

BARING THEMSELVES: REPRESENTATIONS OF  
THE FEMALE NUDE BY AMERICAN  
WOMEN ARTISTS, 1880-1930

By

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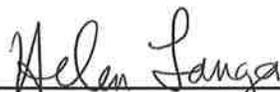
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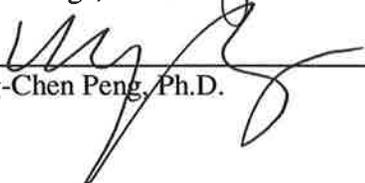
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WOMEN ARTISTS, 1880-1930

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ABSTRACT

In the late nineteenth century, increasing numbers of women artists began pursuing careers in the fine arts in the United States. However, restricted access to institutions and existing tracks of professional development often left them unable to acquire the skills and experience necessary to be fully competitive in the art world. Gendered expectations of social behavior further restricted the subjects they could portray. Existing scholarship has not adequately addressed how women artists navigated the growing importance of the female nude as subject matter throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I will show how some women artists, working before 1900, used traditional representations of the figure to demonstrate their skill and assert their professional statuses. I will then highlight how artists Anne Brigman's and Marguerite Zorach's used modernist portrayals the female nude in nature to affirm their professional identities and express their individual conceptions of the modern woman.

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## INTRODUCTION

Images of the female nude occupy a prominent position within the canon of fine art. From idealized representations in ancient Greek sculpture dealing with allegorical and mythological subjects to late nineteenth and early twentieth century depictions of modern women in the private spaces of daily contemporary life, the nude female figure's role in art has been both multifaceted and, at times, contested. In addition to stylistic art trends, the ways that artists have used the figure throughout history have also been shaped by the varying social and cultural climates in which they worked.

Given the complex significations associated with images of the female nude in art, a surprisingly moderate amount of scholarship on the subject exists. In the preface to his 1956 book, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, Sir Kenneth Clark acknowledged the scarcity of scholarly attention that had been paid to the subject leading up to his survey, citing the immense scope of the topic and unclear way as to best approach it as the likely culprits for such neglect.<sup>1</sup> Since then, few scholars have matched the depth of investigation or breadth of Clark's study. William Gerds narrowed the focus of his examination of representations of the nude to works from one country in his 1973 book *The Great American Nude: A History in Art*.<sup>2</sup> More recently, other scholars have opted to examine the subject in connection to specific time periods, regions, stylistic art trends or treatments by certain artists.

Despite the various angles that scholars have approached this subject, few have made it their focus to understand specifically how women artists dealt with representations of the female

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953), vii.

<sup>2</sup> William H. Gerds, *The Great American Nude: A History in Art* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), 153.

nude. It is my goal to bring to light how a new assertion of professionalism and desire for self-definition among a growing number of women artists working between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries embolden some to challenge the seemingly exclusive right of male artists to represent the figure. In my examination, I will show that while some artists adopted the approaches of their male peers in portraying the female nude as a symbol of ideal beauty and source of sexual appeal, several others adapted conventional motifs to develop different narratives for the figure, introducing new, and sometimes personal, perspectives. Moreover, by illustrating the ways that the female nude had come to signify artistic mastery and tradition, I reveal how in taking up iconic imagery of the figure in their art women artists were reclaiming the right for representations of their own sex to serve their professional interests. The overlap in changing attitudes toward images of the female nude in American art at a moment when many women artists were entering the professional art world has led me to focus my examination on artists from the United States. However, the rich experiences that many American women artists had across the Atlantic while pursuing educational training and professional opportunities will often bring me to consider European-based sources of influence in my analysis.

In Chapter One I will reflect on the conditions under which a burgeoning group of American women tried to establish careers in the fine arts from the mid-nineteenth into the twentieth century. My study builds on the research of numerous feminist art historians who have revealed the achievements and hardships experienced by women artists during this period. I am particularly indebted to the scholarship of Kirsten Swinth, whose significant text *Painting Professionals: Women Artists and the Development of Modern American Art, 1870-1930* has

been instrumental in characterizing these artists' diverse experiences.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I will pay attention to American women artists' pursuit of formal training and education, both at home and abroad, which, as Swinth highlights, dramatically expanded in the 1890s and reveals a new emphasis on professionalization. Inequality in the opportunities for art education available to male and female students, however, prevented women from attaining important skills that were needed to be competitive in the art market. Particularly detrimental was their restricted access to working from the nude model in life classes, which hindered their ability to accurately represent the human figure in their art. I will reveal how many women artists tried to further their careers and overcome some of the numerous obstacles their sex faced by joining women-only as well as mixed-sex professional artist groups. In addition, I will show that as more women artists became interested in modernist art, like their male peers, they often challenged the authority of institutions and traditional notions about artistic skill and subject matter. These developments presented new opportunities for women artists, but also new problems.

Despite the various issues related to depictions of the female nude, numerous American women artists chose to take up that subject matter during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Gerdts and other scholars have noted the different reception that nudity in art received in Europe versus in the United States because of the more conservative climate that existed here.<sup>4</sup> However, by the late nineteenth century, influenced by more frequent exchanges with the

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<sup>3</sup> Kirsten Swinth, *Painting Professionals: Women Artists & the Development of Modern American Art, 1870-1930* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Gerdts, *The Great American Nude*, 153. Gerdts pinpoints "first real flowering" of female nude in America in late nineteenth century and explains that it remained popular into the twentieth century. He identifies a second golden age for the female nude in America art in the 1920s and 1930s. E. McSherry Fowble, "Without a Blush: The Movement toward Acceptance of the Female Nude as an Art Form in America, 1900-1925," *Winterthur Portfolio* 9, (1974): 103-121. In her article, Fowble describes the conservative climate that existed for the female nude in American art in the early nineteenth century.

European art world, American audiences warmed to representations of female nude in art as reflecting conceptions of ideal beauty and allegory. Over the next several decades, more artists began to experiment with imaging the female body in varied contexts: within the academic classroom or studio, outdoors in pastoral or exotic natural settings and even engaged in private moments in the domestic sphere. Existing scholarship has been insufficient in considering the ways in which women artists navigated the growing importance of the female nude as subject matter in American art and as a signifier of artistic professionalism. In Chapter Two I will reveal how female painters, sculptors, printmakers, and those working in other mediums largely drew on established motifs and themes for portraying the figure. However, I will show how by using visual devices to adapt traditional conventions for representing the female nude, some artists attempted to represent new conceptions of the figure that resisted the usual tendencies to objectify it. While emboldened to break away from past art traditions, modernist artists continued to draw on existing motifs but also recognized new ways that images of the female nude could function as a form of self-expression.

In Chapter Three I will focus on two seemingly different artists, but whose similar modes of representing the female nude in nature, and making such images a pervasive aspect of their early oeuvres, warrants comparison. A side by side analysis of images by photographer Anne Brigman and modernist artist Marguerite Zorach reveals the similarities and differences in the ways that both artists drew on the personal symbolisms they identified in nature in order to pose the figures in their images as variations of the modern woman. In considering the professional significances that imagery of the female nude held in their respective avant-garde circles, I will highlight how the central position given to the female nude by Brigman and Zorach in their iconographies shaped their public personas as modernist artists. I will also show how the distinct

qualities that characterize the female nudes in each artists' work are tied to their personal definitions of what it meant to be a modern woman. In doing so, Brigman and Zorach are among the earliest women artists to use the figure as a modernist form of self-expression. However, I will reveal how gendered social expectations that continued to be projected onto women artists during this period resulted in these artists' overt references to their femininity in their art impacting their professional lives in unexpected ways.

I hope this investigation adds to a more nuanced view of the issues that women artists working across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries faced as they tried to establish their careers. I intend to show that as women artists asserted new narratives for themselves in society through the pursuit of professional careers, several were motivated to develop new narratives for representations of their sex in American art as well.

CHAPTER ONE  
BECOMING PROFESSIONALS: EDUCATIONAL  
TRAINING AND GROUP AFFILIATIONS

In 1971, Linda Nochlin asked, “Why have there been no great women artists?”<sup>5</sup> Since the 1960s, feminist scholars have searched for answers to both counter and provide context as to why so few women artists are mentioned in survey art history courses. While a long legacy of women artists working as professionals in the United States exists, they are still minorities in most major art museums and continue to be studied as part of a niche feminist art history field.

For nearly one hundred and fifty years, women in the United States have engaged in the arts on a professional level. The period directly after the Civil War marks the first time that American women began to seek careers as artists on a large scale. However, their involvement was mainly confined to lower and middle class women, who, out of financial necessity, pursued occupations in commercial art and craft production. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, this expanded to also include the fine arts as increasing numbers of women enrolled in the nation’s premier art academies and travelled abroad for training. Upon completion of their educations, some joined formal artist groups and associations, further delineating their career intentions.

Why then, are so few women artists from this period recognized in art historical studies? One problem was that women often lacked the more refined skills necessary to be fully competitive in the art market. While access to formal education and training for female art students broadened in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, it remained segregated and

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<sup>5</sup> Nochlin, Linda, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” in *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, ed. by Vivian Gornick and Barbara Moran (New York: Basic, 1971).

inferior in quality to that received by male students. Most detrimental were the limitations placed on women's access to studying the nude model in life drawing classes. Grasping the important role that this restriction played in terms of women artists' ability to achieve professionalism in their careers helps to us to understand their individual and varied approaches to representing the nude body in their art. Moreover, despite changing social attitudes toward their participation in life outside the domestic sphere, women continued to be subjugated to prevailing notions of femininity and gender-based discrimination in the art world, which complicated how they conducted their careers. This chapter examines these issues and identifies some of the solutions that were devised to combat them.

### Working Artists in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

In her book *Art Work*, April Matsen characterizes the middle of the nineteenth century as a period of surprisingly prolific activity for women artists.<sup>6</sup> During these years, many women, predominately from the lower and middle classes, managed to establish careers in craft production and the art industry. While it remained rare for women to achieve professional status as painters and sculptors, broadened access to basic art education, as well as the acceptance gained for women to work outside the home in certain arts-related jobs, laid an important foundation upon which later generations of women artists could build their careers in the fine art world.

