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

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

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

written by

Abby Leal

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Introduction

The misconception that artists of centuries past were almost exclusively men is no accident. It is a direct result of institutional inequity that kept women artists, though they lacked neither the talent nor the initiative of their counterparts, in a less advantageous position. They were denied the same opportunities for education and employment as men, and many women artists, even those with successful careers, have been lost to history. With this essay, I hope to give women artists the credit they deserve for their diversity. Not all women experienced their position in the art world the same way. Some sought the very praise men used to undermine their talents. Others sought to distance themselves from other women and shake the feminine characteristics they felt discredited their achievements. Some went so far as to sign their paintings as men, avoiding association with womanhood entirely. It would be a great disservice to flatten such a large, varied group of women with blanket statements. Each woman artist over the course of history has navigated her different circumstances in her own way. For the purpose of my research, I have focused solely on the Western art world. This means that the majority of women discussed here will be white. It is important to recognize that to be a woman of color in the art world has always been and continues to be a different and, by most metrics, more challenging experience.

Looking back on the factors that shaped the experience of women in the art world centuries ago helps inform us of the origins of some of the lingering effects of historical prejudices. Drawing these connections helps us move forward and mitigate modern-day prejudices that profoundly affect working women artists. In order to have a more equal art world, we must avoid writing off the hardships these women face as a result of talent, effort, or chance. Recognizing that centuries of bias against women artists has led to an art market that

overwhelmingly favors work made by men is a necessary precursor to material action that will shape the art world moving forward.

European Painters of the Seventeenth through Nineteenth Centuries

The period in Europe from the 17th century to the 19th century, sometimes referred to by historians as the Early Modern period, is a span of time marked by a variety of artistic styles gaining and fading in popularity. The Renaissance, which had begun some 300 years before 1600, was losing its momentum (Rosner). The modern period would not begin until the mid 1800s. The centuries between saw styles such as baroque, rococo, and romanticism dominate the art world at various points in time. Some women were able to make names for themselves as artists during this time, but not without hardships.

The variable that kept many women out of the art world, or in the case of many, not popularly recognized, for centuries was not their absence of talent nor their lack of desire to make art. It was the public's perception of what pursuits were appropriate for women. The underlying cause of European women's struggle to pursue or succeed in a career in artmaking was the prejudice much of society held against women's autonomy and self-preservation. There was also a need to preserve a specific mode of femininity, especially among the higher class, that served to restrict women's choices. While some Enlightenment authors espoused the equality of the sexes, authors such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau presented a very different point of view that relegated women to a separate and lesser sphere than men.¹ He argued that this inequality was inherent and natural. Artmaking in a professional capacity during this time was seen by many as

¹ Darling, John, and Maaïke Van De Pijpekamp. "Rousseau on the Education, Domination and Violation of Women." *British Journal of Educational Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2, 1994, pp. 115–132. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3122332.

a breach of appropriate feminine conduct. Individualism and competitiveness marked great artists of the time, and women were presumed to possess quite opposite qualities. An unnamed 19th century commentator wrote, “So long as a woman remains from unsexing herself, let her dabble in anything.”² Women, consciously or not, had to choose between “unsexing” themselves or remaining associated with traditional femininity. Both of these choices had their own set of consequences. A woman distanced from femininity could have gained what many would have considered more genuine recognition for her work, but she would not likely have been seen as a true woman in the way her more effeminate counterparts were.³ She might face criticism for not behaving in a way that agreed with societal standards at the time but could potentially use that to an advantage in the future.

Rosa Bonheur is a great illustration of these principles at work. Bonheur, a French artist known for her paintings of animals, was held up as a great painter and enjoyed exceptional commercial success in the 19th century. She was also famously “unfeminine” by the standards of the day; she kept her hair short, smoked, and wore pants, a choice that required special permission from the French government.⁴ Because she did not exhibit traditionally feminine characteristics, Bonheur was held up as almost a different kind of individual entirely. Rather than serving as an exemplification of the talents that certainly lay with many women, she was seen as an exception whom few of her sex could match. Though she undoubtedly faced criticism, her profound success and popular admiration at the time illustrates that the efforts of those to keep women out of the art world were focused on women who fit into the standards of femininity at

² Chadwick, Whitney. *Women, Art, and Society*. 5th ed., Thames & Hudson, 2012.

³ Greer, Germaine. *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979.

⁴ Quinn, Bridget. *Broad Strokes: 15 Women Who Made Art and Made History (In That Order)*. Chronicle Books, 2017.



