

Crafty Jane Austen

Jane Austen's Sewing Box

By Jennifer Forest.
Murdoch Books, 2009. 224 pages.
Illustrated. Paperback. £14.99.

Reviewed by Kelly M. McDonald.

Amid completions, continuations and Austen-life novelizations, Jennifer Forest's *Jane Austen's Sewing Box: Craft Projects & Stories from Jane Austen's Novels* enters the marketplace as a refreshing departure. Guided by the Austen canon, the author assembles eighteen Regency-style craft projects suitable for most skill levels. While projects may accommodate beginners willing to spend time acquiring some knowledge and ability, be advised that the book does not explain, for example, embroidery how-tos; if you do not know a French knot from a satin stitch, augment your library or grab a friend willing to teach basics. The challenging aspect, for North American readers, will be deciphering the metric units of measure (dimensions of pieces; knitting needle equivalents; yardage for fabric or ribbons); in lieu of dual information, an inserted conversion chart would have been helpful.

A few project examples will give sufficient hints as to contents. Some would make great gifts; Regency costume enthusiasts will welcome others. A "letter case" project opens the book (technique: sewing; skill level: intermediate). This assumes comfort working via diagrams rather than using a paper pattern, though anyone with a flatbed scanner could easily enlarge the diagrams. The challenge would be in getting the rounded edge properly cut out (a compass may be useful here, though one is not included in the required supplies list). The instructions for making up the piece are concise and easy to follow.

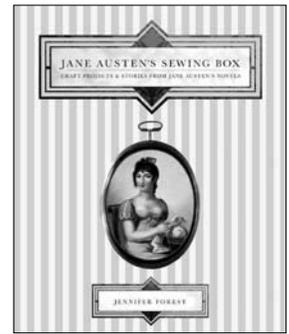
Every lady or gent should have a purse, and Forest provides two: one a knitted miser's purse and one a netted coin purse (level: intermediate/advanced). The netted purse is the more difficult

of the two, given the more unusual craft. A list of suppliers, for items like the coin purse's metal frame, is given at the end of the book. The carpetwork pillow project (skill level: intermediate) includes instructions for the needlepoint, as well as directions for sewing it into a pillow ready to stuff. Instructions for a "transparency" (technique: painting on glass; level: intermediate/advanced) and paper flowers (level: beginner) are two of the more unusual craft projects.

Individual projects aside, the book's major draw lies in its extraction of incidents from Austen's novels, as related to the crafts under discussion. How easy, in context, to overlook such telling observations as, "Fanny Price attends to her work 'with such ineffable sweetness and patience' while the needlework of the spoilt Bertram sisters is 'too ill done for the drawing room.'" Readers in Austen's era would have immediately zeroed in on the significant meanings behind those contrasting statements. Lucky for us, Ms. Forest points them out. Emma Woodhouse, pensive upon a possible spinster's existence, is quoted: "Woman's usual occupations of eye, and hand, and mind, will be as open to me then as they are now, or with no important variation. If I draw less, I shall read more, if I give up music, I shall take up carpet work." Likewise, quotations from Austen's letters remind us that crafts were also practiced in Austen's home: "Martha [Lloyd]'s rug is just finished & looks well, tho' not quite as well as I hoped."

Even more informative, individual projects provide opportunity to focus on an aspect of Regency life. The purse chapter discusses money and how it defined social order. With this comes a brief look at consumerism. How the levels of society touched Austen, the Bennet sisters, Emma Woodhouse, Anne Elliot, and how women and men—even Captain Harville—netted, all enter into the debate. The carpetwork chapter comments on the opportunity, "[w]ith increased wealth filtering through the social order," for more people to

appreciate and utilize interior design. "The gentry, the growing middle classes and families with wealth newly acquired through



commerce or naval prizes, were keen to emulate the leaders of fashion. Emulation took many forms, from the purchase of goods for the home, to visits to the grand estates of Britain." The Prince of Wales' residences—Carlton House in London and the Pavilion in Brighton—round out a discourse on influences (from Chinoiserie to Moorish to Greco-Roman) in decoration. The chapter concludes with an observation that in Austen's novels the "older women, [such] as Lady Bertram in *Mansfield Park* and Mrs. Jennings and Fanny Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* undertake carpetwork." A discourse on Romanticism, "influencing architecture, literature and art, in particular," serves as an appropriate focus for the transparency chapter. Marianne Dashwood, "spontaneous emotion" personified, propels the essay.

Each of these discussions will enlighten even the most knowledgeable Austen enthusiast. Combine the text with sumptuous photography and colorful period works of art and illustration (which all merited fuller identifications), and *Jane Austen's Sewing Box* becomes a delightful reading book, picture book, craft project book all rolled into one volume. Ms. Forest has located suitable projects and pulled together relevant material from a keen knowledge of the period and the novels, making this a unique addition to anyone's Austen collection.

Kelly M. McDonald's research into the diaries of Emma Austen-Leigh highlights the article "Pemberley's Welcome, or An Historical Conjecture Upon Elizabeth Darcy's Wedding Journey," Persuasions On-Line, Vol. 30, Winter 2009.