Special Feature

TEACHING ABOUT WOMEN AND THE VISUAL ARTS
EDITORIAL

Transformations

"Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" Virginia Woolf wrote in A Room of One's Own. Woolf was writing about women and fiction, but her statement has a special resonance for the visual arts. For, as Ernst Gombrich has observed, "works of art ... share with mirrors that elusive magic of transformation which is so hard to put into words." Though not a mirror, literally, the visual arts act as a looking-glass in which we look for and find transformed aspects of ourselves. Men have been in control of this transformation both in the history of art (that is, in art during the course of its creation) and in Art History, the twentieth-century discipline that has imposed its own interpretation on the art of the past.

Art History is one of the most tradition-bound and conservative disciplines because art, at least since ca. 3000 B.C., has been used to reinforce the beliefs, wishes, and intents of the dominant male culture. Furthermore, the history of art (prior to the nineteenth century) as commonly taught by art historians is a history of the major monuments, that is, the art created for and by those in power. More generally art, both public and private, has been created primarily by and for men and has reinforced the political and social ideologies current at the time of production. It has expressed the taste and beliefs of the political majority, the wealthy elite, or a powerful group of patrons. Therefore the discipline of Art History also has been elitist and hence very slow to respond to new critical perspectives.

The kingly, the heroic, the mythic, and the divine have been the most frequent subjects of official Western art from the pyramids, the Parthenon, the Hagia Sophia, and the Gothic cathedrals to Versailles, the Louvre, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Woman has been introduced into this pantheon in the guise of the virgin, allegory, mother, monster, mistress, wife, daughter, or temptress. Her otherness is dramatically expressed when she becomes the exotic and fierce Amazon, to be defeated by the male hero.

The heroic remains a male prerogative and woman, when in control of man's fate, becomes a monster—the Gorgon who turned men into stone and whom Perseus heroically decapitated (a favorite theme in art). Significantly, Perseus achieved this feat by looking into a mirror and not at the Gorgon herself. The monstrous woman can be defeated only through gazing at her reflected image. It is this image that we need to transform by putting it into the context of female experience and woman's view of herself.

The transformations presented in this issue range from theoretical approaches to more pragmatic ones. The former are based on a systematic reconsideration of gender as a factor in the production and interpretation of art; on the questioning of the objective voice of scholarship and one's own preconceptions; on the use of imagery to document historical attitudes toward women; and on eliminating the hierarchical stratification of the arts. The more pragmatic approaches incorporate active student

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The purpose of this article is to describe the achievements and concerns of feminist art history. It is meant to be an informal, personal, and somewhat discursive retrospective look at the development of feminist theory in our discipline, as expressed in some important writings of the past fifteen years, set next to major landmarks in other disciplines, especially literature and history. We conclude with a consideration of the special characteristics of art history that both complement and distinguish it from other disciplinary approaches, and with an assessment of where we are now and where, in our view, we ought to be going.

Because ours has been a conservative discipline, art historical feminist scholarship has yet to receive the kind of acceptance and recognition that feminist scholarship has been accorded in other fields. In contrast to both history and literature, for example, where lively dialogues between feminists and others in the field are commonplace, feminist work in art history is rarely reviewed, rebutted, or even acknowledged in print. The field of literature is additive, tolerant: The traditional literary canon may be hotly defended, but the MLA admits all comers to its plethora of disciplines, and methods, perhaps because it fears it can be transformed. Very few feminist art historians hold academic positions in the major Ph.D.-granting institutions, a situation that has effectively limited the capability of feminist scholarship in art history to grow and perpetuate itself in the normal academic manner. Things are changing in other fields: At Princeton, for example, recent appointments have included Elaine Showalter and Sandra Gilbert in English literature and Natalie Davis in history. But in the male-dominated art departments of Princeton, Harvard, and other Ivy League universities, the once reprehensible Marxists and the still controversial but currently voguish semioticians are now happily accommodated, and the feminist viewpoint is still not represented.

