

# Naaikussen

Weighted sewing pillows from the low countries, late 16<sup>th</sup>- early 17<sup>th</sup> c.

Grace Gamble

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Walnut, Brass, Silk napped upholstery velvet, silk thread,  
gilt thread, gilt purl, spangles, Glass, Silver leaf

Prior to the advent of modern embroidery hoops there were several other methods of tensioning needlework, dependent on what type of work was being performed. One of these ways in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries was by utilizing pillows held in the lap to which they would pin their work. These pillows

are shown in many of the pastoral scenes of women congregated in gardens and in sewing parlors. Weighting these pillows greatly increased their efficacy, allowing the needle worker the assistance of gravity in applying tension.

I follow Modelbuch Muse, who I highly recommend for inspiration and who in her posts generally points out correlations between extant pieces and the printed patterns from the era that likely inspired them.

In April of 2020, she posted about naaikussen weighted sewing pillows from the low countries with an additional aspect of opening to reveal hidden storage compartments inside the pillow.

I had not known they existed and was immediately enthralled.



Figure 1 Gabriël Metsu - A Woman Sewing, with a Parrot 1661-1664





Figure 3 Ludolf de Jongh, *Woman doing needlework by candlelight* 1616-1679

Once I knew of their existence, I started seeing them everywhere in the Dutch genre paintings, hidden in plain sight.

When closed, they just look like regular pillows.



Figure 2 Joost van Geel *"The lacemaker"* (1631-1698)



Figure 4 Johannes Vermeer *"The Lacemaker"* 1669-1671

If you look at Vermeer's *"Lacemaker,"* (left) the blue pillow to her right has red and white threads spilling out of the side of it, indicating that it indeed opens.





*Figure 5 Joachim Wtewael 'Portrait of Eva Wtewael' 1628*

In this painting Ms. Wtewael has hers sitting open in her lap.





Figure 7 Rijksmuseum accession# BK-NM-3582, 1580-1620

And there are several extant ones, the Rijksmuseum has a couple (above and below)



Figure 6 Rijksmuseum accession# BK-NM-5169, 1580-1620







This one (left) was sold by a dutch antique dealer, Grijpma Antiquaris, Current whereabouts unknown.

This one (Below and Right) is in the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum in Munich, Germany. (they are called "Nähkästchen" in German) The original outside cover did not survive and the cover shown is a 19<sup>th</sup> century replacement and thus you can see that they chamfered the wooden box prior to attaching the padded cushion.



Supposedly there is one in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts but sadly no photo is available.