The economic condition of the United States around the middle of the nineteenth century made it more acceptable for middle class women to work for a living as artists. For example,

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<sup>6</sup> April F. Matsen, *Art Work: Women Artists and Democracy in Mid-Nineteenth-Century New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

Matsen draws attention to the financial instability in the years leading up to the Civil War, particularly the widespread detriment caused by the Panic of 1857, which affected women of all classes.<sup>7</sup> Subsequent waves of inflation during the wartime years and Reconstruction further amplified the economic crisis. On top of the financial strain caused by these events, the diminished presence of the opposite sex increased the need for women to become financially independent. After the war, the male workforce was heavily depleted by those killed or left handicapped from battle. The promise of gold and westward expansion in the years thereafter also added to lower numbers of men among populations in the East.<sup>8</sup> In turn, a generation of women found themselves needing to work to offset diminished house-hold incomes, or in some cases, become entirely self-reliant.

Matsen further explains that a “democratization” of American art between the 1820s and 1860s also contributed to a greater social acceptance and ease by which some women could engage in art in a professional capacity. For example, Matsen points to the flood of artist manuals published during these years that gave women easy access to learn basic drawing skills.<sup>9</sup> She highlights how these manuals were intended by their authors to be much more than a means of feminine artistic refinement, noting how they emphasized the practicality of art skills like drawing, painting and engraving for both male and female students.<sup>10</sup> Further, in major northeastern cities like Boston free public art programs that were held at night, and were well

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<sup>7</sup> Matsen, *Art Work*, 68.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Gordon, “Early American Women Artists and the Social Context in which they Worked,” *American Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (Spring 1978): 56.

<sup>9</sup> Matsen, *Art Work*, 17.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

attended by both men and women, framed artistic skill as something that could be attained by anyone, regardless of class or gender.<sup>11</sup>

These changing democratic perspectives concerning the propriety of artistic skill led to a restructuring in art education in the United States that increased the training opportunities available for women. In the 1820s and 1830s artists were in large part conditioned through an apprentice system that relied on fathers passing down their craft to their descendants, which speaks to the ubiquity of artist fathers among early women artists.<sup>12</sup> After the Civil War, art education became more accessible to a larger portion of the population with the Morrill Act of 1862, which set up technical institutes across the country to equip people with applied skills in art, science and agriculture.<sup>13</sup> Using the Massachusetts Normal Art School as an example, Diana Korzenik demonstrates how these technically-oriented art schools equipped women with employable art skills, noting how many of MNAS female graduates went on to be art teachers in various parts of the country. Another important source for gaining practical art skills were the recently established design schools that were specifically geared toward women such as the Philadelphia School of Design for Women and the Women's Art School of the Cooper Union. Sarah Worthington King Peter, a member of Philadelphia high society and the wife of a British diplomat, founded PSAD in 1844 with the intent giving middle class women who needed to earn a living a respectable means of doing so through art.<sup>14</sup> However, often many who attended these

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<sup>11</sup> Diana Korzenik, "Art Education of Working Women," In *Pilgrims & Pioneers: New England Women in the Arts*, edited by Alicia Faxon and Sylvia Moore, 33-43. (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1987), 39. Korzenik notes that the 1870 Dawes Act in Massachusetts required free drawing classes be offered in every city and town with populations more than ten thousand.

<sup>12</sup> Matsen, *Art Work*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Diana Korzenik, "Art Education of Working Women," 36.

<sup>14</sup> Laura Prieto, *At Home in the Studio: The Professionalization of Women Artists in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 27.

schools did so without the intent of later having careers. For example, in 1868 it was reported that only twenty out of the one hundred and sixty students enrolled at the Cooper Union planned on applying their art educations for professional purposes<sup>15</sup>

While it became easier for women to acquire basic art skills and more acceptable for some to use those skills to earn an income, many occupations remained closed off to women, particularly those in the fine arts. As the career trajectories of the female graduates from MNAS reflect, art education emerged as a popular vocation for women and met the growing demand to learn basic art skills among the general population.<sup>16</sup> The women who attended the various technical schools also frequently found employment in the commercial arts sphere and craft production as textile designers, illustrators and lithographers to name a few jobs open to them. However, during this period the ability to become a professional painter or sculptor was predominately the purview of those who attended fine art academies.

### Women Join the Art Academy

For those artists who wanted careers in the fine arts, training and education from a fine arts academy was essential. As the century progressed, the educational options for aspiring American artists increased as more academies were founded in the United States, although European training remained the paradigm. Women artists, however, found much more limited opportunities than their male peers did in the academic training available to them. Nevertheless, in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, the number of women enrolled at art

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<sup>15</sup> Julie Graham, "American Woman Artists Groups: 1867-1930," *Woman's Art Journal* 1, no. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1980): 8.

<sup>16</sup> Korzenik, "Art Education of Working Women," 35. Korzenik characterizes the popularity of art among the general masses in late nineteenth century, noting how art teachers were in demand to bring art skills to every home.

academies at home and abroad rapidly grew, reaching a peak in the 1890s to the point that American society came to be seen as inundated with “thousands upon thousands of art girl students.”<sup>17</sup> In her extensive scholarship on women artists during this period, Kirsten Swinth has revealed that this growth was based on a new emphasis on professionalism.<sup>18</sup> While it remains true that many women attended art school without the intent of establishing careers, in their willingness to travel abroad for the best training and make sacrifices in their personal lives, a remarkable number of young women exhibited a strong commitment to the profession that set them apart from previous generations.

Prior to the Civil War, the availability of academic artistic training for women was very limited. While women were admitted to two of the major academies, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the National Academy of Design, their participation in these institutions was minimal and often limited to those who belonged to the upper classes or the families of affiliated male members. For example, while women were accepted at NAD shortly after it was founded in 1825, full membership was almost entirely the prerogative of male artists. By 1900, only one woman had achieved full membership at the Academy – the artist Ann Hall in 1833.<sup>19</sup> Women were also underrepresented in the lower levels of membership with only eleven associate and four honorary memberships allocated to women before 1900.<sup>20</sup> Among the eleven women to achieve the status of associate member were the two daughters of founding member Peter

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<sup>17</sup> Swinth, *Painting Professionals*, 12. This is the title of the first chapter in Swinth’s book. She borrowed the line from the artist Candace Wheeler who made this comment in 1897. Candace Wheeler, “Art Education for Women,” *Outlook* 55 (January 2, 1897): 82.

<sup>18</sup> Swinth, *Painting Professionals*.

<sup>19</sup> Graham, “American Woman Artists Groups,” 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

Maverick who elected them to their positions in 1828.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, women accounted for less than 17% of the 1,300 artists total who exhibited their work at NAD between 1826 and 1860.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the early admittance of women artists at PAFA was not an indicator that they received inclusive treatment. Although the Academy was founded in 1805, it took nearly forty years before women were admitted to PAFA and several more decades until female students could take advantage of its full educational offerings. For example, it was not until 1856 that female students could study from antique casts.<sup>23</sup> In addition to internal restraints that came from within the academy, women also faced external pressures that limited who could study at art academies. Jean Gordon notes how women were on average less mobile than men.<sup>24</sup> Particularly prior to improvements in transportation in the middle of the nineteenth century, attending PAFA or NAD was not a feasible option for artists who lived outside the metropolitan centers of New York or Philadelphia.<sup>25</sup>

Beginning in the 1870s, a significant increase in options for academic instruction became available to women as existing academies opened their doors to female students and new schools were founded that took a coeducational approach. For example, both the Museum School of Fine Arts in Boston, which opened in 1876, and the Art Institute of Chicago, founded in 1879, accepted women from their inceptions.<sup>26</sup> Once admittance to the art academy was gained, women wasted little time in filling its classroom's seats. Swinth notes how in the first annual

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<sup>21</sup> Maston, *Art Work*, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Graham, "American Woman Artists Groups," 8.

<sup>23</sup> Prieto, *At Home in the Studio*, 19.

<sup>24</sup> Gordon, "Early American Women Artists," 58.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Prieto, *At Home in the Studio*, 31.

report of the Museum School, the board lamented at the fact that women made up a large portion of the school's first class and remained the majority throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup> By the 1880s, it was not uncommon for women to far outnumber men in academic art programs. For instance, Betsy Fahlman highlights how within three years of female students being accepted into the School of Fine Arts at Yale University, they composed three quarters of the program's total enrollment.<sup>28</sup>

The increasing openness of art academies to admit female students and the rapid growth of their enrollment may be understood in terms of broad social developments occurring in the United States. By accepting women, academies were responding to a heightened demand to educate a pervasive figure that had emerged in American culture; the "New Woman". A multilayered character who was meant to signify women's liberation, but was often more illustrative of society's anxieties about the modern woman, the New Woman was seen in both positive and negative lights in American culture.<sup>29</sup> In the late nineteenth century the "girl art student" had come to be viewed as a socially acceptable version of the New Woman, exemplified in Charles Dana Gibson's portrayal of the character [fig. 1.1].<sup>30</sup> Women were viewed by society

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<sup>27</sup> Swinth, *Painting Professionals*, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Betsy Fahlman, "Women Art Students at Yale, 1869-1913: Never True Sons of the University," *Woman's Art Journal* 12, no. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1991): 15. Yale's art program was founded in 1864. Fahlman notes that Yale's program was exceptional in its treatment to women, which likely contributed to its high numbers of enrolled female students, but this trend was more widespread.

