Hastings Needle Work

Women Creating, Women Providing

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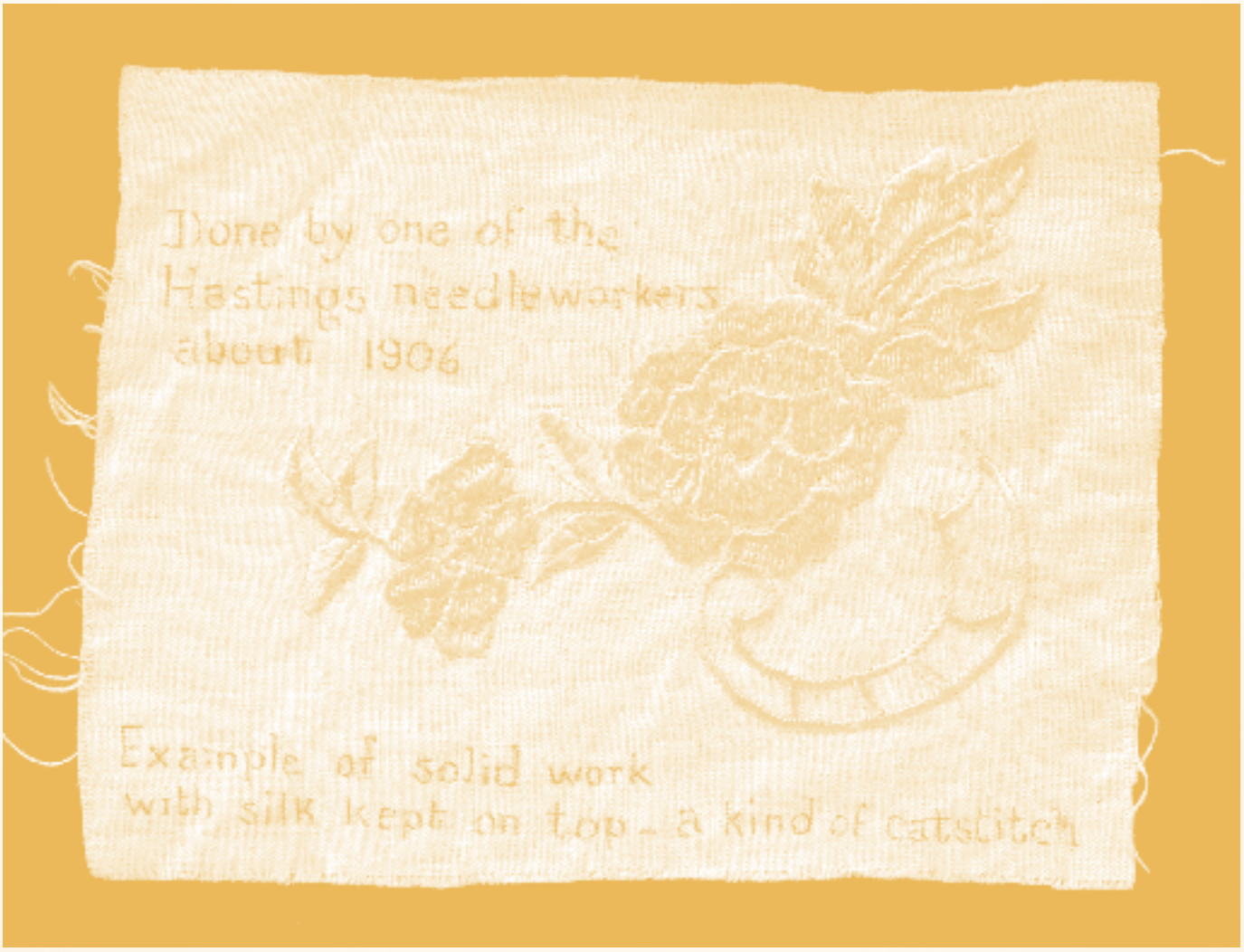
EMBROIDERY WAS A FORM of needlework that well-bred women of the nineteenth century were expected to master. Academies for young ladies taught the skills of "good manners and posture, reading, dancing and above all, needlework." Far from being drudgery, embroidery was considered the highest art form available to "respectable" women. Even so, there was a hierarchy among needleworkers, as *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* explained in 1880: the "higher levels," for "women of refinement," included household decorative work and artistic pursuits. The trades—millinery and dressmaking—were next and attracted a "more intelligent class" than the bottom rung of "factory labor, shirt- and underwear-making and tailoring."[1]

