Flora Klickmann: An Early Needle Tool Collector

By Clare Muzzatti

Introduction

There are small gems of information that can be found amongst the pages of seemingly dry and outdated copies of magazines. One such was in an old 1950s copy of "Embroidery". It was a letter written by an elderly lady on her childhood memories. She wrote of the 1890s, when she used silk thread,

"Nearly as fine as human hair to cross stitch on perforated card"[1]. (Bristol Board)

This was the high point of her embroidery week, as Sunday was the only day she was allowed to use coloured silk. The rest of the week was spent enduring the dull stitching of

"everlasting insertion and edging embroidery in white linen thread-yards and yards of it"[2],

For underwear.

It is easy to lose sight of how embroidery shaped the routines and the passage of time in some of our ancestor's lives. So much has changed. Not just in fashions and fabrics, but in the social and economic expectations for women.

When we sit here today, to investigate and discuss sewing tools and history we are no longer planning our efforts to make insertion lace for decorating our underwear in the coming week. Thank goodness! Nor are we restricted in celebrating only Sunday with coloured silks. Instead a good many of us can access extensive stashes of colourful threads and fabrics at home or on line.

What is harder to do is to uncover the roots of our desire to collect antique, vintage and modern needlework tools.

Perhaps your first tools were given to you as a child, by an older relative or close friend. Certainly needlework tools that belong to the 1800s and before have been passed on from one generation to another, either as gifts or though sale.

Now so much is made, to the point where it is cheap and easily disposable, with the result that items now have more novelty value as they seek to stand out as the most colourful, quirky, or cute. Humorous tape measures of political figures with the tape end streaming out from their backside immediately come to mind.

It is all very well to have a few items handed down, but a collection is another matter altogether. It is a hunt, it is a display, it is a place where we lose our selves and time travel, or marvel at the creativity of variations upon a single tool.

However, who were those who first saw this range and with a mind and interest intrigued, sought to bring this study to a wider audience?

[1] Margret Train Okehampton. Letters and Queries, Embroidery Vol.12 No.2 Summer 1961, John Pinder-Wilson & Partners London. p63
[2] Ibid.

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I have a copy of Gertrude Whiting's Old Time Tools and Toys of Needlework. It was first published in 1928. This appears to be the earliest book on the subject, though I would like to be informed of others!

Discovering Miss Klickmann

Emily Flora Klickmann.

One woman has recently come to light, though to some of you she may be well known. Once more it was eBay and a lucky find that led me to Emily Flora Klickmann.

To my limited knowledge, she is the earliest collector of sewing tools who wrote a published account about her collection.