It is worth noting that the first shots of feminist revisionism were fired as early in art history as in any discipline. In 1971, nearly simultaneously with the publication of Kate Millett's earthshaking Sexual Politics, art historian Linda Nochlin published an article that was to become the cornerstone of feminist art history, entitled (with deceptive innocence), "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" Nochlin's question was not her question but their question, the one that had commonly been used by defenders of the patriarchal art world to fend off women's demands for equality within that world. While acknowledging that there were no female equivalents for Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Nochlin pointed out that women had lacked the educational experiences essential to the creation of art: early encouragement and apprenticeship, classical studies, and access to the nude model, which from the sixteenth through the early twentieth centuries was the foundation of the artist's development. Women's past exclusion from the hallowed circles of Great Art was thus a result of institutional bias, and not of gender deficiency.

Nochlin went on to challenge the myth of the Great Artist who is endowed with Genius, the golden nugget that, when found even in "Giotto, the obscure shepherd boy, and van Gogh with his fits," would invariably surface and drive its possessor to creative achievement and fame. The question of artistic genius has loomed somewhat larger as a sine qua non in art and music than in literature, and Genius has invariably gone hand in hand with Quality, as the twin bludges with which any artistic achievement may be elevated or dismissed. If the issue of quality, or value, has been more pressing in the visual arts than in literature or music, it is surely because the financial appraisal of the unique object, created for or sold to a single paying patron, is inextricably entwined with its "pure" assessment. In any event, one of the most significant ideas of feminist art history appeared in its Ur-text: the revelation that artistic geniuses were not born but made, and that their makers were men, the direct beneficiaries of this apparently "natural" order. The feminist reappraisal of the myth of artistic genius was extended by Carol Duncan (in a 1975 article called "When Greatness Is a Box of Wheaties"), who exposed acerbically the extent to which "greatness" has been a totally male-defined concept. In an essay of 1977, Alessandra Comini demonstrated the relativity of standards of artistic "universalit" in a witty juxtaposition of the careers of Edvard Munch and Käthe Kollwitz, showing that while Kollwitz, the supposedly minor artist, went in her Expressionist art for all humankind, Munch's expressive grief was no larger than mere self-pity.

The other revelation in Nochlin's 1971 article, less emphasized by the author but much more influential upon subsequent scholarship, was the suggestion that women might have been artists in greater numbers than previously supposed. She cited by name a handful of "the small band of heroic women, who, throughout the ages, despite obstacles, have achieved pre-eminence, if not the summits of grandeur": Lavinia Fontana, Artemisia Gentileschi, Angelica Kauffmann, Mary Cassatt, Käthe Kollwitz, and more, concluding her essay with a long look at Rosa Bonheur. With this stroke, Nochlin opened the way for the rediscovery and reinstatement of countless women artists, whose names were no longer familiar (thanks to beleaguered nineteenth-century male critics and scholars, who had systematically written women out of their art histories).
The virtually total exclusion of women artists from the ranks of "normal" artistic practice must be emphasized here, for it accounts for our discipline's disproportionate focus upon the amassing of women artists' names and biographies as evidence of women's equality in the arts. By contrast, George Eliot, Jane Austen, and Virginia Woolf were in the canon of literary greats, and were taught and studied along with male writers (if subtly unequally) long before 1970s feminism. Women's historically easier access to writing than to painting or sculpting produced a proportionately larger body of literature than other art and thus a greater probability of female literary than artistic "geniuses," however that term may be defined.

In 1977, a major historical exhibition of work by women artists was created by Nochlin, in collaboration with Ann Sutherland Harris, and shown in four U.S. cities. The principal effort of the show, Women Artists: 1550-1950, was to demonstrate to the scholarly world that there had been numerous women artists of quality. Harris and Nochlin presented impressive documentation of the careers of some eighty-three women artists, combined with rich historical essays on the changing social and cultural context for women artists in the four-century period. Yet they did not question prevailing concepts of quality, arguing (as period. Yet they did not question prevailing concepts of quality, arguing (as had Nochlin in 1971) that there were "no special visual characteristics" of works by women, no "mysterious essence of femininity." The same theoretical position—that many women artists had, despite disadvantages and biases, managed nevertheless to create the same kind of art as men, sometimes equally well (dangerously close to being a female version of the golden nugget myth)—implicitly informed the cluster of introductory books on women artists published in the mid-1970s, by Eleanor Tufts (1974), Karen Petersen and J. J. Wilson (1976), and Elsa Fine (1978), although Fine, writing later than the others, was able to reflect recent scholarship that presented new and more sophisticated social histories of women, as well as to discern an occasionally distinct female perspective.

