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The Needle's Eye: Women and Work in the Age of Revolution
(review)

Thomas Dublin

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to worry about than the joke itself. It is the serious opinions and the actions informed by these opinions that should be the objects of concern.

California State University, Los Angeles

Elliott Oring

AMERICAN ICONS: An Encyclopedia of the People, Places, and Things That Have Shaped Our Culture. Edited by Dennis R. Hall and Susan Grove Hall. 3 vols. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. 2006.

It is hard to dislike a trio of volumes with shiny, high-school-textbook covers adorned with images of Oprah, the Alamo, and the Babe. And the announced goal of the editors was to provide essays on American icons for browsers in public libraries, students writing term papers, and scholars of popular culture. The first two groups may well benefit from the big type, the plethora of photos, and the generally reader-friendly format of the project. But the scholarly community will not be so pleased, I fear.

The problems are several. In the 20-plus essays I sampled—they ran the gamut from Mickey Mouse and Crayola Crayons to Elvis and Whistler's *Mother*—the writing was easy to follow but lacking in depth or a sense of the inherent complexity of the subjects. The lists of sources skirted texts that treat the objects of inquiry as problematic: the references were, in most cases, the first things a "Google" search would be liable to turn up, albeit not the studies that most professional historians of a given topic would find challenging and significant.

The more serious problem, however, is the icons chosen for inclusion. Why Coney Island—and not Disneyland? Johnny Cash without the Grand Ole Opry? The Kodak Camera and not the Polaroid, the Xerox machine, etc.? The Dollar Bill and not currency and philatelic design in general? Tara without *Gone With the Wind*?

It is this decision to select narrow categories and to avoid contextual issues that limits the usefulness of *American Icons*. I found myself thinking of Howard Lamar's admirable *The Reader's Encyclopedia of the American West* (Harper & Row, 1977), a volume I still consult regularly. And every time I do, I find myself lost in one of its lengthy, informative, and literate essays, chockfull of all the specific "icons" a reader could ever desire along with what were, for the date, remarkably detailed bibliographies. Is today's library user so witless (or myopic) that a densely printed book—a *real* book—is somehow unattractive? Another more recent example of a fine reference work on American culture is the one-volume *Encyclopedia of American Folk Art* (ed. Gerald C. Wertkin) published by Routledge in 2004. The margins are wider, the typography more legible, but like the Lamar book, it is well written, well researched, and manages to retain a firm grip on the sweep of cultural history while sparing no pains to get the details straight.

In the end, I can't imagine why *American Icons* would be a welcome addition to a library given its hit-or-miss list of topics and disinterest in relating one theme to another—or to the nature of American culture. It's a great pity, though. The cover photo of Oprah hugging Elmo is a genuine icon!

University of Minnesota

Karal Ann Marling

THE NEEDLE'S EYE: Women and Work in the Age of Revolution. By Marla R. Miller. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press. 2006.

In *The Needle's Eye* Marla R. Miller has rescued for a twenty-first century audience New England needlework and needleworkers in the generations before, during, and after the American Revolution. Her account offers a broad perspective, viewing needlework as

both paid and unpaid work, exploring both its economic and social dimensions in village life from roughly the mid-eighteenth century through the first quarter of the nineteenth century. She also brings to the topic a sensitivity to its material culture dimensions which is particularly valuable. Building upon extensive research in both archives and collections of surviving clothing, Miller also places her narrative within the broader interpretive framework of the industrial and market revolutions that transformed New England in the period. The result is a rich and thoughtful study that makes deft contributions to women's, labor, and family history, while also speaking to the regional economic and social development transforming New England in the Revolutionary era. In a final chapter, she moves beyond the temporal focus of the study and writes intelligently about changing perspectives on early-national needlework over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As material culture study, social history, and intellectual history, *The Needle's Eye* has much to say to American studies scholars today.

Miller's introduction sets the broader framework and introduces readers to the Connecticut Valley, the primary geographical focus for the study. The carefully organized study moves through three sections: a first part focusing on clothing production and consumption; a second exploring the lives of six needlewomen whose experiences and surviving sources illuminate different aspects of the development of the needletrades in and around the town of Hadley, Massachusetts; and a final one that broadens the perspective, placing the transformation of the needletrades in this period within the broader economic transformation of New England and within changing perceptions of needlewomen and their craft in subsequent years.

This is a nuanced and complex work that contributes new knowledge on many levels. The way in which cooperative needlework among the rural gentry helped to constitute a female elite in the Connecticut Valley is a striking and original finding. Miller shows how quilting among the wealthy depended upon the contributions of their servants and slaves and played an important role in the visiting and socializing that marked elite women as a cut above their neighbors. Miller's analysis of needlework employment distinguishes among three groups: tailoresses who did plain work in the homes of their customers, skilled dressmakers who fit, cut, and stitched women's gowns, and women who worked on men's clothing, competing more directly with male tailors. Two broader points emerge over the course of the case studies. First, that needleworkers rarely kept accounts of their own but that considerable evidence of their work can be teased out of the account books of their fathers and husbands. Second, the study of needleworkers reminds us that women could be artisans, but that they did so on terms that were quite different from those of men. The clear implication is that overly male-centered criteria have defined artisan work and culture in ways that have blinded historians to female participation in artisan crafts. Marla Miller makes a real contribution by viewing artisan work through a gendered lens, reminding all in the historical trade of the value of this new perspective.

State University of New York at Binghamton

Thomas Dublin

SLAVE COUNTRY: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South. By Adam Rothman. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2005.

American historians have long studied the settlement of the Old Northwest. Jefferson's draft legislation restricting slavery and the spread of democratic institutions provide a compelling picture of how founding visions played out in western lands. Adam Rothman's *Slave County* joins recent examinations of the Old Southwest by James Miller, Daniel