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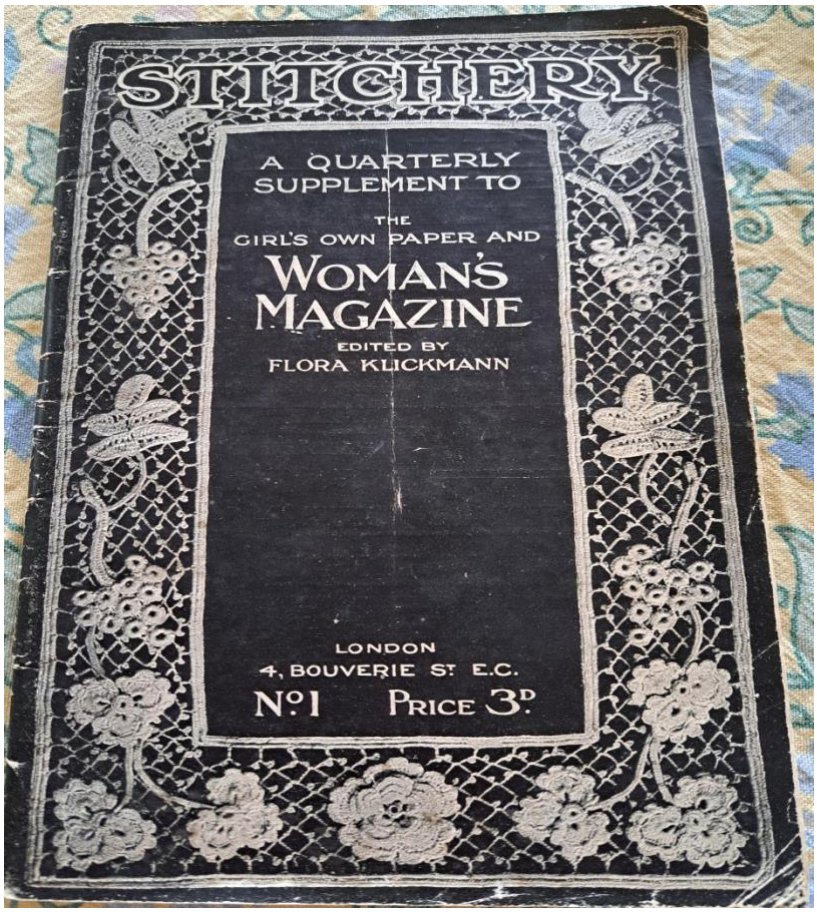
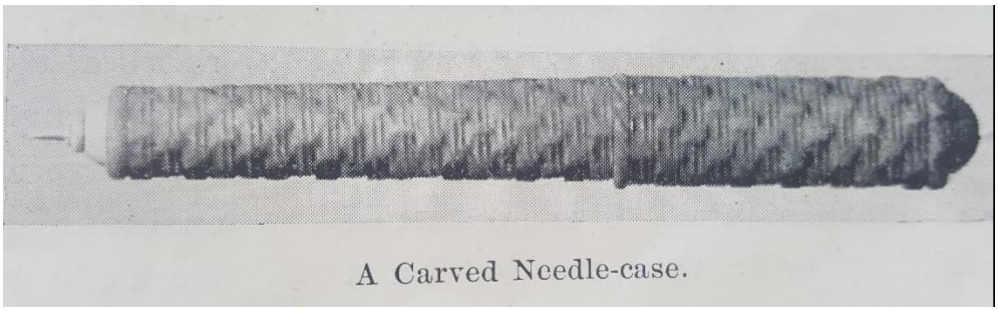
The article appeared in a little magazine called "Stitchery", which was the quarterly supplement to The Girl's Own Paper and Women's Magazine. It appeared about 1915. Klickmann was the editor.




A Carved Needle-case.

Flora Klickmann was an experienced editor, she had by this time edited four popular books on needlework under the "Home Art" series.

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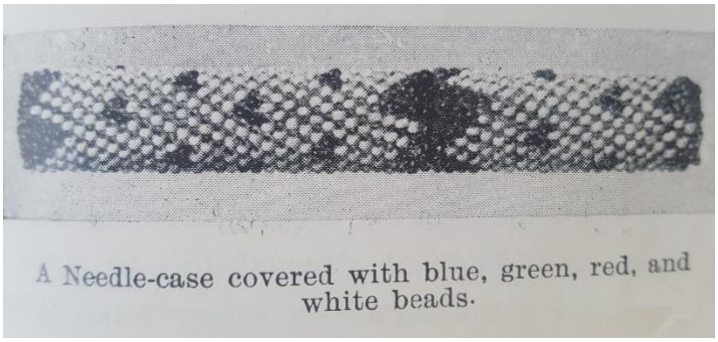
Her essay on “My Workbox” reveals more about her personality and childhood. She explains to the reader that her early fascination with workboxes began when she read her first long story book. The heroine, a little girl named ‘Ellen’ was taken on a shopping trip, where her mother buys her a work box. Ellen keeps this glorious example “*scrupulously tidy”*[3].



A Needle-case covered with blue, green, red, and white beads.

Flora is inspired. She finds a small wooden box which although it is in her eyes inferior, she keeps pristine. This earns a certain delight in the eyes of her family, as it signals she might be more diligent with the needle.

Such hopes fell on stony ground.

“As a small girl I detested needlework and as a big girl I was vastly superior to everything of the kind…. Plain needlework was so sordid; and fancy needlework so inane and futile!”[4]

Flora is honest about her youth and character. She describes herself at around the age of 16 (1883) as a *“self- opinionated little importance “.* Yet, at this time she was striving to develop her musical talent and make a career in this area. She appears to be a very talented youth from a working class background, with ambition and drive.

[3] Flora Klickmann, Stitchery No1. London. p31.
[4] Stitchery p30.

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This ancient little Dutch Doll is an Emery Bag.