<sup>29</sup> For an in-depth discussion on the figure of the "New Woman," see Ellen Wiley Todd, "The New Woman Revised" in *The "New Woman" Revised: Painting and Gender Politics on Fourteenth Street* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>30</sup> Swinth, *Painting Professionals*, 144. However, as Swinth explains how the New Woman as an artist took on two different guises in popular culture; the "girl art student" and the "woman artist". These figures were cast in negative and positive lights. For example, Christine Stansell highlights how often women were portrayed in literature in failing situations related to their pursuits to become professional artists. Christine Stansell, "Bohemian Beginnings in the 1890s," chapter one in *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books Henry Holt and Company, 2000), 25.

as the overseers of culture and morals and as such art fell within the acceptable realm of activities for them to participate in.<sup>31</sup> In terms of topics of study, society was much more accustomed to women engaging in art than in the fields of science or medicine, which remained dominated by men and only tackled by a select number of women.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the girl art student version of the New Woman was viewed as non-threatening to the traditional norms associated with the female sex. Christine Stansell also suggests how financial incentives served as an additional influence, pointing out how by admitting female students during the Civil War when male enrollment was low, art academies could recover some of their lost revenue.<sup>33</sup>

The acceptance of the girl art student, however, largely rested on the belief that such females would not go on to have professional careers. Several scholars have highlighted how the increasing presence of women in the academy coincided with a sharpened distinction between the professional and amateur artist, with women often relegated to the latter status. For example, Swinth draws attention to the more regimented structure that art academies assumed in the 1870s as their programs were organized into a hierarchal format modelled on European institutions.<sup>34</sup> She postulates that part of the motive behind such developments was the perception that female students were encroaching upon the studies of the more serious male students.<sup>35</sup>

The general assumption that the academic art training for women was a means of feminine refinement rather than professional development led female students to receive less

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<sup>31</sup> Christine Stansell, "Women Artists and the Problems of Metropolitan Culture: New York and Chicago, 1890-1910," in *Cultural Leadership in America: Art Matronage and Patronage*, ed. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (Boston: Trustees of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 1997), 26.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>34</sup> Swinth, *Painting Professionals*, 19-20.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 21.

opportunities than male students. For example, many art academies often held classes for female students during the day while reserving the instruction of male students for night time hours.<sup>36</sup> This was a convenient arrangement for men that enabled them to earn a living during the day as they honed their professional art skills at night. On the other hand, by providing women with only the option of day time instruction, the academy restricted the female population of its student body to those who had the economic means to not be reliant on earning an income during the day and colored the educational pursuits of those who did attend as efforts to improve the performance of a hobby rather than the pursuit of professional skill.

However, the most detrimental restriction that women faced in terms of hindering their ability to later establish professional careers as artists was the limited training they initially received in life drawing. As Swinth aptly points out, the waning popularity of landscape painting in the late nineteenth century in favor of figurative art was advantageous for women artists because they could paint their subjects from the safe confines of the studio.<sup>37</sup> However, since women were often denied this type of training, particularly regarding studying from the nude model, they were systematically excluded from achieving the professionalized skills needed to become successful painters and sculptors. Laura Prieto draws attention to how women initially had to advocate for this vital training, noting that the female students at PAFA were excluded from the life drawing classes until 1868 and only received instruction in the subject after a group of women students formed their own class in protest.<sup>38</sup> At NAD, the Ladies Life School was not

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<sup>36</sup> For example, the Corcoran and PAFA also offered life drawing classes for women during the day while offering male artists with the option of day and night life drawing classes.

<sup>37</sup> Swinth, *Painting Professionals*, 14.

<sup>38</sup> Prieto, *At Home in the Studio*, 90. Prior to this, the school's more industrious female students, Cassatt among them, had met privately and modelled for each other.

established until 1871, more than thirty years after one had been established to teach male students, but a rule barred unmarried women under the age of twenty-one from enrolling.<sup>39</sup> As the century progressed, admittance to life drawing classes that were segregated by the sex of the artist became more commonplace for female students. However, the limitations placed on their access to nude models continued to seriously hinder their ability to establish careers.

### Professional Definition in Paris

While women increasingly gained admittance to American art academies and made gradual headway in achieving better quality educations, it was becoming widely recognized that to acquire the refinements necessary for a promising professional career as a fine artist, one had to travel to Paris, viewed as the capital of the art world, for more elite training. Demonstrating their commitment to professionalism, by the 1880s American women flocked across the Atlantic to pursue their educations in art alongside their male colleagues.

Swinth highlights that it was viewed as radical for American women “to study academic art in Paris...[and] claim a male prerogative as their own.”<sup>40</sup> At the same time, the abundance of written material available to American women on Parisian art study reveals just how popular such courses of study had become.<sup>41</sup> Before leaving the States, prospective students could learn about what to expect abroad through pamphlets that outlined different tuition costs, housing details, and the various ateliers. Specific information was available that pertained to female students, such as the ateliers that offered instruction to women. For example, the Boston Art

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>40</sup> Swinth, *Painting Professionals*, 39.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 51.

Students association published a pamphlet in 1887 that was one of many that outlined necessary information for women artists looking to further their educations in Paris.<sup>42</sup> These pamphlets and guidebooks reveal a strong network of young American women art students in Paris; this information was valuable in persuading prospective female students and their parents that the presence of an extensive expatriate community framed the idea of studying abroad as a less threatening and compromising pursuit. The comprehensive network that American women art students encountered in Paris speaks to the determination and progress made by the members of their sex in Paris before them.

Parisian art study offered American women artists who wished to take their careers to the next level forms of technical knowledge and expertise that were unavailable to them in the United States. Several prestigious ateliers, such as the Académie Colarossi and the Académie Julien, accepted women students and these schools were heavily attended by Americans. By enrolling at these institutions, women had the opportunity to study under renowned French masters who could not only provide them with important skills, but also valuable mentoring and associations that could boost their reputations. For example, even after acquiring training under William Morris Hunt, studying at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and establishing a successful studio, Ellen Day Hale sought to study in Paris with French master William-Adolphe Bouguereau because she recognized how such an association could help her gain more commissions and solidify her professional status.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Jo Ann Wein, "The Parisian Training of American Women Artists," *Woman's Art Journal* 2, no. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1981): 42.

<sup>43</sup> Tracy Fitzpatrick, "Ellen Day Hale: Painting the Self, Fashioning Identity," *Women's Art Journal* 31, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2010): 29.

The vibrant social atmosphere of late-nineteenth century Paris also offered advantages and freedoms unavailable back home. Away from the judgment and strict social codes of American society, women art students could mingle with young men in the cafes and restaurants of Paris and take part in the city's nightlife. Especially for women interested in avant-gardism, the chance to interact with French artists in these social situations and learn about the latest trends in modern art were opportunities impossible to come by in the United States. Additionally, Swinth highlights the personal growth that seeking an art education in Paris could activate in women. In case of many women, art study in Paris was their first experience in living away from their families. For some, this experience pushed them to take over the management of their own finances and become the sole decision makers in the future trajectories of their lives.<sup>44</sup> The sense of independence and confidence that many artists gleaned from their experiences in Paris energized them to pursue their desired professions with a new vigor.

While Parisian art training afforded aspiring women artists with unique advantages, it forced them to be confronted with a level of inequality that they had not been subject to in the United States for several decades. The most obvious evidence of this disparity was their barred access to the official government-run art academy in Paris. Whereas by the 1870s women were universally accepted, albeit with certain limitations already mentioned, into American art academies, in Paris the *École des Beaux-Arts* refused to admit women until 1897. This denied women the ability to acquire the most prestigious art education available at the time and the opportunity to compete for the Grand Prix de Rome, the highest award an artist could receive in the late-nineteenth century. Jo Ann Wein also notes the more immediate and practical

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<sup>44</sup> Swinth, *Painting Professionals*, 43.

repercussions of this restriction. As a state-sponsored institution, tuition for the *École des Beaux-Arts* was free to native Frenchmen and foreigners, thereby placing both American and French women at a greater financial disadvantage than their male counterparts.<sup>45</sup>

American women artists found alternative avenues to obtain French art training by attending the numerous private ateliers and academies, which had initially been set up to prepare male students for their eventual admittance into the *École* and were now serving the steady stream of foreign artists who came to France. However, once enrolled in schools like the *Académie Colarossi* and the *Académie Julien*, which were both heavily attended by American expatriates, women experienced gender discrimination in the form of financial and technical disadvantages enabled by an informal system of sex segregation. For example, the division of the *Académie Julien* into “lower” and “upper” sections was an inexplicit means to divide male students who were tracked for professional careers from the seemingly less serious female students.<sup>46</sup> Wein explains that the all-male “lower” division received special privileges not afforded to the mostly female “upper” division. Students of the “lower” division were provided with better models and received two critiques per week in contrast to the only one critique that “upper” division students received. Despite receiving a lesser quality of training, female students of the upper division had to pay twice as much as male students, being charged a daily rate of one hundred francs to the fifty francs charged to men.<sup>47</sup> The commonly held view that justified

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<sup>45</sup> Wein, “The Parisian Training,” 41.

<sup>46</sup> Heather Dawkins, *The Nude in French Art and Culture, 1870-1910* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 117. Dawkins notes that eight women were a part of the “lower” majority, male division and twenty-two women were in the “upper” division. This information is based on the journal of the artist Marie Bashkirtseff who was a student of the *Académie Julien*. Dawkins also suggest that the divisions were physically located in separate locations.

<sup>47</sup> Wein, “The Parisian Training,” 42. Wein gleaned this information from the Boston Art Students Association’s 1887 pamphlet. Her analyzation of this information reveals this to have been the trend in French academies. For example, at Carolus-Duran’s studio women paid 70 francs more per month than men. At the *Académie Colarossi*

such a rationale, as explained in 1887 in an American pamphlet on Parisian art education, was that artistic training for female students was a form of luxury as opposed to a professional endeavor to obtain practical skills to perform a future career.<sup>48</sup> However, another important reason for the segregation of male and female students was to allow for varying degrees of access to nude models in life drawing classes.

### Accessing the Nude Model in Life Drawing Classes

Until the last decade of the nineteenth century, in both France and the United States, the academic instruction in life drawing was segregated by the artist's sex. At the time, such an arrangement was regarded as a way of accommodating the large numbers of female students whose modesty necessitated a separate environment to study the nude human body in order to adhere to conventional definitions of feminine respectability. In truth, the fact that female students were restricted in their access to study from nude models seriously limited their ability to gain the professionalized skills needed to be competitive in the art world.

American women artists generally had earlier and better access to nude models in academies in the United States than in Paris, which was problematic due to the emphasis placed on this skill in French art training.<sup>49</sup> At PAFA, upon the initiation of the life drawing class in 1868, women gained the ability to study from the completely nude female model, and by 1877 possibly could study from nude male models wearing loincloths.<sup>50</sup> However, as evidenced by

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men could pay 30 francs for men-only classes, but women only had the option to attend mixed classes at a rate of 60 francs. It appears that only at the Académie des Champs Elysees did women and men pay the same rate at 100 francs a month for a fully day of study.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Christine Havice, "In a Class by Herself: 19th Century Images of the Woman Artist as Student," *Woman's Art Journal* 2, no. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1981): 38.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

Alice Barber's painting *Female Life Class at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts* [fig. 1.2] from 1879, such instruction took place within a strictly sex segregated environment. Apparently, even the nude body of a corpse posed a threat to prevailing notions of feminine respectability because it was also required that men and women attend dissecting labs to study anatomy separately.<sup>51</sup> The ten-year delay in gaining access to the nude male model at PAFA, which still was only partially nude, was standard among formal art programs in the United States. By the end of the century female students in the United States could study from nude female models and, though it remained controversial, in some cases partially nude male models.