Schools of art at this time maintained the Victorian code that proscribed a rigid and limited set of creative outlets for women. Rather than urge them to enter the fine arts, schools tracked women into the decorative arts, believing, as an 1890s article declared, that "talented, ambitious or impoverished women could convert their skills into a profession." During the late 1800s and early 1900s, design became an area "where women could both express themselves artistically and earn money," according to historian Cynthia Branimarte.[2]

Hastings Needle Work, a business operating out of the Le Duc family home in Hastings, Minnesota, is one such example of women's entrepreneurial success. For 34 years—between 1888 and 1922—company workers

FACING PAGE: Woman Embroidering, *a 1908 watercolor by Alice Sumner Le Duc, an artist, designer, and needleworker who surely knew her subject.* BELOW: *Embroidered green silk flower, most likely a sample; the notes were probably added when the piece was donated to the Minnesota Historical Society.*



LEFT: *Mary Bronson Le Duc and daughter Alice in about 1888, when Hastings Needle Work was founded.* RIGHT: *Florence Le Duc, about 1878*

designed, embroidered, and finished pieces that were sold across the United States. Their products included table linens, pillows, a variety of cases, bags ranging in size from hairpin bags to corset bags, bridge-tally covers, and magazine covers. The Minnesota Historical Society acquired artifacts and records from this innovative company along with papers of the Le Ducs, a prominent early Minnesota family, in the early 1960s. While there are few examples of finished products, more than 800 patterns in this collection show the range and artistry of the business as well as the popularity of certain designs. In addition, meticulous ledgers detail the business side, from workers to clients to expenses and time accounting.

HASTINGS NEEDLE WORK was a collaborative effort of sisters Alice Sumner Le Duc (1868–1962) and Florence Gray Le Duc (1855–1929), aided by their mother, Mary Bronson Le Duc, and eventually their niece Edith Le Duc Gardner. Women in and around Hastings also embroidered for the company.

In the early 1860s, Alice's and Florence's father, William Gates Le Duc, had begun planning to build a grand house in Hastings following Andrew Jackson Downing's "design for a lake or river villa for a picturesque site." The Civil War caused him to put plans temporarily on hold. Le Duc eventually secured a commission as U.S. Army Quartermaster during the war, and the family left Minnesota, having hired an architect and a builder to work in their absence. The Le Ducs returned to their gracious new home in Hastings in 1865, where Alice would be born in three years.[3]

Florence and Alice never married but assisted their mother in managing the family home while General Le Duc traveled for extended periods, seeking business opportunities. During these times, they needed money to fund the household, and the respected art of embroidery came to their rescue.

Alice credited Florence with starting the business. Instead of traveling with her family to California in the 1880s, Florence joined her married sister Mary and her family in New York City. There, Alice said, Florence

"took lessons in painting china, and painting flowers, and carving wood and beating brass. And she visited the Decorative Arts Rooms constantly and other places where beautiful things were to be seen, and came home after two years with her head full of ideas."[4] In 1888, with the Le Duc women back in Hastings again, the business was born.

Alice later wrote that 33-year-old Florence "decided on embroidery," and her philosophy influenced the company's designs. She believed, "We must not do anything other people are doing . . . we must do something entirely different." It was Alice, however, who became the main designer