The little Brass Bear.

This Crimson Silk Pincushion has groups of flowers and fruit finely carved in ivory on each side.

As she writes this essay in her late 40s, she has had the passage of several decades to think about her mental collapse. According to her biography on Google she was diagnosed at the age of 20 with heart arrhythmia. An irregular heart beat would certainly indicate her feeling stressed by the expectations of herself and the others around her. It is very sad when she writes;

"the inevitable nervous breakdown that finds out most girls who are imbued with the notion that their intellectual attainments are of vast importance to the nation…. the sight of books or the sound of music (was) unbearable".[5]

This is written by a woman who had graduated from Trinity College of Music London, studied at the Royal College of Organists, performed as a concert pianist and had been the first woman to play the huge organ at the Crystal Palace.

Flora discovers her solace in stitching and in liking it too! Her creative energy finds a new field.

Over subsequent years the task of writing articles for magazines on music and a variety of other subjects provided her with an income and with the experience to move on to editing publications by 1904.

It seems likely that this magazine was published in the years 1913-14. According to Google, she suffered another bout mental misery brought on by overwork in 1912. She had been the editor of The Girls Own Paper since 1908, a position she held until retirement in 1931. So such recent events were on her mind and ready to be put on paper.

If were possible to go back in time and ask her how she was feeling when she wrote another essay for the Stitchery No1 it might illuminate those feelings that tore at her.

[5] Stitchery p31.

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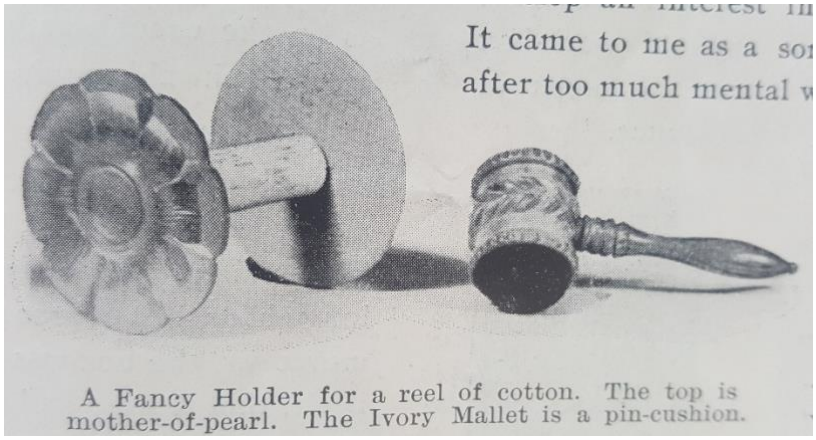

"How Needlework Reveals Our Aims", unleashes a blast aimed at those who would dare use cheap material and produce careless and coarse work. Such a person shows a

"lack of purpose and stability of character, an absence of any desire to attain to(sic) the best, a feeble mental outlook, an inartistic temperament, a disregard of the value of time and a blunted sense of honesty!"[6]

Even the stoutest heart would quaver at such a tone of admonishment, but in the following paragraphs the tirade continues.

One is *"killing time, (and) injuring the community"* by adding one more *"inartistic item to a world overstocked in that direction already and doesn't need its eye sight harassed any further".* [7]

Could these harsh phrases mirror the thoughts which drove her to the emotional edge?

Whatever the case, needlework had become the balm for when she was

"overdone with the wear and tear of work in our great city" or had spent the day *"wrestling with the stern commercial side of life".*[8]

This is her safe place where she can relax. The work box is her private domain: one she commands, where she can lose herself and keep her treasures. The work box will not judge or lecture her and it will keep her secrets.