In contrast, female students who attended the various Parisian art academies experienced more restrictive access to nude models in life drawing classes. According to Tamar Garb, by the late-nineteenth century women could frequently study from live models in Paris, but the model was almost always female, whether draped or not.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, while life drawing classes in the United States remained segregated in most schools until at least after WWI, the division between students of the opposite sex was even more pervasive in Parisian academies.<sup>53</sup> For example, while it was standard for women's life classes to be held at a different time of day or in separate spaces, Stansell notes that at the Académie Julien a separate entrance and staircase was installed for the women's life drawing class to eliminate any chance of male students catching a

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Tamar Garb, "Men of Genius, Women of Taste: The Gendering of Art Education in Late Nineteenth-Century Paris," in *Overcoming All Obstacles: The Women of the Académie Julien*, ed. Gabriel P. Weisberg and Jane R. Becker (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 127. An exception to this rule seems to have been the Académie Colorassi.

<sup>53</sup> ASL had separate life drawing classes until after WWI and undraped co-ed classes not until 1960s.

sight of them working from their models.<sup>54</sup> An 1890 newspaper account that gives a glimpse into the life of American women art students in Paris further sheds light on how this divided atmosphere extended beyond the classroom: “No male being crosses the thresholds of the women’s ateliers and save for the models, no women under any circumstances, are allowed to visit the studios of men.”<sup>55</sup> While socializing with their male peers in Paris was possible in later years, it was not done without risk. On the other hand, during this period in the United States, with the exception of life drawing classes, male and female students were comingled in other classes and in the wider social environment of the academy, which allowed for a more fluid exchange of ideas and healthy competition.<sup>56</sup>

In addition to allowing for the censorship of male nudity, sex-segregated life drawing classes also enabled other variances in the quality of training that male and female students received. Often, women were given less time to study from nude models in life drawing classes. For example, while attending the Académie Julien in the early 1880s, the American artist Anna Klumpke complained that the men’s class had access to study from a nude model all day while the women’s class could only study from the draped model in the morning and a nude in the afternoon.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the models that were allocated to them were allegedly of lesser quality than those provided in the life drawing classes attended by male students. Louisa May Alcott

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<sup>54</sup> Christine Stansell, “Women Artists and the Problems of Metropolitan Culture: New York and Chicago, 1890-1910,” in *Cultural Leadership in America: Art Matronage and Patronage*, ed. by the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (Boston: Trustees of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 1997), 29.

<sup>55</sup> Eliza Putnam Heaton, “Art Students in Paris: Life of American Women in Ateliers. A Glimpse,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA) Sep 8, 1890, 8.

<sup>56</sup> Swinth, *Painting Professionals*, 60.

<sup>57</sup> Prieto, *At Home in the Studio*, 98.

remarked in a letter to her family on her experience studying art in Paris that the male class, which “no longer opens its doors to women” had “better models”.<sup>58</sup>

These inequalities have led several scholars to propose additional theories as to why such divisions were enacted at a moment when large numbers of women were seeking professionalized training in United States and Parisian art academies. Tamar Garb credits the strict segregation in Paris primarily to an effort by the existing patriarchal system of the academies to protect and preserve the privileged position of masculinity.<sup>59</sup> She references how contemporary arguments against the comingling of the sexes in life drawing classes were centered on the uncomfortable sexual tension that the situation would create for male artists, citing comments made by French artist Jean-Léon Gérôme in which he claimed that male artists worked less well when studying from female models.<sup>60</sup> It was further believed that the presence of female students would compromise the professional working relationship between the male student and models by serving as reminders of the female models’ physicality.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Christine Stansell views the creation of a more limited, segregated space for women artists as a “resegmentation of hierarchies.” She goes on to explain that as women artists became more ubiquitous in the academy and the art market, it was necessary to redraw lines of differentiation between female and male artists so that the latter could continue to enjoy a more elite position.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>59</sup> Tamar Garb, “The Forbidden Gaze,” *Art in America* 79, no. 5 (May 1991): 148.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 150. Garb also argues that the mere presence of women in professional contexts such as the *École des Beaux-Arts* would disrupt the masculine bond that took place between male students.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>62</sup> Stansell, “Women Artists,” 26.

However, it has also been argued that women artists benefited from the segregation of life drawing classes. Prieto cites how “in absence of men” some women viewed segregated classes as enabling them to “take up their full-fledged roles as artists.”<sup>63</sup> So long as the training they received was equal, many women were content with the arrangement. Understanding the heightened tension surrounding protecting one’s “purity” that women had to contend with in the late nineteenth century, particularly those who pursued training in Paris, puts this argument into a better perspective. Away from their families and alone in Paris, Prieto explains that the reputations of young women were in constant jeopardy. She recounts the experience of one young artist, Louisa Lander, whose career ended after it was rumored that she had posed as a nude model for a male artist friend.<sup>64</sup> There is evidence that similar sentiments existed in the United States. For example, in 1886 Eakins was asked to resign from PAFA due to his insistence that female students be allowed to study from nude male models. Both his controversial stance to expose women to male nudity and his subsequent resignation drew protests from female students.<sup>65</sup> However, while the segregation of life drawing classes may have served the purpose of protecting the social reputations of female students, it continued to perpetuate sexual tensions that undermined the professionalism of women artists. As will later be discussed, this also complicated their ability to take full advantage of valued life drawing skills by portraying nude figures in their artwork.

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<sup>63</sup> Prieto, *At Home in the Studio*, 92.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 96. Prieto speculates that the board of directors of PAFA was fearful of losing female students because of Eakins’ controversial thoughts on women studying from nude male models. Prieto cites at least one student, Diana Franklin, who criticized Eakins’ use of male models. However, when Eakins was dismissed, both male and female students protested.

## Equality Beyond the Academy

As the authority of academic art institutions gradually waned with the emergence of modernism, and artists in general looked to them less for training, the educational experiences of women artists improved. Beginning in the final years of the nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth, increasing numbers of schools and private studios were set up in both continents that offered prospective artists alternative opportunities from the more prestigious academies. As a reaction against the exclusivity and conservatism of already established academic programs, these new schools generally demonstrated a more inclusive attitude toward women and more equal training opportunities.

The Art Students League in the United States stands as a prime example. It was founded in New York in 1875 by a group of students from the NAD who were dissatisfied with the Academy's rigid instruction, and from the beginning, women were fully integrated into the school.<sup>66</sup> Within its governing body, women also shared power with their male peers. Nancy G. Heller highlights the great pride that the League took in its student-body controlled structure, which included a twelve-member board of control in which a third had to be drawn from current students.<sup>67</sup> In addition to the opportunity for female students to serve as elected officers, the board had both a men's and women's vice president; a policy enacted at the League's founding.<sup>68</sup> Such attention to equal representation reflects a new attention to the interests of female students,

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<sup>66</sup> It was also founded while the NAD was shut down due to lack of funds.

<sup>67</sup> Nancy G. Heller, "The Art Students League: 100 Years," *American Artist* 39, no. 398 (September 1975): 79.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, The roster of the Art Students' League's Board of Control between the years 1875-1925 reveals that most the time, women occupied two-thirds of the elected officer seats. Julia E. Baker was the first female vice president at the League.

which historically had not been the case at academic institutions that were governed mostly by male administrators.

The educational experiences of the female League students reveal the positive impact that acquiring formal art training in such a context had on the professionalization of American women artists. Escaping the academy's restrictive exclusivity and crippling conservatism, the League enforced no grades, and had no required courses or examinations.<sup>69</sup> Students who lacked the resources to acquire the prerequisite skills needed to enter the academies could benefit from this leniency, especially women who typically had less freedom in society than men to develop these essential art skills. Once at the League, female students were also given equal opportunity to develop the skills necessary to become strong competitors in the American art market through the school's coeducational approach, which made it harder for separate standards or quality of instruction to be applied based on a student's gender. For example, an 1879 newspaper article on the nascent League indicates that except for instruction in life drawing, male and female students took classes together.<sup>70</sup>

While female students at the League were subject to the same social constraints and sexual tension surrounding their exposure to male nudity, it's evident that the school was more willing to push conventional boundaries than the academies in terms of equipping female students with the resources they needed to become professionals in the field. For example, though later rejected by some female students, Augustus Saint-Gaudens' attempts in 1890 to introduce a mixed modelling class attests to the League's more liberal atmosphere.<sup>71</sup> The

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<sup>69</sup> Heller, "The Art Students League," 80.

<sup>70</sup> "The Art Students' League," *New York Times* (New York, NY) Jun 13, 1879, 5.

<sup>71</sup> Prieto, *At Home in the Studio*, 96.

League's more open stance toward training women artists is further demonstrated in a situation that occurred in 1906 involving Anthony Comstock, who was then the United States Postal Inspector and head of the New York Society of Suppression of Vice. In June 1906, the League expanded the circulation their monthly journal, *The American Art Student*, beyond their normal mailing list and allegedly "girls and unmarried women" were among the recipients who received copies.<sup>72</sup> Upon learning of this news, Comstock raided the League's premises. However, striking during summer vacation, he only managed to arrest a young office clerk named Anna Riebley whose shy demeanor and overall innocence made the government official a subject of ridicule and mockery.<sup>73</sup> The inclusion of these drawings [fig. 1.3] in their journal reveals the League's professional stance toward depictions of the nude, despite the continuing prudish nature of mainstream society. Further, in her article on this notorious event, Amy Werbel describes the incessant mocking of Comstock and uptick in displays of nudity that took place within the League community in the immediate aftermath of the event. Allegedly the 1906-1907 League course catalog included a photograph of women students drawing from a male model in a loincloth, which would have reaffirmed the school's rejection of censorship and support for the professional training of women artists.<sup>74</sup>

In both France and the United States many senior artists took teaching positions outside the context of the academy. Among them were several who believed that gender should not stand in the way of an artist's success, which had a positive impact on the women artists' ability to claim professionalism. For example, William Merritt Chase, who taught at several places

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<sup>72</sup> Amy Werbel, "The Crime of the Nude: Anthony Comstock, the art Students League of New York, and the Origins of Modern American Obscenity," *Winterthur Portfolio* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 271.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>74</sup> Amy Werbel, "The Crime of the Nude," 273.

including the League and a school that he founded, The Chase School of Art, believed that women were as capable as men in their ability to become great artists, proclaiming, “genius has no sex.”<sup>75</sup> The plentiful number of women artists who went on to have successful professional careers after studying under artists like Chase and Robert Henri, who was also highly supportive of his female students during the twelve years he was an instructor at the League, reveals the positive impact they had in encouraging women artists to aspire to the same goals as their male peers.<sup>76</sup> In Paris, women who were interested in French stylistic art trends could similarly obtain training from artists outside the more conventional academies. For example, the American artist Marguerite Zorach studied under the Scottish Colorist artist John Duncan Fergusson at Académie De La Palette. However, as Swinth notes, while it was possible for some women artists to find sympathetic male teachers, the lack of female teachers in both the mainstream academies and the less conventional art schools posed limits to the support they could receive.<sup>77</sup>

#### Strength in Numbers: Women Artists Join Professional Groups

After the completion of their studies, women artists faced a new set of challenges as they attempted to establish their careers. In most cases, education and professional training were not enough to launch a successful career as a fine arts painter or sculptor. While the growing traction of the women’s movement in the United States in the late nineteenth century lifted some of the social constraints placed upon women, aspirations to turn one’s artistic training into a means of

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<sup>75</sup> Swinth, *Painting Professionals*, 144.