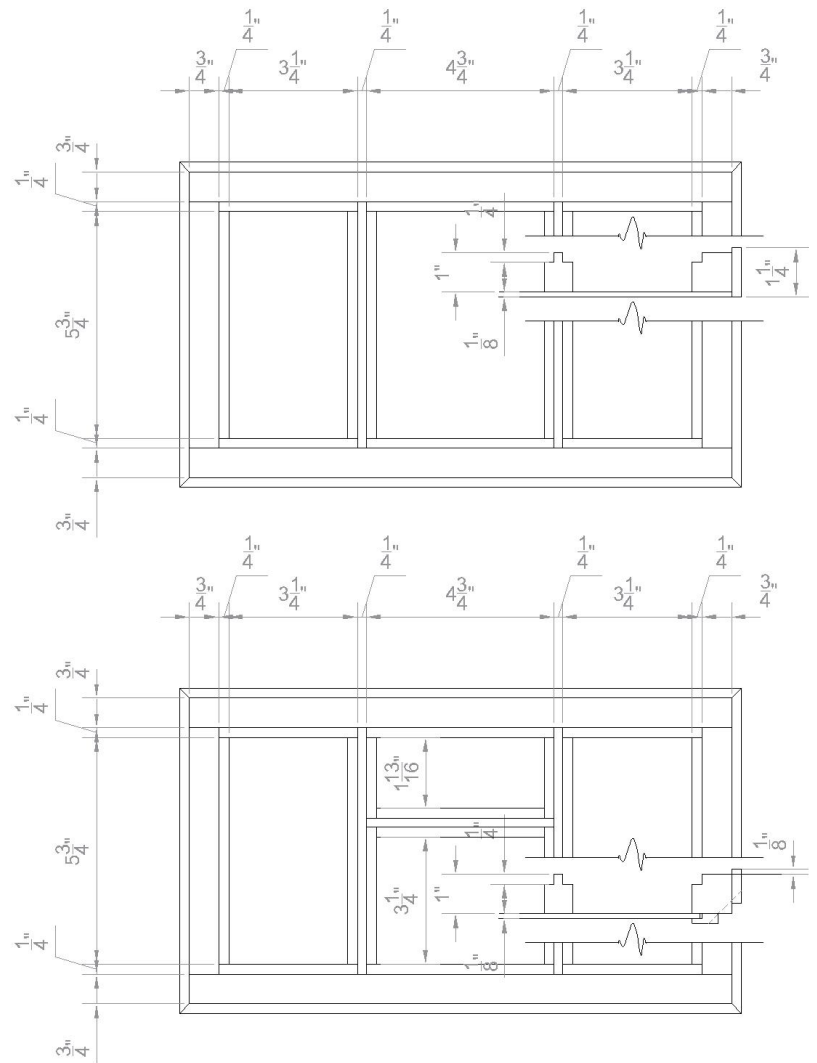


The striking thing about all 4 of the extant cushions (that I've been able to find) is that they have the EXACT same interior layout and hinges, which to me indicates that the interior wooden boxes might have all been made by the same person. The textile finishing and decoration are slightly different: One had painted interior panels, two had embroidered interior panels, and one had embossed and gilded leather panels. So I believe they were finished out (or contracted thus) by the owners.

Being of Dutch descent, creating one became a moral imperative.

I broke down my project into the following parts:

1. Interior boxes
  - a. Construct boxes
  - b. Construct Doorframes
  - c. Lock installation
  - d. Leather hinge installation
2. Outer cover
  - a. Weave trim
  - b. Install trim
  - c. Attach cover to boxes
3. Tassels & install
4. Embroider panels
  - a. Figure out how to Install on backing boards
5. Create mirror & install
6. Create Hinges and latches & install



I am a CAD designer by profession and was able to glean the measurements from one of the extant naaikussen by pulling it into my CAD software and scaling it based on the dimensions given by the museum. From those I was able to draw up a plan for my own pillow. I have a woodshop and was able to scrounge up walnut of sufficient quantities for the interior boxes from



my scrap from other projects. (Although I did purchase thin stock for the backing instead of resawing boards I already had because it was less wasteful.)



The lock hardware I was able to procure from Rockler and is meant for jewelry boxes. I am particularly proud of the extremely narrow mortise I made in the front rail of the box, but next time I would probably use a half-morticed lock instead of a full-morticed one due to ease of installation. The mortise was so narrow I could not fit my chisels into it and as a result had to clean it out mostly with files.



Making the frames sturdy at this scale was challenging and I also struggled with how I was going to attach the backing plate, which had to be done later once the embroidered panels were completed.

To solve both issues, I decided to strengthen the half-lap joints with a thin triangular piece of wood at the corners that would





give me a gluing surface to attach the frame to the backing and also space them a bit to allow room for the nap of the velvet between the two.

One of the extant naaikussen had holes for sewing on the cushion cover in the face of the rim. The other likely had holes in the inside corner but they were covered by the addition of a trim piece. I decided to put mine in the inside corner.



I found a silk pile upholstery velvet in a yellowy green that unfortunately did not look great with the walnut so I overdyed it with blue. I wish I could say I did it on purpose but I was only trying to “blue up” the green a bit. However, the silk pile sucked up the dye better than I expected and I was thrilled with the result...a lovely peacock green.

Not looking a gift horse in the mouth.

The next thing I had to do was make the trim. But first I needed a better tablet weaving loom as my period ones only produced shorter lengths and I needed to make 6 yards. So back to the woodshop. I made an upright inkle-style loom out of cherry (also scrap from another project) and some 1” cherry