The workbox does attract interest, it provides links through the gifts of family and friends, who cheerfully pass on useful sewing items of their own. In turn it becomes a repository of lace, buttons and haberdashery that can be given to others in need. The workbox is a boast and a bastion, for from it Flora can supply her friends, who she suspects are testing her resources! They rarely find her "napping" as she rises to the challenge, produces the goods and "tries to look modest".[9]

[6] Stitchery p2
[7] Ibid p2
[8] Ibid p31
[9] Ibid p34

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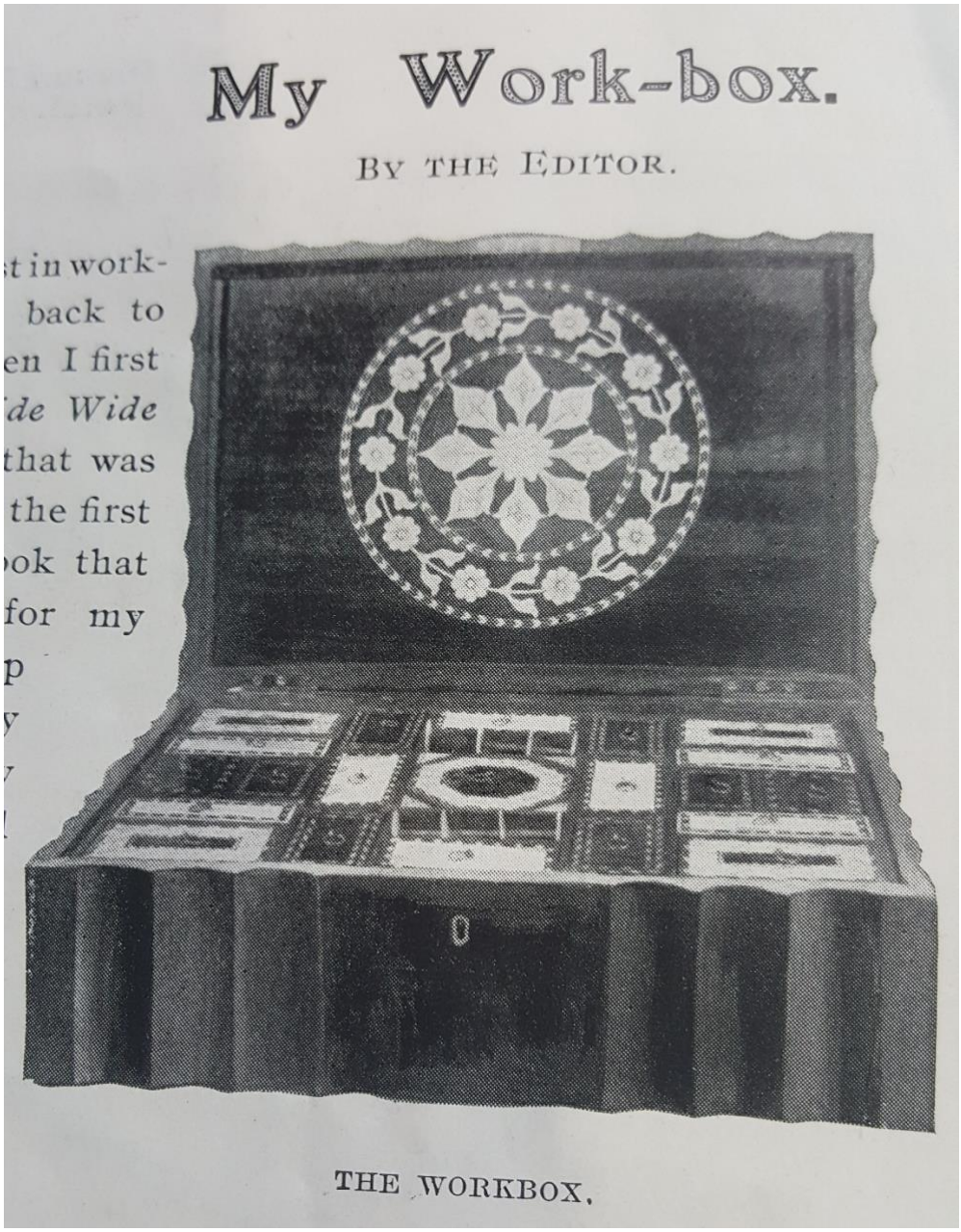
For many years Flora had searched for a sewing box, meanwhile making "shift with a workbasket and similar frauds".[10] She hunts for it in shops and views many that are too small and too ugly. Flora craves for a big workbox with many compartments. A kind friend sends her a present. It is a workbox from the East;

"large and almost as heavy as a sewing machine…It is inlaid with ivory tortoiseshell and silver. The box wood is light and dark… the sewing tray has 23 compartments with a large, deep space below."[11]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THE WORKBOX.