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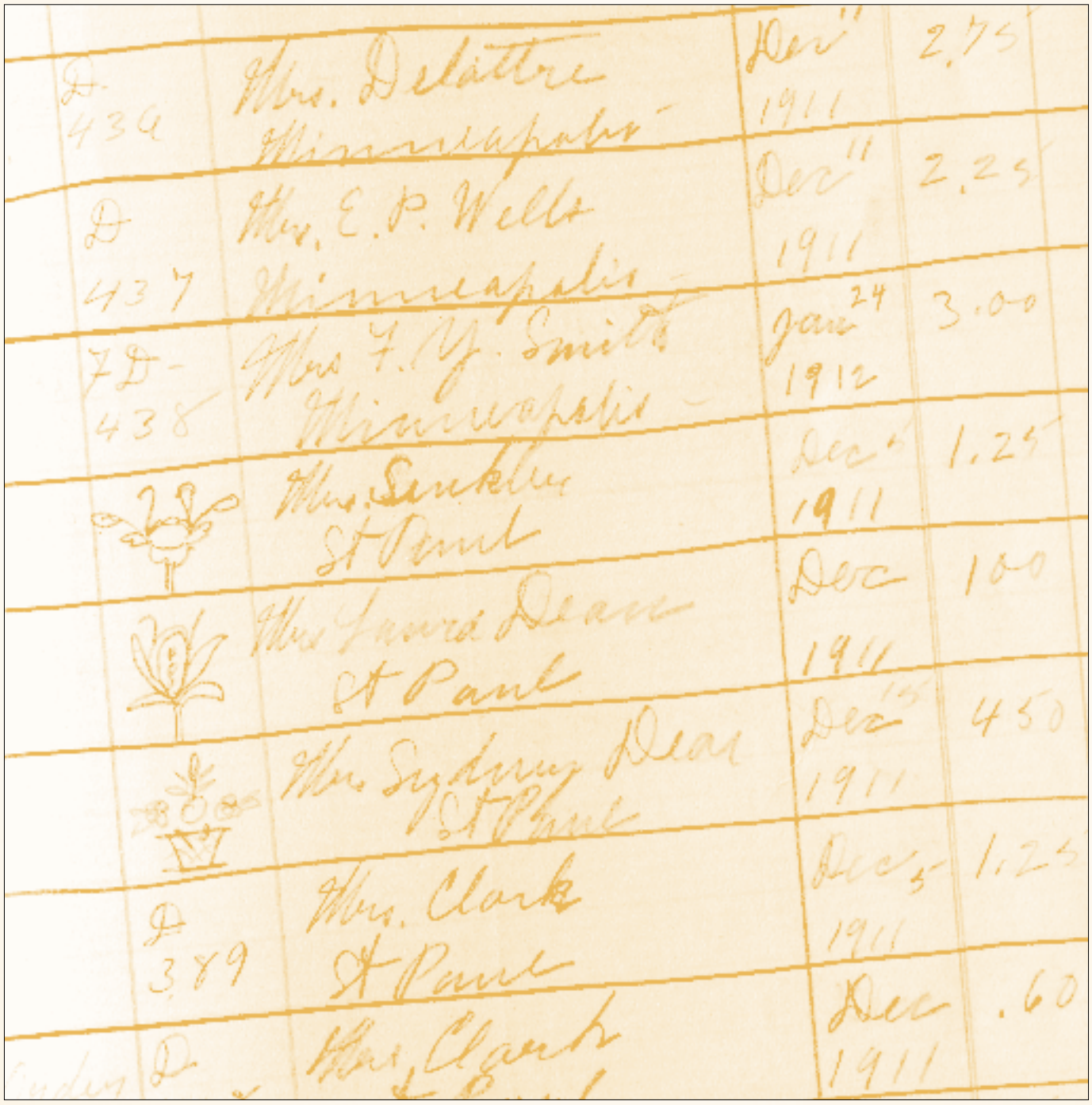
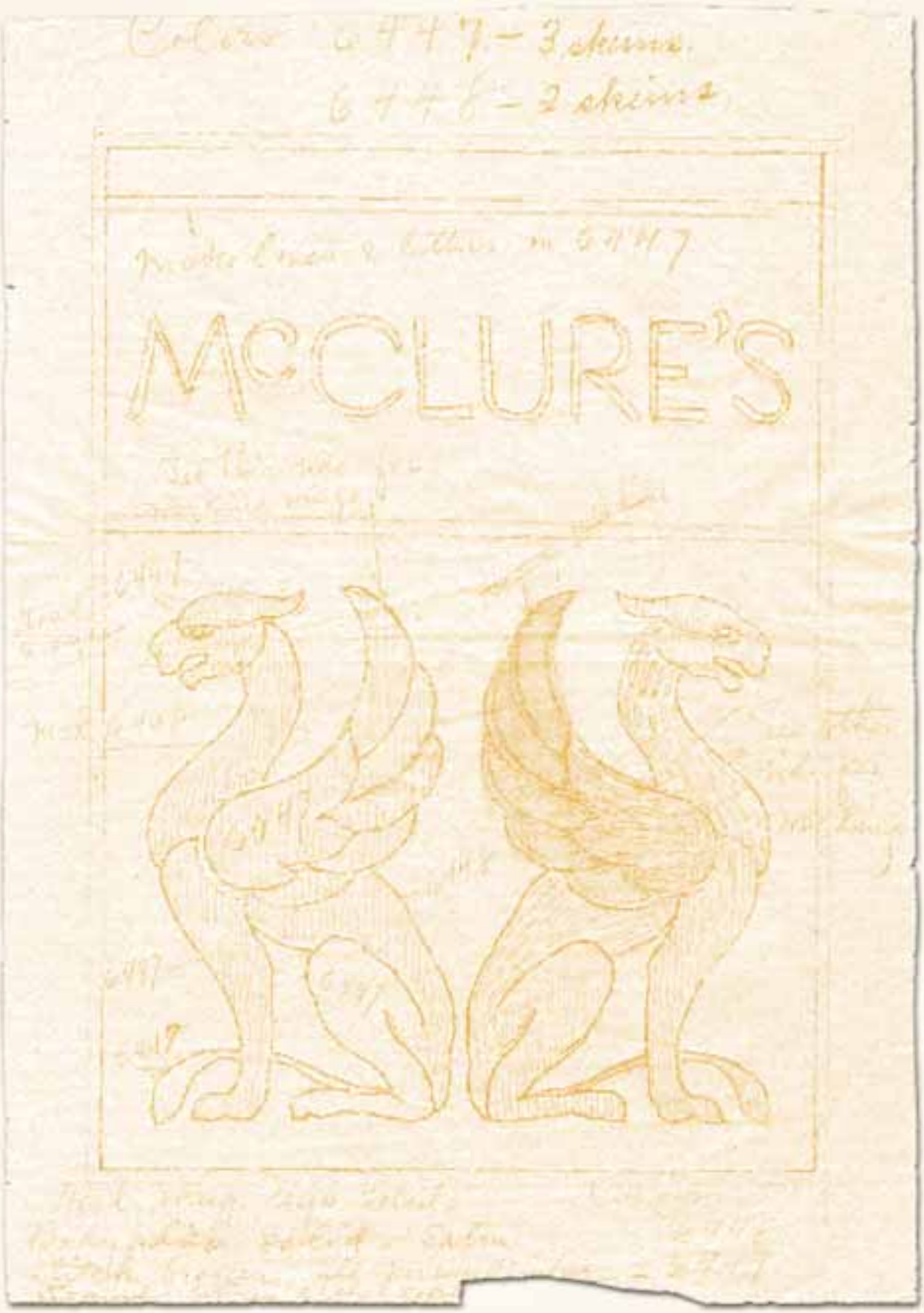