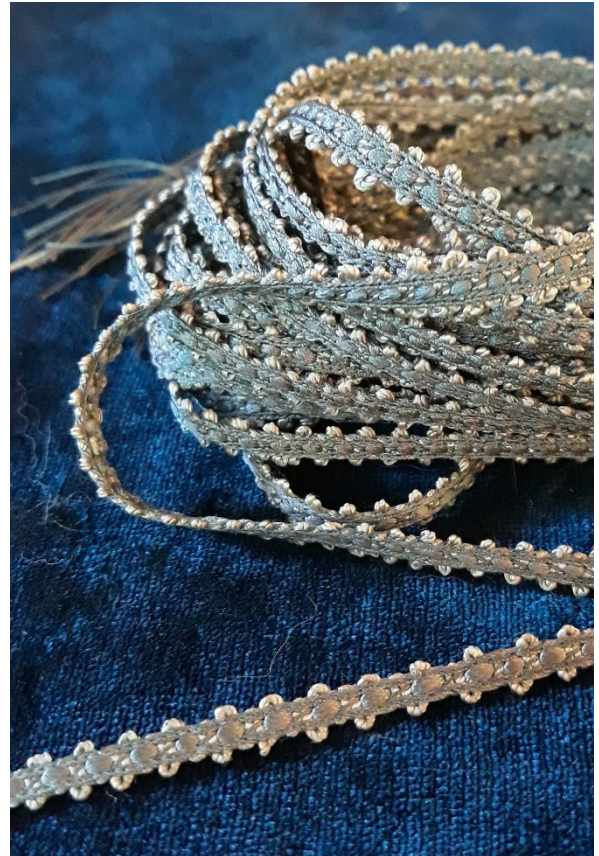
dowels I happened to have available. It cantilevers over the sofa nicely and positions the work right at the correct focal distance for my eyes, which have gotten picky over the last 10 years. (sucks to get old) So I could weave in comfort without hunching over to see what I was doing.







I looked at the trim on one of the extant naaikusen and it seemed similar to some tablet weaving instructions I'd seen in an article in *Waffen- und Kostumkunde*: "Brettchengewebte Zierborten an Kostlimen der Spanischen Mode" by Anneliese Streiter and Erika Weiland. I don't read German, but the diagrams were well done and I was able to muddle through creating a reasonable facsimile with (5) 4-sided tablets and some bent wire to form the picots.



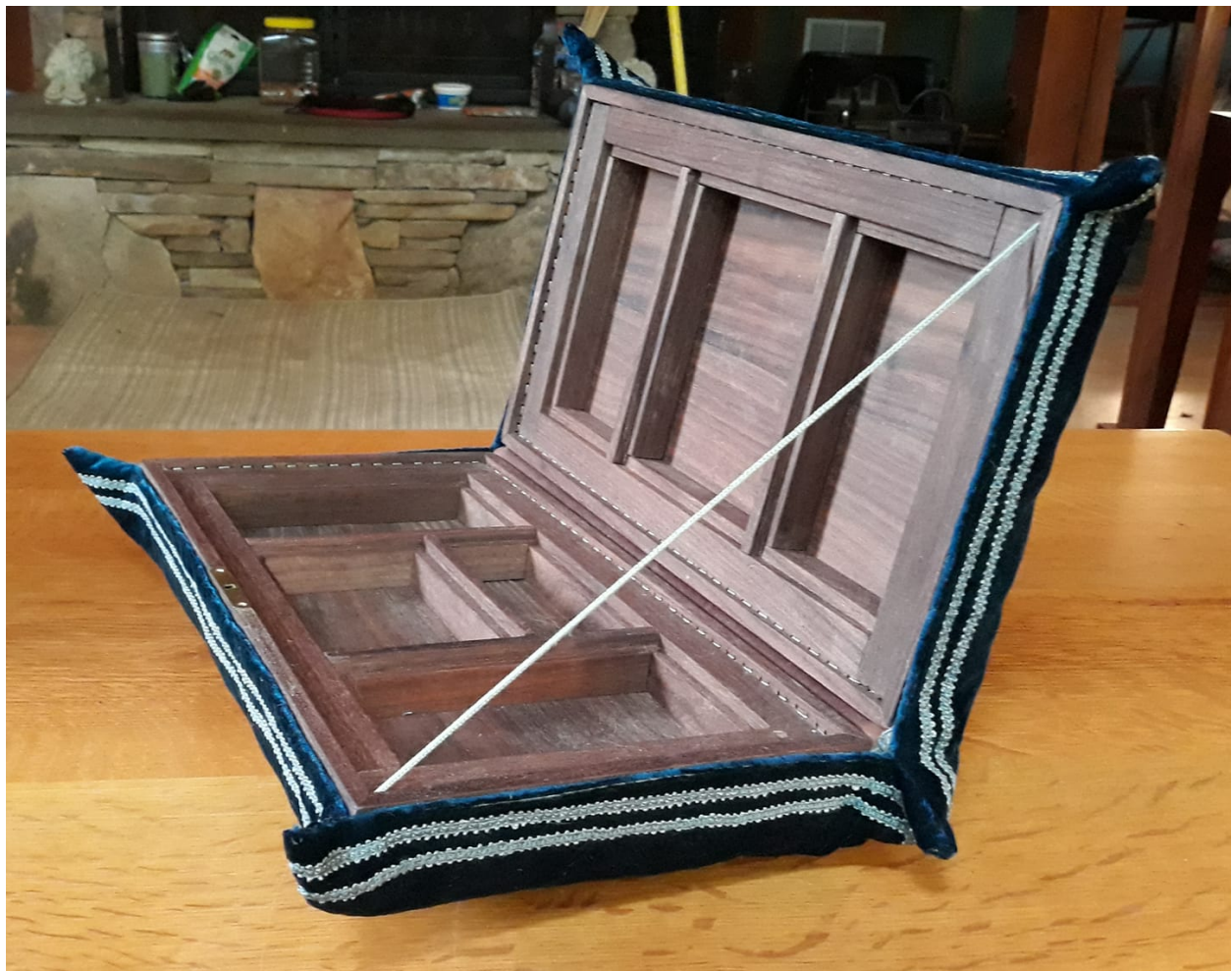
The thread I chose to use was two weights of reeled silk. A lighter "B" weight for the warp and a heavier "F" weight for the weft.

