

Gender issues in art history and production



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Describe How Issues of Gender Are Important to the Production of Art and the Writing of Art History

Feminism has given new and important insights into the production of art and the study of art history. It has not only helped us to discover the work of neglected women artists but has also given us a new approach to the study of art as a whole. Feminists built upon the earlier insights of Marxism.

Traditional art history holds that works of art are the creations of individual genius – that they are forms of self-expression – but Marx argued that art is a product satisfying a demand, supporting the ideology of the ruling class.

Part of that ideology included the subjection of women, who tended to be depicted in a subordinate role. These are the kind of arguments that Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock put forward in their book *Old Mistresses*: “ Art is neither pure nor neutral. It is, as we have shown, an ideological practice, secured within power structures” (Parker 157). Power structures are not just those of sexism, they are also those of racism and class distinction; and thus feminism is closely bound up with the social history of art. With respect to gender distinctions, it seems clear that “ femininity” and “ masculinity” are to some extent social constructs. They are behaviour traits learned in childhood to satisfy the demands of society.

Feminists have shown that the individual artistic “ genius” is not a universal phenomenon but rather a feature of western art since the Renaissance. In other parts of the world, and in Medieval Europe, artists were often anonymous craftworkers. In the Middle Ages, both men and women worked at producing beautiful objects for the Church: illuminated manuscripts, carvings, embroideries. There was no distinction between “ art” and “ craft”,

which was a distinction that arose during the Renaissance. The twentieth-century saw a partial end to this rather artificial division between “art” and “craft”. We have not yet seen “the death of painting”, but it is now rivalled in importance by other media. This rise in the status of the crafts has tended to benefit women artists, since women have always been closely involved with craftwork. The development of abstract art in the twentieth-century owes something to women’s knowledge of the abstract patterns on textiles and embroidery. Sonia Delaunay and Sophie Taeuber-Arp, for example, were both fashion designers as well as painters (Chadwick 271).

The split between “art” and “craft” which arose during the Renaissance was furthered by the new interest in the biographies of individual artists, as distinct from anonymous craftworkers. Vasari wrote a series of Lives of the Artists. The artist, unlike the craftworker, was expected to know about the rules of perspective and about history and the classics, which provided subjects for paintings. This kind of knowledge was usually denied to women, who had a restricted access to education, and this helps to explain why there were few female artists in the Renaissance – although artists’ daughters sometimes learned to paint, and there are examples of aristocratic lady artists, such as the painter Sofonisba Anguissola and the sculptor Properzia de Rossi. A myth developed that the true artist must be a temperamental “genius”, a rebel, a bohemian – as exemplified in the career of a painter like Caravaggio – and this meant that women’s work was not taken seriously, because a bohemian lifestyle would have been deemed inappropriate for a woman (Parker 99). Thus, because of restricted opportunities and the prejudices of society, it came about that no women were deemed to belong

to the ranks of the “ great artists”. Not surprisingly, feminists debunk the myth of the “ great artist”, although it is also true that feminist art history itself still relies heavily on the biographies of individual women artists and seeks to demonstrate that their work has been undervalued. Germaine Greer makes the important point that overemphasis on “ great artists” detracts our attention from the myriad of so-called “ minor” talents: “ The seven wonders of the world are not the only things worth looking at” (Greer 150). Indeed, artistic taste is something very personal, and the gallery visitor may find that she or he prefers the work of a “ minor” painter to that of a far more famous name.

“ Great artists” are usually seen as innovators – Caravaggio’s use of dramatic light and shadow, for example – while “ minor” artists are thought of as their followers. There are many examples of women as innovators: Sofonisba Anguissola helped to develop the new form of the domestic “ conversation piece”; Rosalba Carriera popularised the new medium of pastel; Angelica Kauffman helped to introduce the Neo-Classical style to England; Helen Frankenthaler developed a new staining technique for producing abstract paintings. It may be true, however, that – until recently – women’s work has tended to be conservative rather than innovatory, and Germaine Greer provides a possible reason for this:

The fact that so many gifted women strangled themselves in archconservatism is not some sort of secondary sexual characteristic working its way out, as if women are with necessity born with corsets on the mind. It comes of the very insecurity that these women felt upon entering

into competition with men who seemed to have made all the running so far (Greer 131).