Detail from Hastings Needle Work Company's 1902–22 account book, showing work for December 1911. In the hand-ruled columns Alice Le Duc tracked each piece from start to sale, including its pattern number or, sometimes, a sketch instead.

Above: *In 1962 Alice Le Duc wrote, "We embroidered dragons—a great many dragons and people seemed to like them and also flowers that had never bloomed anywhere, and birds." Thread colors, size (11.5- inch diameter), and directions for stitching this beast are noted right on the pattern: "Very broad outlines for whole length of the body—catstitch between" and, for the wing, "pretty close but not solid."* Facing Page: *Slipcover embroidery pattern for* McClure's Magazine, *similar in size to today's* Reader's Digest. *This piece cost 98¢ to make and was sold for $4.00 to the Providence (Rhode Island) Woman's Exchange in 1905. The numbers on the pattern identify thread colors.*


McCLURE'S

Facing Page, Top: *Ojibwe-influenced pattern for a red linen knitting bag. Company records show that Alice made the bag in November 1915 from pattern 641, using ten skeins of silk thread to stitch the design. The bag sold for $6.00 plus $1.20 shipping and was delivered to its Minneapolis buyer in January 1916.* Facing Page, Bottom: *Some motifs were labeled "Indian" or "Ojibway." This 1915 sketch includes Alice's handwritten note, "Indian (from the shop on 6th St.)." The 1915* St. Paul City Directory *lists Mrs. L. M. Miller's "Indian curio shop" in the Ryan Hotel, which had shop stalls opening onto Sixth Street.* Above: *"Lochinvar," the popular poem by Sir Walter Scott, inspired this design that Alice entered in the Second Annual Exhibition of the St. Paul Institute of Arts and Sciences (now the Science Museum of Minnesota) in about 1910. This detail of the larger design, meant for a square tablemat, depicts the scene described in the poem's opening lines.*

The pattern collection documents how Alice reworked motifs from successful patterns to create new designs. This penciled pear-and-flowers pattern is for a 12-inch pillow or tablemat, while the hand-painted sample was shown to prospective customers to better suggest how the finished product would look. No pear embroideries have been found yet, but business records show that this was a very popular pattern for Hastings Needle Work in the 1910s.

and manager, drawing inspiration from "photographs of medieval wood carvings . . . and pictures of gargoyles." Dragons, flowers, and birds were other popular motifs.

The Le Duc sisters' meticulous records reveal this evolution of responsibility. Florence's order book opens with an entry dated 1888. As the volume of work increased, she recruited her sister's and mother's help. In 1896 Alice's personal account book begins; next, their mother, Mary, lent a hand, designing, embroidering, and keeping the company's expense records from 1901 until her death in 1904. Niece Edith Gardner joined the women in Hastings in 1902, designing and embroidering until 1913. Alice took over the company's bookkeeping after her mother's death.[5]

Initially, Florence and Alice created commissioned pieces for clients at the top of the social register, including the James J. Hill and Pillsbury families. As the neophyte businesswomen gained confidence and access to sales outlets across the country, they stopped waiting for customers to come to them and created ready-made items, which sold quite well with the help of sales agents. By 1900 Alice's ledger showed that she had earned $227.73—equivalent to about $5,050 today.[6] This amount, when combined with her sister's and mother's earnings, provided the family a meager living.

Each of the Le Duc women kept her own work accounts. These records imply that each received the profits associated with the pieces they made. If the volume of work exceeded an individual's capacity, she contracted with others to help out. To keep track of the materials and time associated with each piece, a temporary "costing" label was pinned to the work-in-progress. A unique pattern number was assigned to each piece, and for custom orders, the customer's name and address were added. The "labor" line recorded the amount of embroidery time, while the "silk" line noted the number of skeins of thread consumed. The last lines, "hem" and "making," tallied different finishing methods: Hemstitched pieces such as tablemats were priced according to the length of the hemmed edges; "making" was for constructed items such as cases, covers, and pillow tops. This information, used to calculate the final price, was recorded in the company ledger so that payments could be made to the appropriate workers.

In a 1903 article in *House Beautiful*, Antoinette Van Hoesen highlighted the artistry of Hastings Needle Work. Comparing the landscape of the Mississippi River at Hastings to the palisades of the Hudson River in New York, she maintained that the business's picturesque location influenced its designs. Her article described the range of work and highlighted the company's "reproductions and adaptations of Indian designs," which, she felt, kept "not only to the form but the color and sheen of the original work," while being "peculiar to the Hastings needlework."[7]

Label bearing an early name for the company; identification numbers starting with "B" date from 1901–05. The pattern number and price written below the perforation could be quickly removed at point of sale, which helped with managing inventory and accounts. Consignment agents returned these tags to claim their commission.

