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Not Exceptions: Historic Views of Women in Art and the Impact on Contemporary Women Artists

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Not Exceptions: Historic Views of Women in Art and the Impact on Contemporary Women Artists

Abby Leal

Intro & Importance

- Misconceptions of an almost exclusively male art world in centuries past
- Focus on western art world
- Looking back helps us move forward

17th through 19th centuries — Europe

- Societal boundaries on women discouraged pursuit of an art career
 - Femininity relatively unwelcomed in the art world
 - Painters thought to possess qualities that were “unnatural” for women
 - Individualism and competitiveness gendered masculine
- Educational barriers
 - Women largely barred from academies
 - If admitted, women were not allowed to attend classes that used nude models
 - Thought that exposure to the male nude would rid women of the delicacy, harden them to vulgar things

17th through 19th centuries — Europe

- History painting was dominant genre for much of the period
 - Most history painters were men as it required knowledge of the male form
- Impressionist movement
 - Male dominated, but saw entrance of women
 - Did not require artists to have a studio or access to models
 - Plein air painting
 - Some women painted from domestic life
 - Mary Cassatt



17th through 19th centuries — Europe

- Education for women began to expand at end of century
 - More women admitted to art schools
 - Faced new challenges as they had never experienced the rigors of formal art training
- New opportunities for exhibition of work and creation of women's spaces
 - Positive material change, but still many institutional barriers

20th century — Europe & America

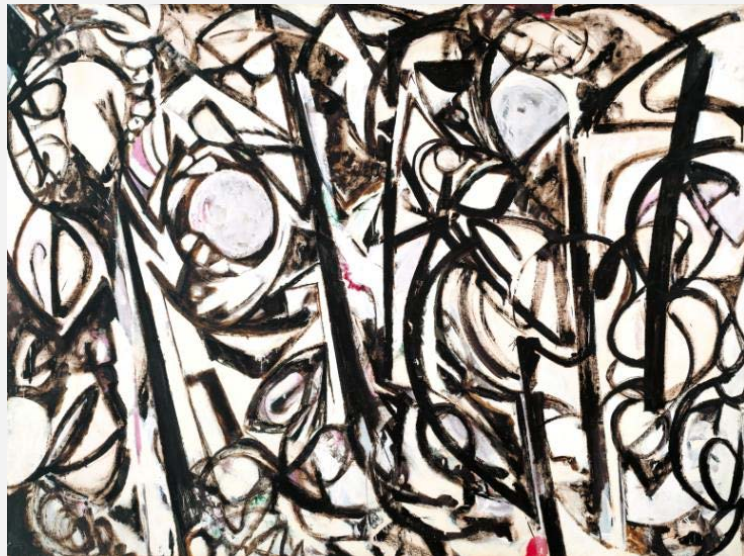
- Shifting values allowed more women to pursue careers in the visual arts
 - The New Woman
 - Increased education of end of previous century continued
- Organizations created to support women artists continued to flourish despite some pushback
 - National Association of Women Painters and Sculptors, The New York Society of Women Artists
- Modernist movement
 - More focused on self-expression and less bound by past expectations of respectability

20th century — Europe & America

- Efforts to continue to exclude women artists amidst growing professionalism
 - Shifted emphasis from professionalism to individualism
- Some improvements in ability to exhibit work
 - Large unjuried shows far better than juried shows which continued to be dominated by men
- Great Depression relief for artists benefited women
 - 41% of federal arts project aid, such as Works Progress Administration, was received by women artists
- Romantic relationships an advantage for some women

20th century — Europe & America

- Abstract expressionism of 1940s
 - Emphasis on masculinity, not well-suited for entrance of women



- Some women did make names for themselves in the movement
 - Lee Krasner
 - Art career overshadowed by marriage to Jackson Pollock
 - Not uncommon in artist marriages

20th century — Europe & America

- Women's art movement formed in 1960s in America and Great Britain
 - Inspired by larger women's liberation movement
 - Addressed gender disparity in exhibitions
 - Whitney protests
 - Sought respect for craft and hobby art
 - Shift away from view as low art
- 1970s saw shift away from activism and collaboration, emphasis on construct of femininity
 - Examining how culture informs gender



20th century — Europe & America

- Increased focus on cultural diversity in 1990s
 - Some shift away from gender issues
 - Women's acceptance into international exhibitions increased
 - Venice Biennale — 1/10 to 1/4 of exhibitors in 1 decade
- More acceptance of non-mainstream approaches to feminism
 - Bad Girls exhibits

21st century artists

- Women much freer to pursue career as artists
- Still underrepresented in museums
 - Work by women seen as financially risky
 - Some museums working to eliminate gender disparity
 - Guggenheim, Boston Museum of Art
- Men's work still outperforms women's work at auctions
 - 40% less on average
 - Just 5 women account for 40% of auction sales



Moving forward

- Historical hardships account for modern disparity
 - Cannot be written off as “ancient history”
- Educating people about women in art history provides a more accurate view
 - Inclusion of more women artists in art history courses
 - Will inform how people see and interact with their work
 - Affects how working artists are treated today
- More women in museum leadership
 - Larger museums still have mostly male directors
- Understand the root of prejudices and work to change them