<sup>76</sup> For more information on Robert Henri’s influence on his female students, see: Sarah Burns and Marian Wardle, *American Women Modernists: The Legacy of Robert Henri, 1910-1945* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Museum of Art, 2005).

<sup>77</sup> Swinth, *Painting Professionals*, 89. Swinth explains that it would be well into the twentieth century before women instructors advanced beyond teaching in design schools or introductory courses.

financial and social independence were generally still seen as falling outside prescribed social norms for women, who were still expected to prioritize their typical roles as wives and mothers. General hardships experienced by artists during the early stages of their professional development were compounded for women artists due to gender discrimination in the art world. Scarce exhibition opportunities and complications in procuring valuable artistic resources like models and studio space were some of the major issues they faced. However, rather than succumb to these obstacles, women artists alleviated some of their problems by forming alliances with other artists.

Academically trained women artists frequently looked for a solution to the discrimination they faced in the art world by joining and founding professional artist associations that were only open to members of their own sex. Julie Graham has drawn attention to the many women-only artist groups that were founded between 1875 and 1925 in the United States, some of which were the National Association of Women Artists (founded in 1889), the Art Worker's Club for Women (founded in 1898), and the New York Society of Women Artists (founded in 1925).<sup>78</sup> In the beginning, these types of groups were formed from a simple need to counter the generally intolerant attitude that already established, male-dominated professional artist associations exhibited toward women.<sup>79</sup> For example, in 1889, women made up only 4 out of the 108 members of the Society of American Artists.<sup>80</sup> Swinth accredits some male artists' resistance

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<sup>78</sup> Graham "American Woman Artists Groups," 7-12. To be clear, there was a rise in the overall establishment of professional artist groups in the United States during this period. Women artists felt a need to form their own groups as men established general artist associations that were not welcoming to them. In addition to the three groups mentioned, Graham mentions the Ladies Art Association, which was founded in 1867, as a precursor to the later, more professionally-oriented groups.

<sup>79</sup> Graham, "American Woman Artists Groups," 8.

<sup>80</sup> Swinth, *Painting Professionals*, 67.

toward professional associations with women in their field as continuing attempts to perpetuate the correlation between “male” professionals and “female” amateurs. She also postulates that American male artists became accustomed to the exclusionary fraternal networks they formed during their educational experiences in Paris which were then translated into tight knit networks back home that continued to exclude women.<sup>81</sup> While the original catalyst for the formation of woman artist associations may have been reactionary, they helped to provide solutions to significant obstacles that impeded the development of women artists’ careers.

The largest driving force behind the formation of professional women artist groups was the lack of opportunity to exhibit their work. For example, founded in 1889, the National Association of Women Artists was established specifically to counter what Graham describes as “the discrimination against the work of women in existing exhibitions” and to “secure opportunities for them to show their work in dignified, professional auspices.”<sup>82</sup> As a group, women could organize their own exhibitions rather than depend on acceptance to those curated by selective juries, which often exhibited bias toward male artists. For example, it’s no surprise that the six male jury members for the 1915 Forum Exhibition at the Anderson Gallery selected the work of only one female artist, Marguerite Zorach. The biases of organizers of the Armory Show, which took place two years earlier, amplifies this issue. Charles Musser draws attention to the fact that out of the 304 artists whose work was exhibited, only fifty were women.<sup>83</sup> However, as a counter to the gendered-prerogative of the Association of American Painters and Sculptors who organized the show, Musser notes how several exhibitions that were organized by woman

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>82</sup> Graham, “American Women Artist Groups,” 10.

<sup>83</sup> Musser, “1913,” 173.

around the same time.<sup>84</sup> Since exhibitions were a central means by which artists could make their work known to potential patrons and make sales directly to the public, the ability of these groups to cultivate exhibition opportunities was vital not only for building the reputations of women artists, but also in providing them with a chance to financially support themselves.

The strong female networks that women artists formed through these groups also enabled them to share valuable resources that had important monetary and social benefits. Many associations offered their members special perks like classes and discounted studio space, which would have been especially beneficial for nascent, unestablished artists who were on a small budget. Members also could share models, which would have been monetarily convenient and socially advantageous and for women artists who wanted to avoid unsavory assumptions from being alone with a man in their private studios. The Art Worker's Club for Women in New York is an interesting example of how this resource was made available to women artists through the artist group system. The club was founded with the intent of improving the working conditions of artists' models, but membership was mutually beneficial for both the women artists and the female models who belonged. In exchange for an annual membership fee, models enjoyed free access to a collection of costumes, regulated wages, and overall better working conditions.<sup>85</sup> In turn, women artists could employ the models at no charge.<sup>86</sup> Additionally, the artist group system

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<sup>84</sup> Charles Musser, "1913: A Feminist Moment in the Arts," in *The Armory Show at 100*, ed. Marilyn Satin Kushner, Kimberly Orcutt and Casey Nelson Blake (New York: New York Historical Society, 2013), 172. For example, Musser mentions an all-woman exhibition that took place at the MacDowell Club. He also mentions the annual exhibit of Woman's Art Club at the MacBeth Gallery, and a "Suffrage Art Exhibit" that took place the same year as the Armory and was organized by three female art patrons, but these two shows were obviously pre-planned and were not necessarily intended to be commentary of the predominately male composition of the Armory show, even though they may have ended up serving that function, anyways.

<sup>85</sup> David Slater, "The Fount of Inspiration Minnie Clark, the Art Workers' Club for Women, and Performances of American Girlhood," *Winterthur Portfolio* 39, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 248.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

brought struggling artists into contact with professionals from their sex who had established successful careers. During a period when these female figures were still few and far between, artist groups concentrated professional women artists who then could be sought out for mentorship and guidance.

However, membership in these women-only associations (versus integrating with male artists) also had its drawbacks. The uniform female membership of women artist groups diminished interactions with their male colleagues who had access to new information about new trends and happenings in the art world. Furthermore, by strictly studying alongside other women artists, women did a disservice to themselves by minimizing the pool of their competition and thereby not challenging themselves against the best of their contemporaries. Many women artists rejected exhibiting their work in shows with an all-female cast for fear that critics might use a different set of criteria for evaluating their work. For example, Mary Cassatt was not happy to learn that her dealer had sent her work to be exhibited in the shows put on by the Woman's Art Club, telling him, "I doubt this practice will do me any good, nor you."<sup>87</sup> Further, in showing their work at exclusively-female art exhibitions, like those frequently put on by women artist groups, Kirsten Swinth points out that women artists faced the threat of their art being seen through an essentialist lens; a problem that women would experience with more frequency as self-expression took on a more central role in their art.<sup>88</sup>

### Coed Alliances Among Modernist Artists

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<sup>87</sup> Swinth, *Painting Professionals*, 123.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

The arrival of avant-garde modernism in American art in the early twentieth century, many of the systems and practices of academicism were challenged, which resulted in some being completely thrown out and replaced. To modernist artists, many institutions and traditional artist associations, which had once been major sources of professional definition (and continued to be for artists working more academic artistic styles), lost their authority. Instead, new sources for instating the status of the modernist artist emerged. Among the sources with power to perform this function were modernist art societies, art circles, or sometimes just loose social associations, which outlined the common outlook of a group of artists at a given point in time.

Like their counterparts who worked in more traditional artistic styles, modernist women artists frequently affiliated themselves with artist groups to develop their professional identities. While some chose to belong to sex-separate artist groups, many displayed a new openness toward socializing, exhibiting and forming professional partnerships with their male peers. Modernist avant-garde circles and societies served many of the same needs that single-sex professional associations fulfilled for women artists working in more traditional artistic styles. At the same time, the coed relationships that these groups fostered with male artists provided women with new, advantageous systems of support and channels through which to share ideas. Yet, female representation among modernist art groups was often very limited and the alienation that came with being the only woman artist, or one of few, came with a new set of risks and consequences.

The nascent state of American modernism at the turn of the century meant that women who were interested in learning about certain avant-garde stylistic art trends could not afford to isolate themselves further by only associating with other female artists. In modernism's early years, the major artists were predominately European and male. There were few opportunities to

show modernist works by American artists, let alone those by women. Instead, galleries preferred to exhibit the work of masters like Matisse and Rodin. However, even venues for the work of these major artists were limited in the beginning. While it was possible to see their art while studying abroad in Paris, another way that women artists could gain intimate insight was by affiliating with one of the various avant-garde circles of societies based in the United States with which European modernists were associated or where they exhibited their work. For example, by joining the circle around Alfred Stieglitz and his gallery '291,' one could become familiar with the art of Matisse and Kandinsky's theories on art. Or, by attending the salons hosted by the Arensbergs, one might have the chance to have a conversation about Dada with Marcel Duchamp.