Figure 1. Rosa Bonheur, *Ploughing in the Nivernais*. 1849. (Google Arts and Culture)

the time. Because Bonheur was perceived as unfeminine, efforts to undermine her professionalism based on “delicacy” or other supposedly natural characteristics of women would have been ineffective. Théophile Thoré-Bürger wrote of Bonheur’s work, “Mlle. Rosa paints almost like a man. What a pity her strong brush is not held also by M. Verboeckhoven and other précieux, who paint like young ladies.”⁵ Thoré not only compares Bonheur to a man in an affirming way but criticizes men by using assertions of femininity, specifically that of young women, as a way to show contempt for some male artists. This idea that femininity had no place in the professional art world, propagated by many more than just Rousseau, profoundly affected women’s access to artistic education and commissions as well as the subject matter and medium of their art.

Though women were not always explicitly prohibited from pursuing careers as artists, they did not enjoy the same privileges as men pursuing the same career. Women were often denied access to the same training as their male counterparts. Schools like the Académie Royale

⁵ Stanton, Theodore. *Reminiscences of Rosa Bonheur*. E-book, D. Appleton, 1910.

de Peinture et de Sculpture famously restricted the admission of women; between 1648 and 1793, only fifteen were admitted.⁶ When women were allowed to attend art schools, they were barred from participation in classes that used live, nude models. Some believed women to be incapable of controlling their passions in the presence of a male nude model.⁷ Others reasoned that the sight of male nudes, even in a class setting, would harden women to vulgar things and strip them of their delicacy. This obstacle did not, however, level the playing field for all women. Some women had the great fortune of familial ties that proved advantageous for entering the art world. Many were related to, often the daughters of, artists. This proximity to a working artist provided women with training they would likely be denied elsewhere.⁸ Without proper artistic training, women as a whole were less likely to have access to commissions, especially those that paid well and would bring them recognition in the art community. Some women benefited, however, from increasing demands for art during this time that could sometimes mitigate the barriers that might otherwise hinder them. In various cities, women could capitalize on the competition that flourished as a result of the high demand for artists. In the Italian city of Bologna, a place where women's ability to garner commissions was greatly improved by the sheer amount of work available to artists, at least twenty-three women were active painters in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁹

The types of art made by women during this period were governed largely by their position in society. The expectation of women to be concerned almost exclusively with the upkeep and beautification of the home meant that many women made art, both personal and commercial, related to the domestic sphere. Though there are likely many career artists whose

⁶ Chadwick, Whitney. *Women, Art, and Society*. 5th ed., Thames & Hudson, 2012.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Slatkin, Wendy. *Women Artists in History: From Antiquity to the Present*. 3rd ed., Prentice Hall, 1985.

⁹ Ibid.

names have been lost to history, there are even more women who made art without seeking economic gain or popular recognition. Women whose artistic undertakings were limited to the domestic space were far more affirmed by cultural standards. Needlepoint and drawing were popular hobbies for middle- and upper-class women to pursue. They were deemed appropriately feminine, and these practices did not disturb the careful balance of separate gender spheres. The work these women produced required great dedication and skill, but because they were thought of as hobbies that simply served to amuse women, they were not afforded the same respect as painting and other forms of high art.¹⁰ Many women who did paint commercially often made pieces with domestic or otherwise traditionally feminine subject matter. Paintings of women doing needlepoint or posed with their children are two common subjects of paintings by women artists during this time period. The popularization of flower painting and botanical illustration in the seventeenth century, especially among the Dutch, also allowed many women to earn wages making art. Engravings and watercolor works of flowers could be found throughout botanical books, and the ability to precisely render plants and flowers became increasingly sought after.¹¹

Judith Leyster, a 17th century Dutch painter, created many works with both of those themes. Despite her birth into a non-artistic family and consequent lack of advantage, Leyster produced work from an early age that exhibited incredible skill. By age 29, she was the second woman to be admitted to the Saint Luke's Guild of Haarlem.¹² She took on students, including men, and supported herself by selling her work on the open market.¹³ The success she enjoyed

¹⁰ Chadwick, Whitney. *Women, Art, and Society*. 5th ed., Thames & Hudson, 2012.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Quinn, Bridget. *Broad Strokes: 15 Women Who Made Art and Made History (In That Order)*. Chronicle Books, 2017.

¹³ Honig, Elizabeth Alice. "The Art of Being 'Artistic': Dutch Women's Creative Practices in the 17th Century." *Woman's Art Journal*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2001, pp. 31–39. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1358900.