In one hole of the middle tablet I ran multiple threads to create a decorative bump.

Sewing the trim onto the velvet was a bit more difficult than I expected. This was my first experience working with velvet and I was fighting the nap, which kept wanting to push whatever I was placing on top of it downwards along the pile. It was hard to keep the trim straight. This was only the beginning of my war with the nap of the velvet.

Once I'd sewn the trim onto the velvet, I sewed the cover onto the boxes using the holes I had pre-drilled, also installing a leather "hinge," hiding the outside seams under the edge of the trim. And I installed a silk cord I finger wove from the heavier weight silk to limit how far it would open, like they had done on one of the extant cushions.

I stuffed the cushion with flax tow as was noted in the Rijksmuseum description of the original. I was thrilled that they had included that information! It ended up taking a total of 2 lbs (1 lb each side.)

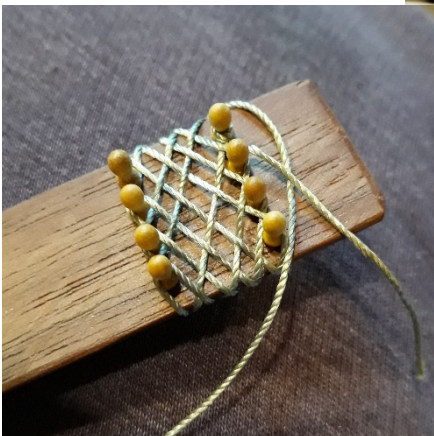


What you can't see in this photo is that I am using a block behind it to keep it from tipping up onto its back edge. When open it's back heavy. Here is a perfect example of pictures don't tell the whole story...I'd love to be able to handle the extant piece and see if they put a counterweight into the front. I briefly considered doing so on the front edge but was worried the weight would show.





The next thing I had to tackle was making the tassels. I had never successfully accomplished making herringbone buttons (let alone tassels) even though I had tried many times. They are quite difficult as you are having to weave a herringbone pattern in the round when the warp is not yet in place...you have to kind of imagine where it is going to be. So, I told the husband not to make any noise, cracked open Gina Barrett's button book, watched some youtube paracord videos and took a full week to make single acceptable button. But the herringbone pattern was going the wrong way. I needed the "V"s to go top to bottom along the length of the tassel, not around the circumference.







Gina Barrett graciously volunteered her recipe for proper herringbone patterning of buttons ahead of the publication of her new book on 16<sup>th</sup> century buttons so that I might move ahead with my project. And I have to say that the new system she is using made it much more understandable. But it still wasn't what I'd call easy. I made 10 tassels and chose the best ones...but none were perfect.