In another bio-encyclopedic effort of 1979, Germaine Greer weighed in with the opposite, though equally conservative, view that women artists had simply not been as good as men, a fact that wishing would not change, because of those famous "obstacles" to equal training that Nochlin had pointed out (though Greer neglected to acknowledge her work). Greer, however, concealed the female disadvantage to be psychological as well as social: "You cannot make great artists out of egos that have been damaged . . ." Her position is analogous to a major work of literary scholarship that appeared in the same year, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's Madwoman in the Attic, in that both acknowledged the debilitating psychological anxieties experienced by women artists alienated from patriarchal tradition. Yet while that recognition served for Greer to justify women's lack of achievement, for Gilbert and Gubar it was the point of departure for the discovery of an alternative female expressive tradition, which might play off the "phenomena of 'infection,'" yet still have an aesthetic vitality of its own. Greer's book was the last to take on the entire post-Renaissance tradition of women artists. More recent studies have had narrower scope. Eleanor Munro's Originals (1979) focused on major American women artists since Cassatt (a book which, like Fine's, reflects a consciousness of female imagery); and Charlotte Rubenstein's encyclopedia-style American Women Artists (1982). The most recent addition to the women artists category is the monumental Dictionary of Women Artists, edited by Chris Petteys, which further exemplifies the ongoing reaction to the charge that there have been no important women artists, as well as the immense scholarly effort that has been devoted to rediscovering and cataloguing women artists of the past. Despite this focus, however, very few modern monographs on women artists have been written, and not all of these have taken a feminist perspective. Only recently have we begun to see a new scholarship on women artists that is culturally integrative; exemplary is Whitney Chadwick's Women Artists of the Surrealist Movement (1985), which takes a group of women artists as the starting point for an exploration of their lives and artistic imagery in relation to male Surrealists and to archetypal ideas.

So large has the basic issue of the neglect of women artists loomed, both in the public and scholarly consciousness, that far less attention has been paid to the equally vigorous and parallel development of feminist theory in art history and to the feminist critique of male art history. It was in the journals—especially the Feminist Art Journal, published by Cindy Nemser and Chuck Nemser from 1972 to 1977—that an intense concern for the broader theoretical aspects of the field was first seen. Nemser herself (FAJ, 1972) addressed the sexism inherent in art's critical vocabulary; her indictment of "phallic criticism" in art paralleled the broader analysis of Mary Ellmann (Thinking about Women, 1968). The turbulence and ebullience of the heady early years of the feminist movement is mirrored in the short but impassioned articles in FAJ (especially while it was in newspaper format), which dealt with such diverse topics as whether there was a specifically female imagery (an issue for artists at least as early as 1972), women in photography and film, black women artists, sex discrimination, and affirmative action, by writers who were more often artists than art historians—Ann Sutherland Harris, Pat Mainardi, but also Joyce Kozloff, Faith Ringgold, and Therese Schwartz. Much early feminist critical writing on art—particularly in FAJ, Art Workers' News, and Women Artists' News—was political and activist, reporting and supporting the artists' public demands for equitable museum and gallery representation for women. The activist concerns of the early 1970s were later sustained in a variety of ways, by such writers as Lawrence Alloway, Lucy Lippard, and Thalia Gouma-Peterson, who have championed and examined the work of contemporary women artists, and by the editors of anthologies (Judy Loeb, Georgia Collins, and Renee Sandell) that present a wealth of essays and articles under the general rubric of feminist art education. Meanwhile, feminist art historians took up the analysis of misogynous stereotypes and distortions found both in male art and in art history itself. Nochlin, again, had provided the keynote, in a memorable College Art Association (CAA) paper of 1972 (published in 1973), a hilariously incisive exploration of erotic imagery in art as exclusively focused on the female body to satisfy exclusively male needs, and of the crude reflection in such art of the power relationship between the sexes. This piece was closely followed, in 1973, by Carol Duncan's fuller examination of the female
formal tendencies, feminist artists and scholars alike have written no less than their own artistic projects, beginning women in the creation and definition of feminist art have with their joint creation, the expression of female values. The leading spokespeople agreed that women’s art has betrayed, or must betray, gender-distinguished art—a suggestion well worth further investigation.20