Figure 2. Judith Leyster, *The Proposition*. 1631. (Smarthistory.org)

was virtually unseen in other women in the Netherlands without familial connections to the art world. Formal training and professional status were rarely gained without the advantage of a family workshop.¹⁴ Several of her paintings depict women engaged in household tasks. One such painting, *The Proposition* (Figure 2), depicts a woman sewing solemnly by candlelight while a man offers her money in exchange for sex. Unlike other paintings about

women's sexuality being exchanged for money made around the same time—a result of increased prosperity in Holland—the woman in Leyster's painting ignores the man. She is depicted as uninterested rather than a temptress which was unprecedented in Northern painting.¹⁵

For centuries, history paintings were the primary focus of the art market. The genre posed several barriers to entry for women and was dominated by men. Because men were able to study male anatomy at art academies and women were denied the practice, men alone typically had the training necessary to paint in genre. History paintings prominently featured multifigured compositions that demanded knowledge of the male figure that most women lacked at the time.¹⁶

¹⁴ Honig, Elizabeth Alice. "The Art of Being 'Artistic': Dutch Women's Creative Practices in the 17th Century." *Woman's Art Journal*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2001, pp. 31–39. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1358900.

¹⁵ Chadwick, Whitney. *Women, Art, and Society*. 5th ed., Thames & Hudson, 2012.

¹⁶ Slatkin, Wendy. *Women Artists in History: From Antiquity to the Present*. 3rd ed., Prentice Hall, 1985.

History paintings were one of the most commissioned types of painting, and many women struggled to make a name for themselves without access to such commissions.

Angelica Kauffman was one of the few women known for history painting. The daughter of an Austrian painter, Kauffman had the advantage of working closely with prominent



Figure 3. Angelica Kauffman, *Cornelia Pointing to Her Children as Her Treasures*. 1785. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 4. Jacques Louis David, *Oath of the Horatii*. 1784. (Wikipedia)

neoclassical painters in Florence and was one of two women admitted to the Royal Academy at its founding in 1769.¹⁷

Kauffman produced a great deal of history paintings in England during a period where it was not very common and was virtually the only woman working in the genre.¹⁸

One of her most noteworthy works,

Cornelia Pointing to Her Children as Her Treasures (Figure 3), serves as a foil to

history paintings done by her male

contemporaries. Wendy Slatkin draws a

comparison between Kauffman's work and

Jacques Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii*

(Figure 4). While both paintings are similar

in style and composition, the virtues they

promote are quite different. Kauffman's painting espouses a rejection of materialism. Cornelia is

illustrated gesturing to her children after being asked what her treasures are by a visitor. David's

¹⁷ Chadwick, Whitney. *Women, Art, and Society*. 5th ed., Thames & Hudson, 2012.

¹⁸ Slatkin, Wendy. *Women Artists in History: From Antiquity to the Present*. 3rd ed., Prentice Hall, 1985.

painting focuses on military heroism and nationalism. The three Horatii sons salute their father, who is holding their swords, as a sign of their oath to fight in Rome's battle against Alba Longa.¹⁹ The gender dynamics in both paintings are incredibly different. *Cornelia* features only women and children; Cornelia is the central figure who is presented as a moral example in contrast to her wealthy visitor who is more concerned with material possessions. David's composition is made up of two distinct groups separated by gender. The men dominate the painting and stand tall with outstretched limbs giving the impression of power. A group of women occupy only a small portion of the canvas and are depicted as tearful and distressed. Though both paintings were set in distant history, the stark contrast between both the societal roles and emotion of the two groups illustrates the gender ideals that were at play during the 18th century.

The impressionist movement, which began around 1860 in Paris, was male dominated like each artistic era before it. Women impressionists, however, did manage to make names for themselves in the style and used the movement's favor of domestic and outdoor scenes to their advantage. Because these paintings were typically done on canvases much smaller than history paintings, they were easy to take outside. Painting landscapes while outdoors, or plein air painting, became popular. Scenes of domestic life were also common. Women did not have to have access to a studio or models to make impressionist work; they could simply paint their surroundings.²⁰ Women sewing, reading and tending to children were common themes in women's work.

¹⁹ "The Oath of the Horatii." *Louvre*, Musée du Louvre, <https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/oath-horatii>.

²⁰ Chadwick, Whitney. *Women, Art, and Society*. 5th ed., Thames & Hudson, 2012.

Mary Cassatt, an American who trained at the Pennsylvania Academy in the early 1860s, moved to Paris to further her study before returning to America and forging a career that would secure her place in history as a successful impressionist painter.²¹ Cassatt, one of the first in America to paint in the style, created work that brought the viewer into the woman's space. Most of her subjects are women and children, often in loving, familial embrace. Critic J.K. Huysmans said of Cassatt's work, "Woman alone is capable of painting childhood..." Despite her immense talent and



Figure 5. Mary Cassatt, *Young Mother Sewing*. 1900. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

dedication, the success of her work is, to a degree, attributed to her gender.²² This identification of womanhood, something beyond the woman artist's control, with ability that is natural rather than developed is just one way women in the art world were treated as separate.