AS THEIR BUSINESS INCREASED, the Le Duc sisters brought in additional hands to help with production. In a 1962 letter Alice related, "In our little town there were women who were skillful needlewomen and who quickly became interested in doing embroidery, being furnished with charts for guidance and with the colors [threads and fabrics]. These were not any of them poor people who needed the work especially, just women with a taste for it, and who were perhaps not averse to earning a little spending money."[8]

Alice remembered, "We carried on in this way successfully until World War I. We did not feel that it was a suitable activity for that time and we left it off. The work had been reasonably profitable and we felt that it had been fairly successful. Once we sent a piece of work to an exhibition in Paris, and it was accepted, which pleased us." (Unfortunately, she did not name the exhibition.) The company ledger shows, however, that Hastings Needle Work's production declined through World War I, and the sisters closed up shop in 1922. Account books chronicle more than 2,100 pieces produced in the firm's 34 years.

In 1919 Alice and Florence had moved to Minneapolis, retaining the family "mansion" in Hastings as a summer home. They continued to earn a living with their artistic skills, creating wood-block-printed greeting cards and hand-painted lampshades and china. In addition, Alice, contrary to Victorian dictates, had been painting and sketching since the turn of the century. She is now known as a regional painter, and MHS collections con-

tain more than a dozen of her oil and watercolor paintings and charcoal and crayon sketches. Florence died in 1929 at the age of 74. Alice lived to be 94. She died in Minneapolis in 1962.[9]

OF THE 2,000-PLUS embroideries Hastings Needle Work produced, only five existing pieces, part of the Le Duc family donation to MHS, have been identified to date: a linen pillow cover, a linen jabot, a rectangle hemstitched on one side, a square showing a green silk flower motif, and a batik card case.[10] Unfortunately, the company did not permanently mark its embroideries. A paper label printed with the company name and its signature Ojibwe moccasin was pinned to each piece. On it, the pattern number and price were written by hand. Once the label was removed, the embroideries lost any link to Hastings Needle Work.

Since few examples of the company's finished work are known to exist, the 800 patterns donated to MHS take on added importance. These patterns will help future researchers positively identify Hastings Needle Work pieces. Ultimately, this valuable resource will provide a better understanding both of the range of Hastings Needle Work products and of the women who helped provide for their families.

Notes

1. J. R. Weissman and W. Lavitt, *Labors of Love* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), xi; William H. Rideing, "Working Women In New York," *Harpers New Monthly Magazine* 61 (June 1880): 25–33, cited in Jean L. Parsons, "No longer a 'Frosy Druge': Women's Wardrobe Management: 1880–1930," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2002, p. 33–44.

2. Cynthia A. Branimarte, "Sombody's Aunt and Nobody's Mother: The American China Painter and Her Work, 1870–1920," *Winterthur Portfolio* (1988): 206, also quoting Addie E. Heron, "Dainty Work for Pleasure and Profit," ca. 1893.

3. A. J. Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses* (1850; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 343; Jean A. Brookins, "A Historic Mansion: The William G. Le Duc House," *Minnesota History* 37 (Mar. 1961): 192–98. The Le Duc Historic Estate is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and the house is a museum of the late Victorian era.

4. Here and below, Alice Le Duc to Lucile Kane, Minnesota Historical Society archivist, June 25, 1962, in William G. Le Duc and Family Papers donor file, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul.

5. Le Duc to Kane; Alice Le Duc, ledger, 1896–1900; Mary Le Duc, ledgers: B/Work Account/M. E. Le Duc, and B/MEL Expenditures, Nov. 30, 1901–Aug. 1, 1904; Edith Le Duc Gardner, work account ledger—all in Le Duc papers.

6. Alice Le Duc, 1896–1901 ledger. Calculation based on the Consumer Price Index; see The Inflation Calculator, *www.westegg.com/inflation*.

7. Antoinette Van Hoesen, "Hastings Needlework," *House Beautiful* (Chicago), Oct. 1903, p. 305.

8. Here and below, Le Duc to Kane.

9. *Hastings Gazette*, Jan. 3, 1963, p. 1; Florence Gray Le Duc death certificate 1929-MN-018988; Alice Sumner Le Duc death certificate, 1962-MN-028124.

10. Hastings Needle Work pattern collection, MHS. Embroidery patterns comprise the bulk of the collection, but there are also a few patterns for lampshades, greeting cards, and china. Another collection in the Pioneer Room, Hastings City Hall, gives further evidence of the scope of the business.

All photos and items are in Minnesota Historical Society collections; label, embroidery, and pattern photography by Eric Mortenson/MHS.