There were also barriers to prevent women from competing with men in the first place. For example, women were usually excluded from art academies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and denied the chance to copy the nude, which was the basis of the most prestigious art form, that of “history painting”. Women’s social lives were also restricted. Griselda Pollock points out that Baudelaire’s “flaneur” who wanders the streets of Paris is a male figure – a woman would not have been able to roam freely in this way (Pollock 70-72). This limited the subjects available for women to paint, and helps to explain why the Impressionist painter Berthe Morisot concentrated on domestic interiors. In order to visit the Paris horse market for her painting *The Horse Fair*, Rosa Bonheur had to disguise herself as a man (Parker 37).

Women’s restricted opportunities meant that they tended to concentrate on “lesser” genres like portraiture and still-life. But the idea that there is a hierarchy in painting is now completely discredited, because there is obviously no link between the subject of a picture and its aesthetic quality. The flower paintings of seventeenth century Holland – many of which are by women – include some of the most beautiful works of art ever made. The academic hierarchy of genres broke down in the later nineteenth century, as Parker and Pollock explain:

When avant-garde artists rejected academic theories and hierarchies, they took up the hitherto less prestigious fields of portraiture, landscape and still-

life. Women could and did take full part in avant-garde movements based in these, for them, familiar areas of art (Parker 35).

Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt, for example, were important in the new movement of Impressionism.

The subject of gender and the visual arts also includes the ways in which gender roles are depicted. Up until the end of the eighteenth century, the male nude was probably more important than the female nude as a subject for art. One only needs to think of Greek sculpture and Michelangelo. But the female nude was also important, and these female nudes tend to depict women in a humiliating way, as objects of male fantasy. Carol Duncan argues that even the distorted nudes of avant-garde Modernism – such as Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.J. version O) – continue this way of portraying women into the twentieth century (Duncan 47-52). She is certainly correct to point out that it is strange that modern art, which is often said to move away from representation, still contains a surprisingly large number of female nudes. John Berger has demonstrated that the nudes in “old master” paintings often bear a surprising resemblance to the nudes in modern advertising images and porn magazines (Berger 55). Berger points out that the nude is essentially dehumanising because “a naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude” (Berger 54). It seems that Kenneth Clark, a traditionalist of the old school, would agree with Berger to some extent, since Clark writes of Manet's *Olympia* that “to place on a naked body a head with so much individual character is to jeopardize the whole premise of the nude” (Clark 225). This rather dehumanising quality of the nude is, however, a quality that Clark admires, because he sees the nude as a vehicle

for expressing a sense of ideal form, divorced from life to some degree; whereas Berger and the feminists are interested in showing how art reflects and constructs the attitudes and injustices of society. Paula Modersohn-Becker's famous nude Self-Portrait of herself was an important and original contribution because of the individuality she gave to her features, subverting the whole tradition of the nude.

Feminist artists seek to actively change society, and one of their achievements has been to draw attention to the stereotyped gender roles which appear in art, advertising and the media. Barbara Kruger's famous print entitled *Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face* draws attention to the fact that the male gaze can be a means of expressing dominance or hostility, a form of harassment. Cindy Sherman photographed herself in poses derived from stereotypical advertising and media images of women. Sylvia Sleigh painted a series of pictures showing male nudes in the kind of poses usually given to women, to demonstrate their absurdity. (The above examples from Kruger, Sherman and Sleigh are taken from Chadwick, chapter 13).

Yet women's art is concerned with much more than issues of gender and sexism. It may, indeed, be a mistake to consider women's art as separate from men's because it risks placing women's art in a separate category, a kind of "ghetto" area. Works of art themselves have no gender. In this Postmodern era we should now do more to stress the individual contributions of individual women artists, who are much more than just representatives of their gender.

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