

The Training of the Hand

1. Preparation

See that the hands are perfectly clean.

Let the light come from behind
and over the left shoulder if possible.

2. Purpose

Outside the practical advantage,
mental training through hand and eye
develops the inventive faculty
and has a permanent effect on the character.
Using hand, will, and mind together
inculcates moral and mental strength,
patience, thrift, and accuracy,
love for the true and the beautiful,
appreciation for the army of those who work,
a love of doing, and a desire to do for others.

3. Practice

Children must not be sacrificed to perfection,
to a model, to a stitch as an end in itself.
Accuracy of thought and action
is not gained by vain repetition.
The stitch should be taught as a means
to a definite article of interest to them.
The spontaneous handwork natural to a child
then abides as a powerful ally.
It is well for the teacher to remember
that good workers enjoy difficult tasks.

4. Postscript

The training of the hand makes it dexterous
in other employments.

The enthusiastic and progressive teacher can
make freer beings of her pupils.



ABOUT THE POEM & AUTHOR

“The Training of the Hand” was constructed from the General Directions in *A Handbook of Elementary Sewing* by Etta Proctor Flagg (1915) and the prefaces and Notes for Teachers in *A Sewing Course for Teachers* by Mary Schenck Woolman (1893, 1900, 1908).

About the poem Wendy says:

“This poem is part of a manuscript about Grace Evelyn Arents, a Progressive Era educator and philanthropist who had a lasting impact on Richmond, Virginia, and Mary Garland Smith, Grace’s companion in her later years. The school Grace founded in 1894, St. Andrew’s, had its roots in a sewing class. Over time, both Grace and Garland served as the school’s principal, and the curriculum expanded to include reading and math, trades, science, physical education, music, and art; yet sewing remained a consistent component. I was drawn to the precise diction in these sewing manual excerpts and the way they illustrate the multifaceted nature of sewing as practical skill and art, as well as a source of moral and mental strength, and a gateway to empathy, self-sufficiency, and further opportunities—elements echoed in Grace’s works and words. I first encountered these manuals at the American Antiquarian Society and later studied copies in Google Books. The sections arranged here relay an engaging and provocative narrative about sewing, education, and the Progressive Era, as well as broader themes important to the manuscript.”

Wendy DeGroat is the author of *Beautiful Machinery* (Headmistress Press 2016), and her work has also appeared in *Common-place*, *Raleigh Review*, *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, *Forage*, and *Rogue Agent*. She received an MLIS in library and information studies from Florida State University and works as a librarian. She also teaches writing workshops and curates poetryriver.org, a resource for documentary poetry and diversifying the contemporary poetry taught in high school and undergraduate classrooms. She lives in Richmond, Virginia.

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