A different line of exploration was taken up by those who raised the question of whether there might be a separate female aesthetic. (Elaine Showalter has characterized this line as “gynocritics,” the study of female creativity, contrasting it with the “feminist critique” of men’s writing.18) Among the first writers to look at art from this viewpoint were art historian-critic Lucy Lippard and artist Judy Chicago (1973), who focused upon contemporary, largely abstract art to express the view that “there is a definite and pervasive women’s imagery based on women’s biological and social experience” whose prevalent images are a central focus, ovoid and circular forms, boxes, overlapping flowers, webs (Chicago), and a preference for a uniform density or overall texture, repetition, layers, sensuous tactility, and looseness of handling (Lippard).19 This bold embracing of a correlation between the female body and women’s imagery in art struck many as excessively reductionist and limiting, a form of biological determinism that women were trying to escape. Yet the proposal that women might at least tend toward a different formal language from men has been given some reinforcement by psychological studies of gender differences, as Selma Kraft later observed (1983), which demonstrate that females respond to multiple visual stimuli simultaneously and contextually, scanning for order, while males respond to one stimulus at a time, attending to objects separated from their fields. Kraft thought that these different perceptual tendencies might partly account for the prevalence of pattern art created by women, and for a greater object-focus and three-dimensional depth in men’s art—a suggestion well worth further investigation.20

If there has developed no consensus on whether women’s art has betrayed, or must betray, gender-distinguished formal tendencies, feminist artists and scholars alike have agreed that women’s art can be productively directed toward the expression of female values. The leading spokeswomen in the creation and definition of feminist art have been artists Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago, whose writings no less than their own artistic projects, beginning with their joint creation, Womanhouse (1972), and continuing in such independent ventures as Chicago’s Dinner Party (1979) and Schapiro’s “collaborations” with women’s traditional art and her “femmages,” have served to educate all women in the arts in their rich female artistic heritage.21 While Chicago has celebrated the great women of history—Elizabeth I, Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf—(The Dinner Party) or archetypal female experience (The Birth Project), Schapiro has championed and embraced in her own art the anonymous women, particularly of nineteenth-century America, who produced the quilts and other needlework of domestic use and private exchange, objects whose style and values gave art another level of meaning.

Art historical reevaluation of the female craft traditions accompanied the artistic reorientation of taste. In an important FAJ article of 1973 (“Quilts, the Great American Art”), Patricia Mainardi defended quilting and other needle arts as universal female genres, which offered qualities equivalent to those of the “fine” arts—formal complexity and beauty, personal expression, social and communal meaning—and she questioned the devaluation of textile arts, their subordination to the fine arts and their exclusion from art history.22 The relation between the “high” and “low” arts was explored in the context of modern painting by Broude, who in an article of 1980 reexamined the modernist theoretical tenet that abstract art, because of its significant content, was superior to the decorative craft traditions by which it was sometimes inspired.23 Contrasting the efforts of Matisse and Kandinsky to discredit (even as they exploited) folk art and craft with Miriam Schapiro’s deliberately created dialogue with women’s folk and craft traditions, Broude pointed out that feminist art, by virtue of its political and social content, could never be “merely decorative.” Concern about the artificiality and bias of the “fine arts vs. crafts” hierarchy has continued among feminists in the arts, as is exemplified by a recent project created by artist Charlotte Robinson, The Artist and the Quilt, which sought to unify contemporary women’s art with the older folk tradition, through the creation and museum display of modern quilts designed by painters and executed by contemporary quilters.24

By the mid-1970s, some art historians began to discover a female expressive sensibility in representational art of the past. Frima Fox Hofrichter, in 1975, showed that seventeenth-century Dutch painter Judith Leyster had, in a painting called The Proposition, countered and critiqued the traditional pictorial theme of the female procurer by presenting a woman unreceptive to her masculine proposer.25 Around the same time, Ruth Iskin and Susan Yeh, working independently, initiated a feminist reexamination of Cassatt’s female images.26 In a review of the 1976 Women Artists exhibition (1977), Mary Garrard challenged the Harris-Nochlin position that women artists had more in common with male contemporaries than with other women, observing that while this might be true in the realm of style, the disparity of social experience between the sexes suggested that women’s different vision of the world might be discerned if their art were examined iconographically.27 In two studies of themes treated by seventeenth-century painter Artemisia Gentileschi (1980 and 1982), Garrard presented evidence of a major female artist’s replacement of female stereotypes with credible, assertive, and even heroic images of women.28 These iconographic, or (in Showalter’s term) gynocritical approaches to women’s art paralleled in
theory the first feminist studies of women writers, namely, Patricia Meyer Spacks's *The Female Imagination* (1975) and Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* (1976), and they parallel in date the ongoing gynocritical analyses of Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Annette Kolodny, and others.