During this time, more women attended school as opportunities for art education for women expanded and as more women needed to be able to support themselves amidst the growth of the middle class. Their entrance into this new academic setting came with unique challenges that many of them had never faced before. Women who were not conditioned to deal with the rigors of critique and arrogant teachers could be caught off guard by the pressures of their environment.²³ Expanded education and the creation of spaces exclusive to women opened up

²¹ Chadwick, Whitney. *Women, Art, and Society*. 5th ed., Thames & Hudson, 2012.

²² Ibid.

²³ Greer, Germaine. *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979.

more opportunities for women to exhibit their work. By 1893, artworks and craft items created by women from thirteen countries were exhibited at the Columbian Exposition in the Woman's Building. An 1899 article in a London art magazine stated that the Society of Women Artists had just held its forty-fourth exhibition.²⁴ These improvements certainly made a difference in the lives of women artists but did not dismantle the institutional barriers that would persist in varied forms for centuries to come.

Twentieth Century Artists of Europe and America

At the turn of the century, societal shifts afforded women new avenues to pursue careers in the visual arts. Many of the values held for centuries prior began to change at the turn of the century. This is especially true of American culture which saw increased changes in what was societally acceptable for women to pursue. Women's academic enrollment and entrance into the professional world helped inform the creation of the New Woman, a cultural symbol that began to gain traction in the late 19th century. Some historians argue that the New Woman was more of an ideal to be discussed in literature at the time rather than a product of widespread cultural change.²⁵ Whatever impact this symbol had on material social changes that would benefit women, it did serve as a persona that allowed the people of the time to envision what was to come for Western women.

Women artists during this time helped propagate the idea of the New Woman, adopting lifestyles similar to the male-dominated Bohemianism of the previous century.²⁶ Many women

²⁴ Kahr, Madlyn Millner. "Women as Artists and 'Women's Art.'" *Woman's Art Journal*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1982, pp. 28–31. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1358031.

²⁵ Maloni, Ruby. "Dissonance Between Norms and Behavior: Early 20th Century America's 'New Woman.'" *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 70, 2009, pp. 880–886. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/44147735.

²⁶ Prieto, Laura R.. *At Home in the Studio: The Professionalization of Women Artists in America*.

rejected rigid Victorian standards of femininity and began to embrace and express a greater sense of self. This new confidence, coupled with and informed by the social change of the era, led women in the art world to seek more equal treatment as professionals. Institutions and organizations created by and for women artists, which began to appear in the late 19th century, continued to foster acceptance and support for working artists. The Woman's Art Club, founded in New York City in 1889, was renamed the National Association of Women Painters and Sculptors and sought to bring women artists more recognition.²⁷ The New York Society of Women Artists was popular among modernists who publicly addressed the gender discrimination they faced. Despite increasing external pushback against what to some seemed like the feminization of the art world, these societies remained vocal about their missions.²⁸

The values of the American modernist movement during the early 19th century afforded women new opportunities to create work more focused on self-expression and less bound by past expectations of respectability.²⁹ The movement focused on a rejection of history and a spirit of innovation. Modern art was often motivated by social and political agendas and associated with a more ideal, progressive society.³⁰ This departure from previous norms meant some of the limitations previously faced by women began to dissolve. As the art market saw a decline in the demand of history painting it became less crucial for professional artists to have studied the male nude. Avant-garde artwork grew in favor, and the subjects and styles of paintings became more diverse. Improvements of women's position in the art world during this time were not made

United Kingdom, Harvard University Press, 2001.

²⁷ Swinth, Kirsten. "Modernism and Self-Expression." *Painting Professionals: Women Artists and the Development of Modern American Art, 1870-1030*. University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

²⁸ Prieto, Laura R.. *At Home in the Studio: The Professionalization of Women Artists in America*. United Kingdom, Harvard University Press, 2001.

²⁹ Swinth, Kirsten. "Modernism and Self-Expression." *Painting Professionals: Women Artists and the Development of Modern American Art, 1870-1030*. University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

³⁰ "Modernism." *Tate*, www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/m/modernism.

without resistance from men who still enjoyed far more privilege. In an effort to maintain their dominant position, male modernists sought to redefine the conditions that made one an ‘artist.’ As women’s professionalism increased, men became disinterested in this former metric of respectability and instead shifted their focus towards individualism.³¹ Women’s access to galleries did not change drastically during this time, though there was some improvement. In independent exhibitions, modeled on Salon des Indépendants, women had essential unmitigated access.³² Other large, unjuried shows also attracted women artists as their work was guaranteed entry. Between 1922 and 1936, women averaged one third of exhibitors in the Salons of America. Juried shows such as the Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters of 1916, to which only one woman was admitted, were far more difficult for women to gain entry to.³³

