crafts and empathic comparisons with women from non-European cultures. Female authors who travelled to small-scale non-European societies observed the cultures first-hand in their daily context. They compared these cultures with their own experience as Europeans but bypassed the object-framework of the decorative arts. However, here too, the framework of aesthetics and taste remains present.

So, examining texts by women authors as well as their active engagement with craft-making does not seem to change the object-oriented aesthetic-historical framework regarding taste that is formed and supported by specialist historical overviews. But the personal female voice does work very powerfully to confront these impersonal frameworks, thereby broadening the theoretical perspective on history and gender. Compared to the gender-limited discourse offered by emerging scholarship on decorative art and crafts for women in Europe (limited figuratively and territorially), the broadening of the geographical context by the study of cultures outside Europe offers an ideological space for considering gender roles in historical narratives on decorative art and design, and in fact also on aesthetics. And perhaps it contributes to the rudiments for a design-anthropology as well. However, I would also like to note that these texts make one realise above all how much the history of decorative arts and design appears to be a Western capitalist-materialist construct.

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