

## CRAFTY LIBRARIANS/LIBRARIAN CRAFTS

*by Lacey Prpic Hedtke*

Crafty librarians. Crafts about librarians. What is going on on the craft scene? The newest Sublime Stichery (embroidery patterns for hipsters) came out recently, with sexy librarians as one of the main designs they are promoting. There has been an influx lately of handmade librarian swag. I am interested in how the “common people” are portraying themselves/librarians, rather than the media or capitalist corporations, often so tied to the media anyway. I have a lot more questions than answers.

Now, it may be there have always been librarians ecstatic about crafting, but the world had no idea until now, with online forums, blogs and message boards. I’ve been following two of those websites: Etsy and Craftster.

Etsy is an online marketplace for all things handmade, including crafting supplies and vintage goods. Crafters are able to set up a (usually) free online store, post pictures of their handmade wares, pay a nominal fee for listing and when they sell, and, to many librarians’ interest, tag their items for the best findability. For instance, a zine about mustaches will be tagged: zine, screenprint (to describe the cover), hand-bound or staple-bound, mustache, interviews, freebie, etc. The incentive for tagging isn’t only to find information, à la library catalog searching, but it really is in sellers’ best interest to be thorough and broad with their tagging in hopes of increasing the likelihood that buyers will stumble upon it. When I am looking for an item featuring ostriches (which is often), all I have to do is type “ostrich” into the search engine, and then I am faced with ostrich feathers, ostrich-leather belts, and bags with ostriches stenciled on them. Etsy has a messaging function, and a forum for showing off your finished projects, asking questions about materials, and setting up swaps between crafters.



Craftster functions as a forum and discussion board for all things craft. It is not a site that sells items, but rather, connects crafters ranging from knitters to shoemakers to screenprinters. There is an insane amount of information on Craftster, and all types of forums to explore.

The similarity between these two prominent crafting sites is the heavy population of librarians. It seems librarians represent themselves much more fully than, say, veterinarians or accountants. They often have the word “librarian” in their username, and use it as an identity, extending far from an occupation or career. Some use the sites as a way to meet other crafting librarians, as it seems crafters like to work in groups. Some use it as a way of bragging about their library lives, and others seem to feel they represent librarians

world-wide. Whatever the case, there is an exorbitant amount of librarian crafters.

Search for “librarian” or “library” on Etsy and you’ll come up with hundreds of hits. Cufflinks. Paintings. The card catalog is printed on everything from clothing to greeting cards, with a nostalgia for older analog times. Actual catalog cards are used for bookplates and birthday cards; librarian stationery is suggested as gifts for a librarian, and some items that come up when “librarian” is searched for don’t even portray a librarian. These images are meant to sum up the idea of a librarian, for instance a necklace with antique glasses frames and a key to “hidden knowledge”. A handmade pencil skirt with a thin (always!) woman looking off into the distance, deep in thought, touting “librarian

chic” and “establishment”, the new fashion trend sweeping the nation, another story altogether. A few of these crafts are for the activist. “Book Power” proclaims a T-shirt, with Black Panther-like fists in the air, only holding books. Librarians are able to proclaim their status in the world, with a black



acrylic necklace so large it's practically covering both collarbones, stating in bold: Librarian. Not all these crafts are made by librarians, and there seem to be two camps: Those continuing the typical image of a librarian, and those aimed at “radical librarians”.

T-shirts, buttons, eco-friendly mugs and even infant onesies are available from the artist handmade marketplace, Buyolympia.com touting “Reading is Sexy”, “Future Librarian”, or my favorite, and for all you guys: “Guybrarian”. This guybrarian (need it be explained-a guy librarian) shirt is the only mention of a male in the field that I encountered in months of searching. To include the word “guy” implies

that the standard for librarians is a woman. Recently the New York Times published an article about “hipster librarians.” Included in it were representatives from both sexes, with an emphasis on librarianship as the hip new thing among the in-the-know. However, the men were an anomaly, almost a novelty.

Librarianship has traditionally been a woman's career, and crafting (especially knitting and sewing) has been considered domestic work. Does the term “women's work” cross boundaries here, to collide in a blazing feminist explosion? As knitting and all homemade, Do-It-Yourself projects are in vogue, could it be that librarians who are also crafters are asserting their feminist views through their crafting librarian identities? Librarians are quite capable creatures. The DIY ethic seems to appeal to their sensibilities of finding information on any topic of interest, and turning that information into usable skills.

Interestingly, almost all of the crafts portraying librarians somehow tie in the sexy librarian stereotype, or, barring that, showcase a librarian either already in love, or waiting for Mr. (or Ms.-this is the 21st century) Right, supplying flirty puns on sexiness or “checking someone out”. Many feature the 1950s idea of a librarian-a single (white) female in her mid-20s to 30s wearing a pencil skirt, button-up blouse, and without fail, glasses. The characters are always portrayed as avid readers, loving books, dispensing witty and well-informed conversation, and ultimately, “letting her hair down” so to speak. Why is the idea of “sexy” inextricably linked with the ideal librarian? Obviously, our culture both reveres and fears an intelligent woman. Can't a woman be intelligent without having her intelligence be a sexual attractant? Yes, brains are sexy, but nerds typically aren't considered as such, so in order to enable this fetish that has been long-



running, we make an exception. Women haven't been visible in the workforce for that long, com-

pared to men, so when a woman holds a position with a prerequisite of intelligence, it is easier to see her as a sex object.

In a lot of ways these crafts are touching on this idea of gender inequality and pigeonholing, some tongue-in-cheek, others without considering they are reinforcing this stereotype. Some see it as kitschy, some see it as a reclamation, and some see it as a way to make a buck. With the baby boom generation of librarians gradually easing into retirement, it might be time for a new image of a librarian-one with a book about Doing It Ourselves in one hand and the other in a raised fist. Book Power.