During the Great Depression, a struggling art market became a hardship for all American artists but brought about some positive change for women. The 1930 census records 40% of working artists as women³⁴, and many women artists were among those who received work from federal arts projects, such as the Works Progress Administration. Of those who received aid, around 41% were women.³⁵ In the decade that followed, women artists found themselves without the security of these programs and again subject to private galleries and an art market that favored men.³⁶ Many women used connections with men to their benefit in order to secure their place in the art world. Romantic relationships with prominent artists or art dealers often lead to more exposure and success.³⁷ Whether they consciously pursued these relations as an avenue

³¹ Swinth, Kirsten. “Modernism and Self-Expression.” *Painting Professionals: Women Artists and the Development of Modern American Art, 1870-1030*. University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

³² Swinth, Kirsten. “Modernism and Self-Expression.” *Painting Professionals: Women Artists and the Development of Modern American Art, 1870-1030*. University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Slatkin, Wendy. *Women Artists in History: From Antiquity to the Present*. 3rd ed., Prentice Hall, 1985.

³⁵ Chadwick, Whitney. *Women, Art, and Society*. 5th ed., Thames & Hudson, 2012.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Slatkin, Wendy. *Women Artists in History: From Antiquity to the Present*. 3rd ed., Prentice Hall, 1985.

towards commercial success or simply passively benefited from them was certainly different for each of these women. Regardless of their intentions, the work of women artists in these kinds of relationships was sometimes invalidated or seen as secondary to their partners'. It's not unlikely that this kind of risk was assessed at the outset of the relationship and measured against the value of the partnership.

Abstract expressionism solidified as a movement during the early 1940s and became the dominant form of modern art in America.³⁸ The strict gender constructs that characterize this era in American history were embedded in the movement which saw far more involvement of men. Abstract expressionism was, as Prudence Peiffer describes it, "a movement whose mythos was centered on its male heroes, an image of virility that was sent around the world as an ambassador of postwar American power."³⁹ Words such as action and energy, gendered masculine, were common in discussion of the work.⁴⁰ Though the male-centric environment fostered by the leaders of the movement was not well suited for the entrance of women, some did make names for themselves within the movement and help shape it; however, fewer women gained the recognition and lasting reputation that their male counterparts did.

³⁸ Chadwick, Whitney. *Women, Art, and Society*. 5th ed., Thames & Hudson, 2012.

³⁹ Peiffer, Prudence. "Women of Abstract Expressionism." *Bookforum*, vol. 23, no. 2, Jun. 2016, ProQuest, ezproxy.obu.edu:2048/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.obu.edu:2443/docview/2039466537?accountid=28323.

⁴⁰ Swinth, Kirsten. "Modernism and Self-Expression." *Painting Professionals: Women Artists and the Development of Modern American Art, 1870-1030*. University of North Carolina Press, 2001.



Figure 6. Lee Krasner, *Gothic Landscape*. 1961. (Tate Museum)

Lee Krasner, a notable abstract expressionist, faced her own hardships as a woman in the movement. After undergraduate study at the National Academy of Design, Krasner began frequenting a common gathering place of prominent artists, such as Arshile

Gorky and Willem de Kooning, who

would pioneer the abstract expressionist movement.⁴¹ When Krasner, who was already creating abstract work, met her husband Jackson Pollock, he introduced her to a different form of abstraction. He worked not from life but from within. Though Pollock certainly influenced her work, Pollock owes more of his success to Krasner than the inverse. She was more well connected than he upon their meeting and provided him support.⁴² This imbalance soon switched to favor Pollock whose work became increasingly popular over the course of their relationship. Today, Krasner has far less name recognition than Pollock despite her impressive body of work.

Krasner was not the only artist during the period to be overshadowed by a more well-known husband. Elaine de Kooning and Jean Cooke are among other women whose careers, though successful, did not have the same lasting impact on art history as those of their spouses.⁴³

There are certainly myriad factors that determine how well-known an artist becomes, and there's

⁴¹ Quinn, Bridget. *Broad Strokes: 15 Women Who Made Art and Made History (In That Order)*. Chronicle Books, 2017.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Faughnan, Ally. "Eight female artists who should be as celebrated as their artist partners." *Dazed Digital*, 3 June 2019,

<https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/44669/1/female-artists-lee-krasner-ana-mendieta-francoise-gilot-elaine-de-kooning-hopper>.

no way to prove that the careers of these women would have been as famed as their partners had they not been women; however, it's clear that women making art professionally during this time experienced a great deal of gender bias in a hypermasculine environment. Both Krasner and Kooning chose to sign their works with their initials, avoiding immediate identification with their gender in hopes that it would prevent their work from being unnecessarily labeled "feminine."⁴⁴ Their marriages to popular artists often lead to their work being viewed not for its own merit but for how it related and compared to the work of their partner. Both of these challenges have led to many women artists undeservingly seen as secondary to their husbands.