Besides the chance to study the work of significant European modernists and glean ideas from them, whether directly or indirectly, regarding their philosophies on art, integrating into these avant-garde circles with male artists had additional advantages that were important to the career development of modernist women artists. For example, by attending the salons and events associated with these circles and building relationships with the patrons who collected the art of European modernists, they could hope to establish their own lucrative business connections. As was also the case with more traditional groups, women artists could study alongside and share studio space with the other artists, but now this also included artists of the opposite sex. As portrayed by Peggy Bacon's drawing *Frenzied Effort* [fig. 1.5], a depiction of a typical work session at the Whitney Studio Club, by 1925 male and female artists could even work from the nude model side by side. Also, as was the case with traditional artist groups, modernist artist societies often provided exhibition opportunities for women artists. However, exhibiting alongside their male peers often promised greater public exposure for their work. For example,

beginning in 1917, many modernist artists who were women had their work shown in several large-scale exhibitions organized by the Society of Independent Artists. While the fact that Katherine Dreier was on the board of directors of the society and helped organize the exhibition may have helped to ensure that nearly forty percent of the first show's exhibitors were women, her achievements were also a testament to the influential leadership positions that were possible for a few women to attain in modernist artist groups.<sup>89</sup>

Belonging to these avant-garde circles had its advantages, but the common coed composition of modernist artist groups produced new obstacles for women artists that could complicate their professional identities. Often finding themselves the single female member in a group, women artists faced the threat of being marginalized or overshadowed by the dominating presence of male members. Also, as demonstrated by the experiences of Anne Brigman and Georgia O'Keeffe who were both affiliated with the Stieglitz circle, women artists were often victimized by the essentialist readings imputed to their works by male colleagues.

### Conclusion

If one traces the experiences of women artists both in educational institutions and professional artist affiliations from the mid-nineteenth into the early-twentieth century, evidence of their overall advancement towards professionalism becomes increasingly pronounced. Though they faced limited access to important educational resources and were dismissed for their supposed amateur intentions, they defined their professional aims by travelling abroad for the best art training available. Finding the art market to be divided along lines of gender as had been the case with their educational experiences, women artists working in both traditional and

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<sup>89</sup> Swinth, *Painting Professionals*, 182.

modernist art styles devised strategies to make themselves competitive in the art market. As will be seen in the following chapters, the gender-based issues that women artists became aware of during their educational experiences and years of early professional development formed a consciousness that impacted the decisions they made in terms of subject matter for their art.

CHAPTER TWO  
AMERICAN WOMEN ARTISTS AND TRADITIONAL  
REPRESENTATIONS OF THE FEMALE NUDE

Just as gender shaped women artists' educational experiences and paths of professional development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it similarly impacted the artwork they produced. In comparison to their male peers, women artists had additional issues to consider in how the subject matter they selected for their artworks would be perceived in relation to their professional and social identities as artists and women. The social conceptions of female gender associated with artistic representations of the female nude made it difficult subject matter for women artists. However, the professional significances associated with the figure drove some to incorporate it into their art. Investigating the varied approaches that women artists used to depict the female nude in their work provides some clarity on the complex situations they faced throughout this period as they established their careers.

The increasing prevalence of classical and idealized representations of the figure in American art in the late nineteenth century coincided with a sharp increase of women artists professionalizing in the United States. However, while access to the educational resources needed to render the human body improved for women around this time, many continued to exclude both male and female nudes from their artistic subject choices due to the wide range of social implications that such imagery could ignite in the continuing conservative social climate in the United States. In doing so, they missed opportunities to demonstrate their skill and participate in valued artistic genres. At the same time, artists who dared to portray nudity in their artworks risked charges of indecency and defying normative expectations of gendered behavior. In the twentieth century, despite the more liberal social attitudes and willingness of the avant-

garde to break with traditions, the objectifying narratives surrounding the figure continued to problematize women artists' abilities to represent it in their work.

Considering the possible consequences, the decisions of a few women artists to portray the female nude during this period warrants examination. What sort of themes and motifs did they use to depict the figure in their art? How did those depictions function as assertions of their professional statuses? How did their representations differ from those of their male peers? And what sort of problems were women artists confronted with in portraying the nude body of their own sex? Answering these questions reveals the different ways that they sought to recognize their gender as an aspect of their professional identities. In the following pages, I will show that by drawing on traditional motifs to picture the female nude, women artists proactively sought to connect themselves to a lineage of professional artists. At the same time, I will also reveal the way that some in their representations attempted to subvert the patriarchal authority, which, historically, had defined the figure in artistic traditions.

### Professional Motivations for Representing the Female Nude

The professional significances of the female nude in American art beginning in the late nineteenth century contextualizes why some women artists were motivated to incorporate the figure into their artworks. While it was not until the late nineteenth century that the nude gained acceptance by American audiences in its idealized, classical female form, in time, it increased in popularity and was portrayed with some frequency by artists working in a variety of artistic styles and mediums well into the twentieth century.<sup>90</sup> However, though representations of the

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<sup>90</sup> As I will later explain, the female nude, as opposed to the male nude, grew in popularity in American art during this period.

female nude becoming more widespread, the narratives communicated by the traditional motifs commonly used to portray it remained narrowly defined by a predominately heterosexual male perspective that placed women artists in a precarious position.

Whereas the nude figure's long legacy in European art traditions had accustomed viewers across the Atlantic to nudity in art, American audiences had less opportunity to grow accustomed to such sights. The presence of the female nude in artworks exhibited in the highly public setting of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair exemplifies, however, the way attitudes toward such imagery were changing in the late nineteenth century. In the six months that the fair was opened, visitors reached nearly a quarter of the country's population.<sup>91</sup> Adding to the splendor and spectacle that they encountered across the nearly seven hundred acres of the fair's sprawling grounds were numerous artworks of nudes were on display in the Fine Arts Palace.<sup>92</sup> Among several sculptural works of the female nude was Frederick Wellington Ruckstuhl's 1891 sculpture, *Evening* [fig. 2.1], and one of many instances of the figure in painted form could be seen in the Arcadian vision of Kenyon Cox's 1890 work, *An Eclogue* [fig. 2.2].<sup>93</sup> Further, while "the human figure most frequently encountered...was the idealized classical nude," the titillating realism of John Singer Sargent's large-scale studio nude in *Study From Life* [fig. 2.3], from 1891, demonstrates

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<sup>91</sup> Julie K. Rose, "The World's Columbian Exposition: Idea, Experience, Aftermath," *The University of Virginia Department of American Studies*, last modified August 1, 1996, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma96/wce/introduction.html>.

<sup>92</sup> Brandon Brame Fortune and Michelle Mead, "Catalogue of American Paintings and Sculptures Exhibited at the World's Columbian Exposition: Revised and Updated," in *Revisiting the White City: American Art at the 1893 World's Fair*, ed. Carolyn Kinder Carr (London: University Press of New England, 1993), 193-383. Artists whose exhibited works depicted female nudes included: Frederic A. Bridgman, Kenyon Cox (6 paintings), Benjamin Rutherford Fitz, Carl St. Paul Gutherz, Alexander Harrison, Will H. Low, Albert Pike Lucas, Helen Watson Phelps, Lucy Lee Robbins, John Singer Sargent, Walter Shirlaw, Elihu Vedder (2 paintings), sculptors John Donoghue, F. Edwin Elwell, Charles Grafly, Frederik Wellington Ruckstuhl and Olin L. Warner. While it is likely that additional artworks of the female nude were also exhibited, I have only could confirm the above mentioned based on reproductions in the catalogue found in this book.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 224-226, 376.

the expanding styles and modes that artists were beginning to use for their portrayals of the figure around this time.<sup>94</sup>

The monetary value assigned to paintings and sculptures that depicted the female nude, which were among the highest priced at the fair, reveals American patrons' increasing interests in such imagery.<sup>95</sup> For example, listed at \$10,000, Ruckstuhl's *Evening* was the most expensive sculptural work exhibited.<sup>96</sup> In painting, Thomas Alexander Harrison's grand work, *In Arcadia* [fig. 2.4] of 1885, which measured more than nine feet long, was also marked at \$10,000, making it one of the most expensive works on canvas on display at the fair.<sup>97</sup> Richard Leppert's information on the buying tendencies of American patrons during the last three decades of the century helps to explain the latter work's high value. For example, Leppert notes that Americans were among the upper-bourgeois clientele that fueled demand for scenes of nude spectacle and specifically references the large market for the French artist William-Adolphe Bouguereau erotic paintings of female nudes that existed among newly wealthy Americans.<sup>98</sup> In this regard, we can view the decisions of a few women artists to exhibit works at the 1893 World's Fair that featured images of the female nude, in part, as efforts to appeal to contemporary interests they saw reflected in trends of the American art market. For example, Helen Watson Phelps, Sarah Paxton Bell Dodson and Lucy Lee Robbins all exhibited paintings at the fair, which included images of

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<sup>94</sup> Carolyn Kinder Carr, *Revisiting the White City: American Art at the 1893 World's Fair* (London: University Press of New England, 1993), 156. In addition, nudes also appeared in decorations and murals of the fair buildings.

<sup>95</sup> Fortune and Mead, "Catalogue," 193-383. Prices are not listed for every artwork, but they range from \$125 dollars to \$10,000 for paintings, depending on the artist and size of the work, and \$6,000 to \$10,000 for sculptures. It should be noted that among the fifteen paintings that have prices listed, six were priced above \$1,000.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>98</sup> Richard Leppert, *The Nude: The Cultural Rhetoric of the Body in the Art of Western Modernity* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2007), 122, 275 (as footnote 38).

the female nude, among which Robbins' painting, *Before the Looking Glass* [fig. 2.5], was listed at the sizable sale price of \$1,000.<sup>99</sup> The sensuality of the salon-style nudes in Robbins' painting and Phelps's *Abandon* [fig. 2.6] further support the notion that they were attempting to fulfill the then-popular demand for such sexually suggestive imagery of women in art.