[10] Ibid p32
[11] Ibid p 30

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There is a photo of it at the head of the article, Flora's workbox was created in Ceylon and uses the costly Coromandal /calamander ebony. This is a heavy, durable, insect and rot resistant wood with swirls and bands of colour. It is a wood that is no longer available and in the early 20th century was rare.

From the outside it is a large, plain oblong box with a wavy veneered edge on three sides. Inside it is lavishly decorated. Inlaid in ivory on the underside of the lid with a ring of flowers. The compartment lids in the sewing tray are decorated with sheets of veneer- tortoiseshell, ivory and ebony. They have no further incised patterns as found on later boxes and appear to have simple ring pulls. The box could date to around 1850 as there are two multi sectioned thread reels for silk thread. This feature became out dated with the introduction of thread sold on a reel instead of sold in hanks. In later boxes the compartment lids were made from many other beautiful Ceylonese woods. Flora writes that the box was an 'antique'.

Into this box comes a host of oddments, some from her relations who turned out their own workboxes and found little 'fittings', others from friends and a number that Flora 'pounced upon'[12]. Modern or antique mattered little, so long as they were useful and attractive. It became a hobby, her cherished box and something she could see herself in old age, *"getting quite garrulous over*".[13]

From the photos and descriptions many of her boxes oddments would be familiar to avid needle tool collectors.

A collection of early 19th century Chinese carved ivory sewing tools; a thread barrel, an ivory sewing clamp with a pin cushion on top, together with a small carved ivory container.

The article on the left is for a small spool of silk. The next is a carved screw for holding material firmly to the edge of a table. The centre article has a tape and measure at the top, bees-wax below, and a pincushion at its base. The next is a tape measure, and the ivory box on the right holds glove buttons. The carving on the ivory in each case is very fine.

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Pin cushions galore! Small, round flat discs of ivory carved in Dieppe and China, an ivory mallet. A wonderful tatuga nut compendium that grew from a pin cushion base to a bees wax middle and a carved retractable tape measure at the top.

[12] Ibid p35
[13] Ibid p33

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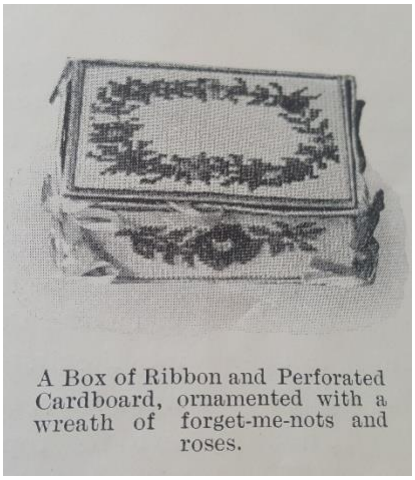
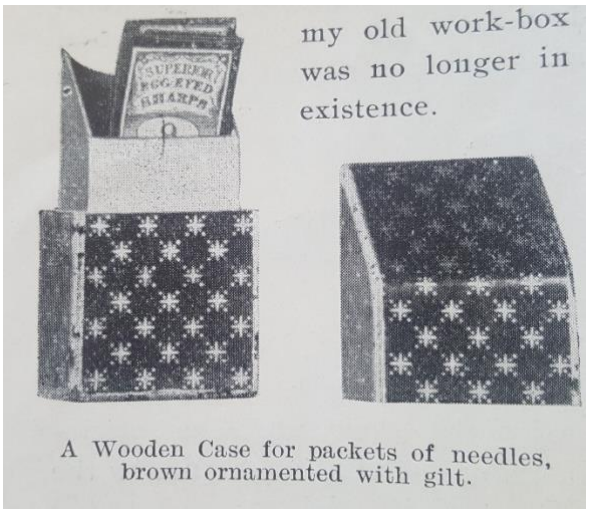
Among the tape measures shown is an ebony barrel with a bone/ivory spindle, while she writes of another as a donkey with a tail that turned.

Then needle cases; one of bone encased in colourful beading, while another of either ivory or bone, carved in a waffle like texture. Needle books with mottoes, a box of embroidered Bristol board covered with forget-me-nots and roses and a gilt decorated box of packaged needles in sets of sizes.