Other feminist art historians have explored the social circumstances that shaped the work of women artists, and the cultural roles played by women. For example, Josephine Withers (1976) studied the nineteenth-century association of women with peripheral artistic accomplishment and men with serious achievement in the context of art training, while Christine Havice, among others, has looked at the exceptional nature of women's education in art schools. Women have been examined as patrons of art; an exemplary study is that by Deborah Marrow of Marie de' Medici (though a modern feminist analysis of Isabella d’Este remains to be written.) An important study of cultural roles played by modern women is *Women as Interpreters of the Visual Arts, 1820-1979*, by Claire R. Sherman with Adele H. Holcomb (1981), a book that makes a richly informative contribution to the history of art history as well as to that of female culture. To date, however, few feminist art historians have produced ground-breaking social reconceptualizations comparable to work by such historians as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Joan Kelly, or Natalie Davis. *Old Mistresses*, a useful recent book by British feminists Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, Marxist-socialist in approach, is concerned principally with the exposure of broad cultural ideologies. It is in articles by Carol Duncan that one finds the kind of probing analysis of the interaction of art and culture in a given period that leads to a radically altered historical understanding of that age.

The belief that a feminist perspective can lead to the reformation of the entire history of art has by now permeated our field, and we ourselves, along with Eleanor Tufts and Alessandra Comini, have been perhaps the most vocal proponents of this position. The call for reconceptualization of the discipline was heralded in an article by Garrard (“Feminism: Has It Changed Art History?” *Heresies*, Winter 1977-78). Comini, in a CAA convocation address that was subsequently published (1980), and Tufts, both in lectures and in writing (1981), have each advocated the reinvigoration of traditional art history through the inclusion of women. In an anthology published in 1982 (Broude and Garrard, *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*), we gathered what seemed to us the most significant art historical essays and articles that had been written—studies that, taken collectively, sketch the new form that an art history shaped by feminist insight might have. (For obvious reasons, many of those articles are mentioned in this essay.) In the early 1980s, the feminist call grew louder for the inclusion of women artists in the art history textbooks—Janson, Gardner, Harrr—a demand that several publishers have now begun to heed. In our own view, however, the addition of women artists to a history that remains in every other respect the same history is cosmetic and insufficient. Since the early 1980s, we have projected the writing of a new, thoroughly revisionist art history textbook, inclusive of the achievements but also the values of women, that reconsiders the narrow hierarchies of art history and places the attainments of men in a broader perspective. The integrationist impulse to include women artists as part of the general art history of a period, especially the modern period, has begun to be modestly reflected in certain texts such as Robert Rosenblum's *Nineteenth-Century Art* (1984). Nevertheless, more far-reaching analyses of the roles played by women, female values, and gender relationships, myths, and stereotypes in forming modern art history have not yet found their way into the canonical publications.

In many of these new directions, as we have seen, art historians have paralleled investigation carried on in other fields, particularly in literature and history, but with major differences that should be pointed out. As a discipline, art history is more aesthetically oriented than history and more historically oriented than literary criticism. Art history is further distinguished from literary scholarship in the sense that it takes far less time to see, even to absorb, an image, than it does to read a poem, a short story, or a book. This relative swiftness of perception permits art historians to deal with a wider variety of images and has directed the natural course of an art historical investigation toward breadth of scope and toward the analysis of the relationships between works of art rather than to the analysis of a single text. In this, art history is closer to history, which is also more concerned with the interaction between forces and events than solely with the events themselves. From this broader perspective ensues the desire to discover pattern, sequence, and development within a series of images, a concern that distinguished in particular the earlier stages of our discipline.