The extant Naaikusen had identical interior layouts but very different finishes. Two were exposed black stained wood (or Ebony?) with embroidered panels, one was exposed wood with painted panels, and in the last the wood was covered in red satin and had gilded leather panels. I chose to do exposed wood (walnut, as it's relatively dark, I knew they used it on the continent in this time period and it has a nice, fine grain,) with a tung oil finish & with embroidered panels but with a different style of embroidery.

I had been wanting to try goldwork for some time and here was my chance. As the one naaikussen with leather panels was quite evocative of the bookbinding of the time, I turned to embroidered book bindings for my design inspiration.



*Figure 9 16th-century Elizabethan embroidered binding (Aa.6.52) A binding of embroidered velvet with the badge of Queen Elizabeth I on an anti-Catholic treatise, The castle of Christianitie by Lewis Evans (London, 1568) St. John's College Cambridge*



*Figure 10 Embroidered bookbinding in the British Library # C2a34, Geneva 1583*



*Figure 8 Embroidered bookbinding in the British Library # C23a26 Antwerp, 1590*





Figure 11 Embroidered casket Victoria and Albert Museum accession # 347-1864

This type of work did have precedence being used for caskets. (above)

I'd attended a class at the Smithsonian a while back on goldwork and the books I used to refresh what I'd learned there were Ruth Chamberlin's "Beginner's guide to Goldwork" and the Royal School of Needlework's Essential Stitch guide "Goldwork" by Helen Mc Cook. Both of which I would recommend. I tried to pounce my design onto the velvet through holes pierced in a paper pattern but quickly realized that with the nap I needed something less impermanent. So instead I cut my holes bigger...almost like a stencil and used white gouache paint...first putting down the dots along the lines and then tracing over with the paint to make the lines coherent.

Embroidering on velvet is more difficult than I first realized. The nap keeps trying to shove whatever you are trying to place on it one way or the other like hordes of tiny microscopic pikemen. And you have to put down felt to cover the nap before doing any areas of embroidery or the nap will bristle through it. I



also ended up trimming the nap back on the upper side to keep it from overlapping the embroidery and obscuring it.

It was definitely a learning experience.





The panels took me about a week each. If anyone wants to know, this is what 5 yards of #8 gold purl and 20 yards of #1 gilt twist look like. I used up all of both of them...biting my nails at the end, playing thread chicken.



I chose to vary the types of flowers in each panel to keep it from looking monotonous. And by the end I was kind of thinking of them like little garden plots with different flowers in each.

Some of the silks I used for the embroidery were Au-Ver-A-Soie Trame flat silk and some were a floss that I'd dyed myself with cochineal and madder years ago (the pinks and reds) I was interested to see the difference as the floss I'd dyed myself was twisted and not flat. It does make some difference...but I still don't think I would want to dye untwisted silk...what a nightmare!

I am mounting the panels to the backing boards by pre drilling holes along the edges and sewing them to the boards. Not having access to the actual artifacts, I had to get creative on how they might have mounted them and it seemed a plausible method given how they attached the upholstery to the boxes.

The Mirror was an interesting rabbit hole to explore. I didn't want to use a perfect modern mirror. But all my research (most info taken from "The Mirror, a history" by Sabine Melchior-Bonnet) suggested that the substances they probably used in period to make mirrors were not ones I particularly wanted to fool around with (lead, mercury, tin, silver antimony, arsenic) and of course since Venetian fortunes were being made on the exact recipes for the silvering, along with the techniques for getting the glass so perfectly flat as to reflect the light evenly, the whole process was a jealously guarded alchemical secret. It is evidently a quite difficult thing to spread a hot layer of metal onto glass without breaking it from the thermal shock and the artisans that made them were protected and secluded on the Island of Murano and considered celebrities.



I discovered something surprising to a modern person to whom mirrors are blasé. Glass Mirrors in this period were exceedingly rare. They were exorbitant in cost. The expense of just this one tiny glass mirror probably indicated that this whole cushion was probably really about displaying the mirror, which ironically to me was a bit of an afterthought to the whole project.