The expanding presence of the female nude in American art after this period further contextualizes the choices of later women artists to represent the figure using a variety of artistic styles and mediums. For the remainder of the nineteenth century, in painting Kenyon Cox, Abbott Handerson Thayer and other artists associated with "The Ten" group contributed idyllic, allegorical representations of the female nude while similar types of depictions appeared in Pictorialist photography by Clarence H. White, Edward Steichen and others.<sup>100</sup> As new stylistic trends emerged in the early twentieth century, the relevance of the female nude did not diminish. As Gerdts highlights, even in their focus on scenes from daily urban life, artists of the Ashcan group such as George Bellows and John Sloan periodically used the figure in their paintings, drawings and prints.<sup>101</sup> Moreover, as exemplified by Alfred Stieglitz's formalist photographs of Georgia O'Keeffe in the 1920s and the conceptual works of Man Ray, such as *Le Violon d'Ingres* from 1924, modernist artists continued to find new ways of incorporating the female nude into their art. However, while stylistic methods used by these artists were subject to change in

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<sup>99</sup> Fortune and Mead, "Catalogue," 200. The prices I have cited have been taken from the catalog *Revisiting the White City* which were interpreted by Brandon Brame Fortune and Michell Mead from a marked catalogue for the exhibition that was found in the Charles M. Kurtz Papers in the Archives of the American Art, Smithsonian Institution. They speculate that these prices are from the labels affixed to each work where there was a space for a price, but they warn that in some cases the figure may have been the work's insurance value.

<sup>100</sup> In Chapter Three, I will give several examples of this type of imagery appearing in Pictorialist photographs that appeared in the early twentieth century periodical *Camera Work* that Alfred Stieglitz published.

<sup>101</sup> Gerdts, *The Great American Nude*, 154-162.

relation to their different motives and artistic influences, the tradition of objectifying the figure often continued in their art.

From the nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries, for male and women artists alike, portraying a *nude* in one's artwork primarily meant portraying the *female nude*. Art historians have located an explanation for this conflation, and the figure's objectification, in the patriarchal nature of European and American art traditions. As Anna Chave explains, the female nude served as "routine visual pleasure" for the "paradigmatic viewer and patron in the West" who historically "has been a straight male."<sup>102</sup> Gill Saunders' perspective may further contextualize the figure's growing popularity in America at the turn of the century. As summarized by Nunn, the *nude* became synonymous with the *female nude* according to Saunders "because nakedness connotes passivity, vulnerability; it is powerless and anonymous," therefore the nude was easily associated with "the female state and equated with femininity."<sup>103</sup> In this light, it is possible that the prevalent modes of depicting the figure as subservient or as sexually available were a nostalgic responses from contemporary male artists and viewers to the various ways that their privileged positions in the social hierarchy were being undermined by the development of women's suffrage and increased engagement of women in public life.

For women artists who sought to assert their professional statuses as equal to their male peers, the demeaning traditional modes that existed for representing the figures of their own sex were problematic. It's not surprising that most shied away from portraying the female nude in

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<sup>102</sup> Anna Chave, "Feminism, Identity, and Self-Representation: Self-Portraiture Reimagined," in *The Female Gaze: Women Artists Making Their World*, ed. Robert Cossolino (Philadelphia: The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 2012), 79.

<sup>103</sup> Pamela Gerrish Nunn, "A View of One's Own: Female Artists and the Nude." *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 1, no. 1 (2000): 65.

their art. At the same time, participating in certain genres that incorporated the figure could be significant opportunities for them to assert and reaffirm their artistic professionalism in varying ways. In adopting such a historically traditional subject, women artists could demonstrate their skill in rendering the human form and communicate that they had acquired a formal art education. Further, in taking up subject matter that was high in market demand, they might increase sales of their artworks.

In addition to these practical concerns, it is also important to consider how the rapidly changing situation of women in American society may have acted as motivation for them to address the theme of the female body. To understand this, Rosemary Betterton's approach of "embodied subjectivity" is helpful.<sup>104</sup> In particular Betterton writes that there was a "reconfiguration of female embodiment politically and artistically between 1890 and 1914."<sup>105</sup> As concerns relating to women's bodies were brought to the forefront of conversations in major nationwide debates on issues such as the falling birthrate, motherhood, birth control, the sexual revolution, education and more, women artists may also have felt compelled to take control of the female body in their art.<sup>106</sup> In this regard, some portrayals of the female nude by women artists may be viewed as efforts to reclaim agency for their sex through artistic representations. For many women in the United States during this period, joining the workforce and becoming active agents in guiding the direction of their lives placed them, for the first time, in positions in which they felt empowered and independent. Women artists who pursued professional careers as

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<sup>104</sup> Rosemary Betterton, introduction to *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body* (London: Routledge, 1996), 3.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> For info on how representations of the female body were treated in the context of the campaign for women's suffrage, see chapter three, "A Perfect Woman?: The Political Body of Suffrage," in Rosemary Betterton, *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body* (London: Routledge, 1996).

artists would have been no exception. In representing the female nude, women artists could theoretically gain control of a figure, which historically had been under the purview of the opposite sex, in a similar manner to how they had gained control of their own lives. Recognizing the depictions of the female nude by women artists as subjective and, to a certain degree, autobiographical helps rationalize why they risked taking up subject matter that could potentially threaten their social and professional reputations. It also can provide clarity to the connection that viewers often made between the artist and the images of female nudes they portrayed in their artworks.

Given these practical and social benefits, in addition to the inherent risks connected to women artists representing the female nude, what were some of the different approaches they used to incorporate the subject matter in their art? As I will show, several drew on the various traditional motifs that were used by their male peers, but adapted them in ways that reflected the identities they wanted to project as professional women artists.

### The Academic Female Nude as a Demonstration of Skill and Expertise

Some women artists working throughout this period benefited from adhering to traditional motifs when depicting the female nude by allowing it to function as a demonstration of their artistic skill and expertise. By portraying the figure in its classical, idealized form and as various mythological and allegorical characters, artists could participate in popular artistic genres while also maintaining a psychological distance from being identified with the nudes in their artworks. The already mentioned, Robbins and Polly Thayer are two artists whose use of the figure in their art provides examples of some of the ways that women working in more academic artistic styles approached the subject. Working at different ends of this period's historical spectrum, in the 1890s and late 1920s, their use of the figure reinforces its continuing importance

to artists a signifier of professional skill. Though neither artist challenged the tradition of the artistic female nude outright, both took steps to thwart the patriarchal tastes to which such figures historically had been used to appeal to.

Active in Paris during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Robbins early on defied rules of acceptable subject matter for women artists by making the female nude prominent iconography within her oeuvre. Brandon Fortune has illuminated the career of this lesser-known artist.<sup>107</sup> She notes how at least one of Robbins' entries each year to the Paris Salon consisted of a large-scale female nude.<sup>108</sup> These works observe the traditional motifs commonly used to represent the figure, such as private domestic scenes in the boudoir, and are rendered in the academic style that was popular in the Salon.<sup>109</sup> Fortune further explains how these paintings earned her substantial attention and repute and that she enjoyed a commanding position within the atelier of Charles Auguste Émile Durand.<sup>110</sup>

The fleshy nudes in Robbins' paintings do not readily challenge the conventional vocabulary for depicting the figure. However, Fortune draws attention to the artist's formal choices, which subtly complicates its traditional narrative as an object of male seduction in art from this period. For example, Robbins' 1893 painting *Nonchalante* [fig. 2.7] of a woman asleep in an armchair keeps in line with the motif of the lone, vulnerable nude shown in interior, domestic spaces. Undistracted by any radical departure from normal depictions of the female

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<sup>107</sup> Brandon Brame Fortune, "'Not Above Reproach': The Career of Lucy Lee-Robbins," *American Art* 12, no. 1 (1998): 40-65.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 42. However, as Fortune explains in her article, while Robbins gained recognition for her paintings of female nudes, it also worked against her in many ways by compromising both her social and professional reputations.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

nude, nineteenth century viewers could focus on Robbins' ability to render the figure's body. However, as Fortune points out, the nudes that appear in Robbins' paintings appear "less burdened with external narratives of seduction" as was common among artists at the time.<sup>111</sup> Instead, Fortune describes the as freely enveloped within their own world.<sup>112</sup> As the title of Robbins' painting suggests, the sleeping woman is happily unconcerned with her surroundings, whatever or whomever they may involve. Moreover, in her compositional choice to allow only a clandestine view of the figure's backside, viewers of her painting are entrapped in a voyeuristic narrative. However, by not entirely blocking their seductive gaze, Robbins manages not to sanction the erotic interests of the clientele who purchased her work.

In another painting, Robbins portrays the female nude as more self-determined and defiant which depart from the traditional narratives that existed for the figure as an object of sexual desire and lust. In her 1891 work, *Les trois Parques* [fig. 2.8], Robbins' pictures three large salon-styled nudes as the three fates from Greek mythology. Fortune notes that mythological themes were unusual within the artist's oeuvre, which begs inquiry into her decision to take up this subject.<sup>113</sup> A clue may be found in the sense of authority and power that the figures in Robbins' painting convey. One figure unabashedly confronts the viewer's gaze while another is seated in a regal pose while fate, which is symbolized in the painting as a thread that each figure grasps onto, is under their control. This work is somewhat similar to Susan Eakins' painting, *The Three Fates*, from 1881 [fig. 2.9] in the Dallas Museum of Art. While Robbins' painting differs from Eakins' work in that she pictures her figures either partially or

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 48. *Les trois Parques* (*The Three Fates*) is the only known painting of Robbins of an allegorical subject.

entirely nude instead of fully-clothed, one cannot help but wonder whether some of the attraction this myth had for both artists rested in the command that female deities possessed in the myth's narrative.

Four decades later, artist Polly Thayer's use of the female nude in her painting *Circles* [fig. 2.10] of 1929 shows the way the figure continued serve as a demonstration of artistic expertise. Before shifting later towards a modernist vocabulary in her art, Thayer worked in the style of the Boston School during which time her teacher, Philip Hale, suggested that she paint a nude for her first grand-scale painting of her career.<sup>114</sup> Presumably, Hale's recommendation was based on his knowing how painting the figure would highlight his student's skill and earn her respect as an artist. Thayer was well versed in figure drawing, as reflected by her remarks on her training, "you did a nude in a week, and you worked...all day on it... each day."<sup>115</sup> Indeed, Thayer's painting *Circles* launched her early career, earning her a prestigious award and critical acclaim.<sup>116</sup>

While Hale may have given Thayer the idea to paint a "nude," certain formal attributes of *Circle* reveal the artist's own acumen and intent for the painting to serve as an example of her artistic proficiency. Thayer demonstrates her skill through her realistic rendering of the model's musculature and through her ability to capture the light reflecting off the woman's skin. Further, in pairing the figure in her work with a tiger fur and luxurious blue silk fabric, she employs stock visual devices used by past artists in their representations of women. For instance, in his 1881 painting *In the Studio* [fig. 2.11], William Merritt Chase pairs the figure of a woman next to

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<sup>114</sup> Polly Thayer, interview by Robert F. Brown, May 12, 1995 – February 1, 1996, for the Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, transcript.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., Thayer won the First Hallgarten Prize from the National Academy of Design in 1929.

exotic, sensual accoutrements like musical instruments and imported textiles that are scattered about the lavish interior setting. In doing so, the woman becomes another ornament in the artist's studio, enhancing his professional persona. However, while Thayer highlights the sensuality and beauty of these objects and of the figure, she also takes steps to obfuscate the female nude as being viewed as a mere object available for the consumption of her viewers. By portraying the woman in her painting engaged in the activity of drawing circles on the wall Thayer suggests another purpose for the figure beyond that of simply serving as a source of visual pleasure for her beholders. Moreover, in showing the female nude with her body turned toward her makeshift canvas, Thayer averts views of the figure's breasts and genitals. Considering the artistic activity that the female nude performs, it's worth considering whether Thayer, to some degree, identified with the figure and was as a result compelled to grant her some modesty in the painting.