Structural analysis of this kind, in fact, has always been the basis of art history, if by it we mean analyzing to discover invisible relationships that underlie surface phenomena (i.e., the disparate works of art of a period). It is perhaps for this reason that many art historians have for decades been confused by Structuralism as a "new" methodology, because, like Molière's gentleman who did not know that he was speaking prose, we have been doing structuralist analysis all along. Our concern with patterns of style development, for example, goes back to Wolfflin in the nineteenth century. The earliest art historical studies of the medieval cathedral were efforts to sort out stylistic differences among the Romanesque regional schools (Arthur Kingsley Porter) or to analyze changes in style and structure from Romanesque to Gothic (Henry Focillon, Erwin Panofský). What historians might have expected to see done first—e.g., the social and economic analyses of Gothic architecture by writers like Henry Kraus and Georges Duby—has come late in art history. Structuralism was the hallmark of our discipline in its infancy, and recent efforts to "modernize" art history by exploring the special relevance of semiotics, structuralism's visual stepchild, appear to many, by contrast, to be narrow and simplistic.

As in other disciplines, today's semioticians in art history are often more concerned with developing theories than with understanding works of art. Elaine Showalter has pointed to the proliferation of new methodologies in literature and has suggested some possible reasons for this phenomenon which are equally applicable, in our view, to art history. She writes:

The new sciences of text based on linguistics, computers, genetic structuralism, deconstructionism, neoformalism and
deformalism, affective stylistics and psychoaesthetics, have offered literary critics the opportunity to demonstrate that the work they do is as manly and aggressive as nuclear physics—not intuitive, expressive, and feminine, but strenuous, rigorous, impersonal, and virile.37

The elevation of this new “literary science,” she further observes, is leading to the establishment of a two-tiered system of “higher” and “lower” criticism, the “higher” concerned with the “scientific” problems of form and structure, the “lower” concerned with the “humanistic” problems of content and interpretation. And these levels, it seems to me, are now taking on subtle gender identities and assuming a sexual polarity. . . .38

We can only agree with this assessment, and can point in our field to a similar tendency, fostered by the newer, more “advanced” methodologies, for terminology to drown out content. Take, for example, a paper delivered recently at a symposium held in conjunction with the exhibition, L’Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism. This exhibition, one must recall, dealt with a body of imagery in which implied violence, eroticism, and female victimization are the frequent products of the male Surrealist’s efforts to relieve himself of subconscious fears and visions. One paper, presumably generated by just such material, was described synoptically as follows in the symposium agenda:

Surrealist activity worked to ironicize functionalism and the transparency of the modernist signifier, and took the very apparatus and mechanisms of signification as its principal subject matter. It was an example, par excellence, of a deconstructive practice carried forward in diverse media, styles, contexts, and modes of signifying practice. It also, was a critique of, and represented the impossibility of, the genealogical mythologies of “art history” and the tautologies of “art criticism.” This paper will discuss these issues in the light of contemporary critical discourse on postmodernism.39

We can also help to support Showalter's connection between current intellectual fashion and sexual politics, for our period is not the first in the twentieth century to see this phenomenon: a formalist disregard for content emerging just when feminists are becoming sensitized to the sexist meanings, both covert and overt, of “universal” icons of “great art.” The suffragette who, early in our century, slashed the Rokeby Venus in the National Gallery in London because, to her newly raised feminist consciousness, Velázquez's sensuous but impersonal nude was an image that now could be seen as insulting to women, was responding no differently to the content of patriarchal art than her sisters were to do nearly three-quarters of a century later. Is there a connection, we might then ask, between the contemporaneous emergence of the formalist dialectic in the writings of such art critics as Roger Fry and Clive Bell and the suffragist movement in the years just before the first World War, and the present-day emergence, promotion, and survival of structuralism and semiotics in the academy—both functioning as an unconscious means of combating a feminist scholarship and sensibility that stress content and interpretation?

While the evasive and self-referential methodology of the semioticians may not be congenial to many feminist art historians, the attitudes and methods of the Marxist art historians, on the other hand, would seem to offer important clues to feminists who pay increasing attention to the social function of art—i.e., the ways in which art is not personal but ideological, functioning in every historical period as a powerful social force. In many respects, we agree with the Marxists’ concerns. But unlike the Marxists, who all too often seem to use works of art as illustrations of a narrow social theory, feminist art historians have retained a traditional focus upon art itself. The goal of feminist art historians—revolutionary in different terms—has been a renewed and expanded understanding of what art is and how it can function, for both genders, as a truly universal form of human expression.40

In the early 1970s, the burning issue that faced feminist art historians was whether or not there had been women artists of merit (there have); in the mid-1970s, the question was whether there was a unique female expressive sensibility (there is); in the late 1970s, the issue was how much a feminist perspective might alter the shape of history itself (quite a lot). In the early 1980s, an old question has surfaced to become the center of feminist debate: whether feminist scholars should remain separate from or try to alter the mainstream.