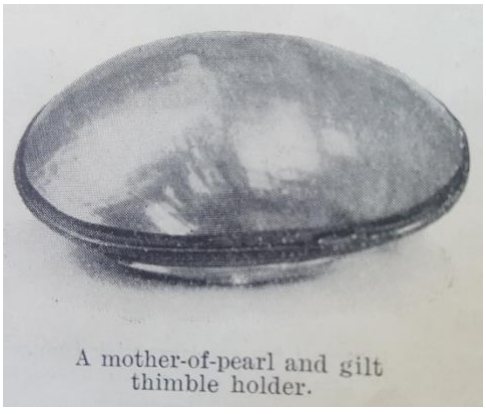
A Box of Ribbon and Perforated Cardboard, ornamented with a wreath of forget-me-nots and roses.



A Wooden Case for packets of needles, brown ornamented with gilt.

There is the luxury of a note book of ivory pages, clad in fine leather, inset with small medallions of very fine petit point roses.

A thimble case made from a bi- valve, polished to show off the mother of pearl and fitted with a gilt metal frame.



A mother-of-pearl and gilt thimble holder.

Beeswax, mounted with mother-of-pearl.

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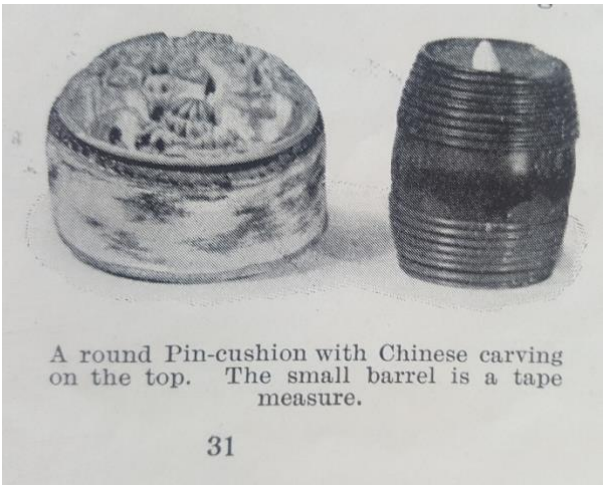
A small but delightful emery, in the form of a little Dutch doll dressed in green silk, which would have been too sweet to push needles through and was at least sixty years old.[14]

A little brass bear chained to a stump with a head that lifted up which was used as a needle case. An example of reuse. This would have been an ink well when it was first sold. The glass liner had been lost in copy sold on E bay for five pounds this year (2019).

Flora's needlework tools dated from late Georgian to the Edwardian period. From a tiny pin cushion mallet to the silver scissors and silver ended beeswax holders. There are no signs of tourist trinkets, Mauchline or transfer ware, no gold tools or expensive etuis. It's a collection of useful and cheery objects assembled through love and friendship. They gave her joy.

Klickmann's essay is significant, as it marks a division in time, for the age of modern plastic and tin has not had an impact. This alone really underlines what an important document this is. For while tin and plastic needlework tools were available well before 1913-14 they are not mentioned as present in Flora's sewing box.



A round Pin-cushion with Chinese carving on the top. The small barrel is a tape measure.

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A further feature underlines its significance: the rarity of a list of a sewing box's contents with their owner still present. The closest one comes to such a list is often when an auction house makes an inventory of a sewing boxes contents prior to sale, sometimes with a hundred or more years between its last use and its present display to attract bids.

I think of Flora Klickmann as the needle woman's Beatrix Potter. Flora married later in life and revelled in her new step family. She lived in the country and worked as a writer publishing a steady volume of work almost up to her death in 1958.

[14] Ibid p32

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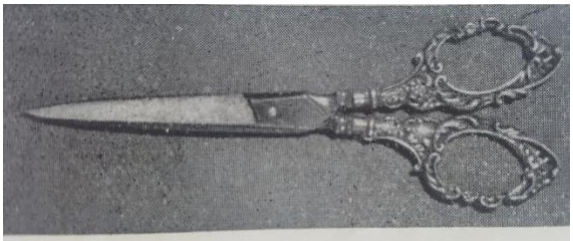

A pair of Silver Scissors.

All the illustrations in this paper are of a few of the items from her sewing box, which she chose to be photographed for her article.

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