The late 1960s saw the formation of the women's art movement in North America and Great Britain. The movement, inspired and supported by the broader women's liberation movement, gathered many women artists together as a more united whole for the first time. It continued through the 1970s and sought to improve the position of women and address art world inequality head on.⁴⁵ While one goal of the movement was certainly to give more exposure to women working professionally as artists, the underlying objective was to shed light on and dismantle the deep institutional sexism that all women in the art world experienced at some point in their careers. One issue addressed by the movement was unequal acceptance of art made by women into exhibitions. When only 8 out of 143 artists in the 1969 Whitney Museum Annual were women, protests against the museum and the formation of several women's advocacy groups followed.⁴⁶ The Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee, formed from the Art Workers' Coalition, focused solely on protesting gender bias in the Whitney Annual.⁴⁷ In a letter sent to the museum, the committee demanded that 50% of the artists featured in the 1970 Annual

⁴⁴ Chadwick, Whitney. *Women, Art, and Society*. 5th ed., Thames & Hudson, 2012.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Lippard, Lucy R. *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays on Feminist Art*. The New Press, 1995.

exhibition be women and that half of those women be black. The Sculpture Annual opened with 20 women out of one hundred total artists.⁴⁸ Though this 15% increase was much smaller than the original demand, it was a clear message to women's advocacy groups that their protests were effective.⁴⁹ Another objective of the women's art movement changing popular perception of craft and hobby art. Quilting, embroidery, basketry, and other "decorative arts" were viewed as low art. These kinds of creative works, predominately made by women, were considered hobbies rather than fine art and were virtually ignored by the art world for centuries. The movement recognized that art world standards for quality were excluding an entire "hidden" art and sought to bring this kind of work more recognition and respect.⁵⁰

At the end of the 1970s and in the decades that followed, feminist art practices shifted from an emphasis on activism and collaboration to a focus on examining femininity as a construct. During this time, artists increasingly made work that exposed the cultural coding of images and sought to improve the position of women and minorities who had long since been viewed as "other" in patriarchal society.⁵¹ Deconstructive work, like that of Barbara Kruger, examined femininity in mass media and popular culture. Kruger layered found images, usually taken from American print-media, with messages that subverted the meaning of the image to illustrate and manipulate "the assumption of masculine control over meaning". Her work

⁴⁸ "The Biennial and Women Artists: A Look Back At Feminist Protests At The Whitney." *Whitney Museum of American Art*. 3 May 2010, whitney.org/Education/EducationBlog/BiennialAndWomenArtists.

⁴⁹ Chadwick, Whitney. *Women, Art, and Society*. 5th ed., Thames & Hudson, 2012.

⁵⁰ Lippard, Lucy R. *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays on Feminist Art*. The New Press, 1995.

⁵¹ Swinth, Kirsten. "Modernism and Self-Expression." *Painting Professionals: Women Artists and the Development of Modern American Art, 1870-1030*. University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

illustrates the argument against biological gender differences, instead charging culture with the creation of gender constructs and inviting the viewer to critique them.⁵²

During the last decade of the century, improvements in art world intersectionality shifted away from a focus on gender issues somewhat and towards increasing cultural diversity. Though this idea of New Internationalism did not deal with gender, women did benefit from its outcomes. Women's acceptance into international exhibitions increased significantly in the 1990s. At the 1999 Venice Biennale, one fourth of the artists represented were women.⁵³ Just over a decade prior at the 1988 Biennale, women made up only one



Figure 7. Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (We have received orders not to move)*. 1982. (Archives of Women Artists Research & Exhibitions)

tenth of those exhibiting. Notable feminist exhibitions of the decade include a 1994 series of shows titled “Bad Girls,” held in the New Museum in New York City. Described by the curators as, “irreverent, personal, shocking, funny, and fey,” the show sought to give exposure to feminist experiences often left out of the popular feminist narratives of the time.⁵⁴

⁵² Slatkin, Wendy. *Women Artists in History: From Antiquity to the Present*. 3rd ed., Prentice Hall, 1985.

⁵³ Chadwick, Whitney. *Women, Art, and Society*. 5th ed., Thames & Hudson, 2012.

⁵⁴ Reilly, Maura. “‘Bad Girls’ to the Rescue: An Exhibition of Feminist Art from the 1990s Has Much to Teach Us Today.” *ARTnews*, 16 May 2018, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/bad-girls-rescue-exhibition-feminist-art-1990s-much-teach-us-today-10326/>.