I decided on a slightly safer process that might have been period but for which I really had no definitive proof. I silvered a piece of modern glass with silver leaf. It's not without precedent:

The Craftsman's Handbook "Il Libro dell' Arte" Cennino d'Andrea Cennini (translated by Daniel V. Thompson, Jr.) P112: *"How to Gild Glass for Reliquary ornaments. There is another process for working on glass, indescribably attractive, fine and unusual, and in this is a branch of great piety, for the embellishment of holy reliquaries; and it calls for sure and ready draftsmanship. This process is carried out as follows. Take a piece of white glass, with no green cast, very clean and free from bubbles; and wash it, rubbing it down with lye and charcoal. And rinse it with good clear water, and let it dry by itself. But before you wash it, cut it to the size that you want. Then take the white of a fresh egg; beat it with a good clean whisk just as you do that for gilding so that it is thoroughly beaten; and let it distil overnight, and with this brush the back of the glass with this glair. And when it is thoroughly wet all over, take a leaf of the gold, which should be quite heavy gold, that is, dull; put it on the paper tip, and lay it deftly on the glass where you have wet it; and press it down with a little very clean cotton, gently, so that the glair does not get on top of the gold; and lay the whole glass this way. Let it dry without sun for the space of some days."*

Well, I did try it and the egg white glair mirror didn't really work well. I think the egg white dries too stiff and doesn't allow you to burnish the very thin modern silver leaf flat enough to be nicely reflective. So, while it's obvious that it's been silvered...it's a VERY dull not highly reflective finish. If I had access to thicker silver leaf and didn't have to wait until it was completely dry to burnish, perhaps it would have gone better.

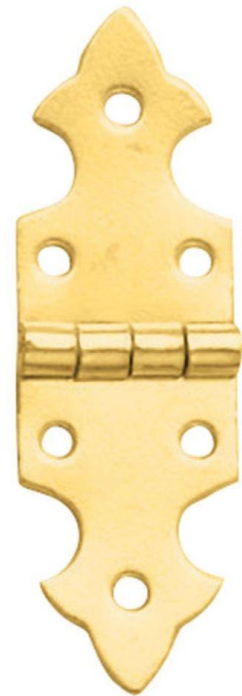
I went with a gelatin size to adhere the silver leaf instead. Gelatin was at least available in the period in question (boiled down hooves) and it definitely produced a more reflective mirrored surface but one that is still not in any way perfect.





The next part of the pillow that I now needed to tackle were the hinges and latch tabs. There were modernly available hinges of the right size that are close but they weren't quite right and I had put so much effort into this thing already that I decided I would rather try to create some that were better.

As I said before, I am a CAD Designer so I drew them up and got them cast in bronze by Shapeways. They printed the drawings that I gave them in wax and then lost wax cast them, a technique that they used in period but with a 21<sup>st</sup> century twist. For once I don't really feel all that apologetic about using modern methods as I was SO completely ready to be done with this project and cutting all those tiny hinges by hand out of sheet metal with a tiny saw did NOT sound appealing.



(above)  
Commercially  
available hinge



(left) Hinges pre cleanup, as  
I received them from  
Shapeways.

You can still see some of the  
printing lines





(above) hinges after clean-up

(below) installed, along with the latches and the little tassels to grip to open the doors.











The only thing left to do is install the rest of the lock hardware but the lock escutcheon plate provided with the lock was too plain. I drew up a fancier lock plate and it's on order, cast in bronze, by Shapeways.

All-in-all this has been a fun project that has led me down multiple paths I've never had a reason to go down before. I have learned so much. And I am in general happy with the final product.



The things I would change next time are actually relatively few. I think the original artisan might have done something much easier on the construction of the doors. I now believe they attached the frame directly to the backing and utilized a second frame inside the first to install the embroidered panels. It won't allow quite as much room for the embroidery but there is a secondary frame showing on the extant ones that is probably more than just decorative. And, as I said before, a half mortice lock would have been not only easier to install but would have allowed more wood thickness at the front of the box to which to attach the escutcheon plate, which I had to design larger than the originals to get the nails out to where they would have enough wood into which to nail.

Grace Gamble  
[Valkerie1000@yahoo.com](mailto:Valkerie1000@yahoo.com)

<https://pysankigirl.wixsite.com/graceslace>



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& Hastings Sanderson of “Modelbuch Muse”, without whom I might never have come across these intriguing artifacts.

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