We take exception to the direction of thinking among feminist literary critics who see a growing separatism as the wave of the future. This position is supported by Showalter, who succinctly defines its premise:

I do not think that feminist criticism can find a usable past in the androcentric critical tradition. It has more to learn from women’s studies than from English studies, more to learn from international feminist theory than from another seminar on the masters. It must find its own subject, its own system, its own theory, and its own voice.41

There is much sense and promise for feminist scholars in this point of view. Yet is feminist scholarship our only goal? In the spirit of interdisciplinary dialogue, we dissent from this view, for we feel that women now have a larger responsibility and opportunity. Let us employ an optical metaphor. In the past, the world was viewed through a single lens, a lens that was male. Now, we humans have begun to take into account that we have two eyes—one male, the other female. But these two eyes continue to see separately, because the collective brain has not yet begun to integrate their individual perspectives. In the future, it is to be hoped, humans may be able to apply our integrating faculty, and to have a new, whole, three-dimensional vision of history and culture.

For if as feminists we dismiss the entire legacy of the patriarchy as tainted, we dismiss a significant portion of our own history as well, because we ignore not only the contributions women have made to culture, but also the reflection of those specifically female elements within male culture. A case in point is ancient Greece, whose art and myth reveal the survival of matrifocal values, and in their juxtaposition with the ascendant patriarchal ideals, reflect a cultural balance between masculine and feminine that the Greeks themselves respected and preserved—though traditional historians have more frequently seen fit to emphasize only Greece’s masculinist traditions. It is a mistake, in our view, for feminists to equate all of received culture with
patriarchy. For even though the political and social institutions of Western civilization since ca. 3000 B.C. have indeed been patriarchal, our literary and artistic traditions have reflected a more equitable balance between masculine and feminine elements.

Given the purposes of art and humanistic studies, it is not surprising that this should be so. A distinction made long ago by art historian Erwin Panofsky is still relevant: “The ideal aim of science,” he wrote, “would seem to be something like mastery, that of the humanities something like wisdom.”42 Within cultural history, it has been the arts and humanities that have sustained our species’ memory, affirming its association with the earth and with nature, and celebrating its rituals, traditions, contradictions, and beliefs. By contrast, the more masculinist disciplines of the applied sciences have had as their purpose not only the understanding of man’s relation to the earth, but also the controlling, and, perhaps ultimately and inadvertently, the destruction of it. We feminist women must not relinquish our share of that larger whole, the central humanist tradition of Western culture. Born into one sex, socialized and educated in the ways of the other, and armed for the first time with an educated consciousness of culture’s acute need for its female component, women can ill afford to retreat into special one-sex concerns at a time in history when females may be uniquely equipped to assist our transition to genuine human universality.

Retrospective judgment suggests that at each of the theoretical crossroads feminists have faced, their bolder instincts have turned out to be the right ones. And the bolder outlook, and between contemporary Neo-Expressionism, who have once more suppressed the work of Expressionist women:  

NOTES


12. ART Documentation 1, no. 5 (October 1982): A: 9-14, provides useful historical information on exhibitions of women’s art: There were three in the entire nineteenth century, six between 1900 and 1970, and between 1970 and 1982, sixty-seven major international exhibitions. Despite this recent explosion, women artists continue to be underrepresented in commercial galleries and in exhibition reviews (ART Documentation, p. A: 19). See also Carrie Rickey, “Why Women Don’t Express Themselves,” Village Voice, 2 November 1982 (reprinted in Huespooints [Spring/Summer 1983]: 5-6), a scathing and penetrating indictment of the “post-feminists” (male and female) of contemporary Neo-Expressionism, who have once more suppressed the work of Expressionist women:  


34. The 1980 edition of Helen Gardner's Art through the Ages includes the work of seven women artists; the 1985 edition of Frederick Hartt's Art: A History of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture includes some twenty-three, with several others mentioned, in the phenomenon of women artists directly addressed.


37. Showalter, Feminist Criticism, p. 140.

38. Ibid.


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