Artists Working Today

Women creating art professionally in the 21st century do not do so without challenges but are certainly more privileged than their predecessors. Because of the countless women who came before them and forged their own space in the art world, they enjoy opportunities and esteem that most women artists have not in centuries past. Today, women are freer to pursue art as a career. Almost half of all visual artists in the United States today are women, and women make up the majority of students studying art at the university level. Despite this increased freedom, the issues of unequal representation and treatment persist.

One metric by which to measure the current standing of women artists in Western, particularly American, society is the acceptance and display of the work of both historical and working women artists into museums. Though nearly as many women as men are working artists in the US today, women are still underrepresented in museums. A 2019 review of artist diversity in 18 major U.S. museums revealed that only 13% of artists on display are women.⁵⁵ Only 11% of all acquisitions and 14% of exhibitions are by women.⁵⁶ One cause for this gender disparity is the fact that many art curators, collectors, and dealers consider work made by women more of a financial risk than that made by men. On average, it sells for just 47.6% of the price of men's work.⁵⁷ Those responsible for acquiring work for museums focus on an artist's name recognition and how well their work sells at auctions. Spending money on art made by a woman with

⁵⁵ Topaz CM, Klingenberg B, Turek D, Heggeseth B, Harris PE, Blackwood JC, et al. "Diversity of artists in major U.S. museums." *PLoS ONE*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2019, doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0212852.

⁵⁶ Halperin, Julia and Charlotte Burns. "Museums Claim They're Paying More Attention to Female Artists. That's an Illusion." *Artnet News*, 19 Sept. 2019, news.artnet.com/womens-place-in-the-art-world/womens-place-art-world-museums-1654714

⁵⁷ Adams, Renée B. and Kraeussl, Roman and Navone, Marco A. and Verwijmeren, Patrick. "Is Gender in the Eye of the Beholder? Identifying Cultural Attitudes with Art Auction Prices." SSRN. 6 Dec. 2017, dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3083500.



Figure 8. Hilma af Klint: *Paintings for the Future* exhibit (Guggenheim)

considerably less recognition is not seen as a decision that would be in the best economic interests of the museum. This further propagates the cycle of imbalance and keeps women in the shadow of their male counterparts.

Some in the art world have recognized this underrepresentation and are actively working to remedy it. Several museums are taking conscious measures to include more works made by women in their permanent collections and visiting exhibitions. The Baltimore Museum of Art, located in a city where only about 4% of artworks owned by four museums can be attributed to women⁵⁸, has pledged to only accept artwork made by women to its permanent collection in 2020. The BMA expects to spend up to \$2 million acquiring this work. In addition, all of the museum's 22 exhibits will be focused on women artists.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ McCauley, Mary C. "Artworks by Women are in Short Supply at Baltimore Museums. Here's Why." *TCA Regional News*, 10 Dec., 2019. *ProQuest*, ezproxy.obu.edu:2048/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/ezproxy.obu.edu:2443/docview/2323041344?accountid=28323.

⁵⁹ Elsesser, Kim. "Baltimore Museum of Art Will Only Acquire Works By Women." *Forbes*, 19 Nov. 2019, www.forbes.com/sites/kimelsesser/2019/11/19/baltimore-museum-of-art-will-only-acquire-works-by-women/.

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City took a risk in 2018 by exhibiting the work of a little-known Swedish painter, Hilma af Klint. The works, created between 1906 and 1915, are colorful and abstract, and they predate similar works by artists such as Kandinsky and Mondrian.⁶⁰ Richard Armstrong, the museum director, knew there was a chance people would not receive the show well and told the museum's board to be prepared for it to be unsuccessful. The exhibit, however, drew 600,000 viewers, becoming the museum's most attended show. The positive effects of the show were measurable. Museum membership increased by 34%, 40% of sales at the museum store were af Klint-themed items, and the exhibit drew in a younger crowd than any show since visitor demographics began being measured.⁶¹ As museums begin to foster gender equality in the works they acquire and exhibit, more museums can be expected to follow. Museums like the BMA and the Guggenheim are broadening the commercial market for work made by women artists of both the past and present.

Another, intrinsically linked, factor by which the commercial success of women artists can be evaluated is how well their work does at auctions. This can be measured by the frequency at which their work is bought at auction as well as how much it sells for. Presently, women still make disproportionately less than men at auctions. Women's work currently sells for around 40% less than that of their counterparts. Of the \$196.6 billion spent on art at auctions worldwide between 2008 and the first half of 2019, only \$4 billion, about 2% of the total, was spent on work made by women. The work by women that performs well at auctions is unevenly distributed

⁶⁰ Dover, Caitlin. "Who Was Hilma af Klint?: At the Guggenheim, Paintings by an Artist Ahead of Her Time." Guggenheim, 11 Oct. 2018, www.guggenheim.org/blogs/checklist/who-was-hilma-af-klint-at-the-guggenheim-paintings-by-an-artist-ahead-of-her-time

