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

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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 freerer 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