⁶¹ Halperin, Julia and Charlotte Burns. "Case Studies: How Four Museums Are Taking Dramatic Measures to Admit More Women Artists Into the Art Historical Canon." *Artnet News*, 19 Sept. 2019, news.artnet.com/womens-place-in-the-art-world/case-studies-how-four-museums-are-taking-radical-measures-to-admit-more-women-artists-into-the-art-historical-canon-1654717

among a relatively small group of artists. Just five women—Yayoi Kusama, Joan Mitchell, Louise Bourgeois, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Agnes Martin—account for 40.7% of auction sales by women from 2008 to 2019, while the remaining \$2.4 billion is divided among 1,663 other women artists.⁶²

Drawing Connections and Moving Forward

In order to truly understand the position of women in the art world today and effectively advocate for their advancement, we must have an understanding of the centuries of hardship that women faced and the myriad ways those struggles impact the present. The tendency of some to write off historical hardship as a problem of the past that has no bearing on people today serves to keep marginalized groups in a disadvantageous position. Centuries of repression of women artists, rooted in ideas about what was natural or appropriate for women to pursue, has led to women still not experiencing full equality as artists.

Perception plays an important part in improving the experience of women working as artists today. Conscious efforts to inform students about women who are often left out of the historical canon can shape upcoming generations’ perception of art history. Because women are disproportionately represented in much of art history literature, including textbooks used in higher education, a skewed view of art history continues to be perpetuated by many of those teaching it. As there were fewer women working professionally and even fewer who can be studied from certain periods in art history, it’s unlikely that women will receive the same amount

⁶² Halperin, Julia and Charlotte Burns. “Female Artists Represent Just 2 Percent of the Market. Here’s Why—and How That Can Change.” *Artnet News*, 19 Sept. 2019, news.artnet.com/womens-place-in-the-art-world/female-artists-represent-just-2-percent-market-heres-can-change-1654954.

of coverage in a general art history course as their male counterparts. Dedicating a portion of the course to discussing the role sexism played in shaping the art world during these times, however, can provide a more comprehensive view of the subject. Art education curriculum at universities should also be written to accurately reflect gender diversity. Educating people about the historical experience of women in the art world will allow them to recognize the long-term effects of discrimination against women that still exist today.

Many museums have improved their treatment of women artists in the past decades. Some museums have publicly acknowledged the gender disparity in their galleries and have increased their acquisitions of work made by women and inclusion of women artists in exhibitions. As both external pressures and internal developments continue, it's likely that more museums will adopt similar plans to move towards more total equality. One way to foster changes in policy is to decrease the gender gap in museum leadership. While there is not a dramatic difference in the total percentage of men and women in directorship positions, a 2014 study by The Association of Art Museum Directors found that the disparity depends on budget size; museums with budgets greater than fifteen million dollars are less likely to be run by women as budget size increases.⁶³ If larger, more affluent museums reflect on gender biases that may influence their hiring processes, they can work to reduce this disparity. While museums run by women directors do not inherently have greater gender diversity in their galleries, bringing more women into museum leadership will certainly shape museum policy as they bring unique experiences, and a personal understanding about how being a woman shapes one's position in the art world, to the table.

⁶³ "Gender Gap Report 2017." *Association of Art Museum Directors*, 22 Mar. 2017, www.aamd.org/ourmembers/from-the-field/gender-gap-report-2017.

The primary way to improve the experience of women artists at auctions is to prove to the art market that work made by women is a sound investment. A recent study of repeat sales by Sotheby's Auction House found that work by women increased in value from 2012 and 2018 more than that of men.⁶⁴ Works made by women included in this study were the best-selling works of a comparatively small sample size of women as fewer works by women make it to the secondary art market, so it is unrealistic to conclude that any work by a woman artist is a better investment than work made by a man. This data does show, however, that there is tremendous value in women's work. As more people are informed of this, it's likely that women's work will be viewed as less of a risk.

The most critical approach to improving the position of women artists is informing people about realities which they, often through no fault of their own, are unaware of. People who have never heard of more than a handful of women artists will undoubtedly view art history as predominately male and will form their own assumptions as to why it is that way. Likewise, museum directors and curators who know that few women artists have the name recognition as their male counterparts understandably shy away from acquiring women's work in the same quantities which they acquire men's work. To continue the great progress that has been made towards gender equality in the art world over the course of art history, knowledge must be passed on from those who have it to those whose potential to use it for good lays in wait.

⁶⁴ Dixon, Emily. "Invest in women artists for better returns, study shows." *CNN Style*, 2 Aug. 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/style/article/women-artists-auction-returns-scli-intl/index.html>

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