As seen in the work of Robbins and Thayer, the degree to which women artists working in more academically-oriented artistic styles departed from traditional modes of representing the figure was often minimal. As a result, images of the female nude in Robbins' and Thayer' paintings could function as an overall demonstration of their skill.<sup>117</sup> Even still, while imaging the figure using these conventional motifs could elevate their professional statuses, it did not make them immune to the negative effects that such displays of nudity in art, which remained controversial well into the twentieth century, could have on their social reputations. For example, it's likely that the Robbins' specialization in paintings of nude women was the catalyst for the

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<sup>117</sup> Fortune, "Not Above Reproach," 49. However, Fortune notes that some critics believed that Carolus-Duran was finishing her paintings, insinuating that their disbelief that Robbins was incapable of possessing the skill her works demonstrated. As Fortune suggests, these remarks surely stemmed in part from the fact that Robbins was a woman, thus inherently incapable of the same skill of her male instructor.

rumors that she had an affair with her instructor, Carolus-Duran.<sup>118</sup> Such predicaments illustrate the possible peril women artists faced in incorporating the female nude into their art, but also the professional ambition that propelled some to take such risks.

### The Female Nude as the Professional Artist's Model

Another common mode that some women artists adopted for their representations of the female nude was portraying the figure as the artist's model. With their access to nude models restricted until the late nineteenth century, and only limited thereafter, historically this motif was acted out between male artists and their female models.<sup>119</sup> The decisions of some women artists to adopt the motif can be understood in terms of the professional connotations that the figure symbolized in this role.

By portraying female nudes within the context of the studio, or various other means that identified the figures as models, artists could communicate notions of access, identity and authority, which enhanced their professional images. In addition to displaying their aptitude in life drawing by depicting the female nude in this role, artists could emphasize their financial ability to procure artists models; a frequent source of economic strain for artists, especially those who lacked a strong patron base. For women artists, there were additional ways that the figure, portrayed as the artist's model, could act as a referent to their professionalism. While the occupational pursuits of women in many fields, including art, were topics of constant debate in American society, the ability of women artists to provide visual proof that they had studied from

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 57. It was also rumored that he painted her works. Charles Auguste Émile Durand is also known as Carolus-Duran.

<sup>119</sup> I have found that male artists frequently portrayed themselves with female models even though they had access to male models as well. This supports the notion that, in addition to projecting their professional status, some male artists also sought to communicate the notion of sexual dominance.

nude models communicated their seriousness about the careers they had chosen. Fellow artists and others who were knowledgeable about the art industry were familiar with the costs involved with securing a model. Women artists who portrayed models in their art evoked their financial commitment to their profession and demonstrated their success, which had presumably provided them with enough income to hire said models.

Images by women artists in which they portray themselves working from female nude models in classroom or studio settings convey notions of privileged access to professional resources. Printmaker Peggy Bacon's drawing, *The Whitney Studio Club (Frenzied Effort)* [fig. 1.4] of 1925, is one such example. Bacon includes her self-portrait in this illustration, which depicts both male and female artists equally engaged in the study of the nude female model that is before them. Though she shows herself tucked away in the crowd along the back wall, Bacon prominently features women artists in the print. It is informative to compare Bacon's print with one of an identical subject by George Bellows from 1917. Unlike Bacon's image, however, in *The Life Class* [fig. 2.12], Bellows omits any sign of women artists, creating a scene in which male artists diligently work in an environment of privileged male access.<sup>120</sup> In contrast, Bacon's print demonstrate women's vital admittance to this important resource of study, but by showing men and women together in this print, Bacon suggests that the exclusive camaraderie, shared between male artists only a few years prior, is now shared between both sexes.

Representations of the female nude as the artist's model are also enveloped in a long-standing narrative in European and American art traditions that symbolizes the power relations between the dominant male artist and his subordinate female model. In this context, Anna

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<sup>120</sup> Albeit, in his print Bellows was depicting the reality of life classes that were still segregated between artists of different sexes during in the early twentieth century.

Chave's idea of the female nude serving as "routine visual pleasure" for the typical viewer who was a heterosexual male, once again bears mentioning.<sup>121</sup> She also writes "for male artists, refashioning the female figure has been an accustomed pursuit."<sup>122</sup> In other words, the occupations of heterosexual male artists give them the privilege to freely participate in the sexually pleasing act of looking upon the nude bodies of their female models.

While it is certainly not the case that all male artists regarded these experiences as moments of "visual pleasure," nor was it impossible for some women artists to derive sexual fulfillment from such occurrences, by taking up this theme in their own art, women artists introduced a new dynamic to the artist-model relationship. These results can be perceived in the humanizing nature in which Alice Pike Barney portrays the female nude model in her drawing *Between Poses* [fig. 2.13] from 1910. The pair of shoes, which the model has tossed off to her side, are a reminder of her life beyond the artist's studio. Furthermore, while the title of the drawing identifies her occupation, it also suggests a liminal moment of the model transitioning into a new pose. In doing so, Barney emphasizes the fact that the nude in her drawing represents a woman who has been hired to perform a service; modelling for artists. In addition to the stylistic realism that Barney uses in this image (Barney makes no attempt to hide the model's several rolls of fat or the bottom of her unclean), she complicates the traditional tendencies to view the female nude as a source of visual pleasure by amplifying the practical reasons for why the woman in her drawing is nude.

### The Modern Female Nude and the Canon

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<sup>121</sup> Chave, "Feminism, Identity, and Self-Representation," 79.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

With the introduction of avant-garde artistic styles in American art at the turn of the twentieth century, many of the themes, values and styles which for years had been upheld by the art academies as the paradigmatic forms required for belonging to the traditional artistic canon were challenged. In the decades that followed, many artists moved towards abstraction, sometimes abandoning figures in their artworks completely. However, one remnant from the old regime that continued to be relevant to avant-garde artists working across a broad range of styles was the figure of the female nude.

Whereas in preceding years, American artists of both sexes had to carefully navigate their portrayals of nude figures to keep in line with society's standards of decency, the spirit of rebellion and breaking from the past that characterized avant-gardism pushed many to incorporate the imagery in their work in bold and exciting new ways. Fascinating is the way that some artists' representations of the female nude juxtaposed radical new modernist visual vocabularies against the canon of Western art. Using traditional imagery to represent the figure as the reclining nude, as Venus, as bathers or as various biblical characters, some modernists made jarring statements demanding their inclusion, or refusal, to belong to the past. When executed by modernist women artists, whose gender had been systematically objectified and marginalized by those visual traditions and the institutions that had promoted them, this commentary could express additional meanings that were significant to their professional and social identities.

Kathleen McEnery's *Going to the Bath* [fig. 2.14], painted between 1905 and 1913, draws on the traditional motif of bathers frequently used around this time by modernists such as Matisse and Paul Cezanne as well as in the past by masters such as Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres. This painting is one of her two works that were exhibited in the 1913 Armory Show, both

of which prominently feature the female nude. In *Going to the Bath*, McEnery depicts two full length nudes as they shed their towels in preparation for a bath. The left figure's body is completely visible to the viewers while the other figure is displayed in profile with her face hidden. Their bobbed hairstyles and makeup would have appeared strikingly contemporary to viewers.

McEnery's choice to reference the traditional theme of bathers and show paintings that featured images of the female nude in the important context of the Armory show may be understood as a conscious attempt to position herself within a lineage of professional artists from past and present. An estimated 300,000 people in New York, Chicago and Boston attended the 1913 Armory Show where McEnery's paintings of the female nude were seen alongside similar works by notable European modernists like Wassily Kandinsky and Auguste Rodin.<sup>123</sup> However, while McEnery draws on a traditional convention to portray the female nude body, in a similar vein to her contemporaries, she makes bold stylistic choices that mark her as a modernist. For example, her expressionistic use of color of the bluish skin of the figures in *Going to the Bath*, would shocked American viewers in the same way they were startled by the color in Matisse's controversial painting *Blue Nude* that was also exhibited in the Armory Show when it travelled to Chicago and burned in effigy by local students there.

There is also may be evidence in this work that McEnery considered how, as a woman artist, representations of female nude in her paintings might be projected onto her by viewers. It is possible McEnery's preemptive awareness of this is what prompted her to represent the figures in *Going to the Bath* as active and more self-assured versus the passive figures that are often seen

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<sup>123</sup> In fact, it was at the Armory Show that Matisse's painting *Blue Nude* induced controversy causing students at the Art Institute of Chicago to burn copies of Matisse's painting in effigy.

in more traditional depictions that use the bather motif. For example, while the left figure is fully exposed to the viewer, her sideways gaze communicates her awareness of being watched. Her hunched over position leaves us wondering whether she has just met the eyes of the viewer or, perhaps she has had a few seconds to react after being seen and is pulling back her towel to cover herself? McEnery further undermines tradition in choosing not to identify the female nudes in her painting simply as “bathers,” which is so often the case among artists when titling works dealing with this subject. Instead, the figures are *going* to bathe versus the objectification that is projected onto traditional female nudes as *bathers*. While subtle, McEnery suggests a new narrative for the bathers in her painting, which does not necessarily assume that the viewer is invited along to watch them bathe and be provided with the seductive visual pleasure that act usually entails. The rather unfriendly feeling emitted from the figures in her painting perhaps were meant to communicate McEnery’s own resistance to the demeaning and belittling that members of her sex were so often subjected to in art world at that time.

Tradition is also evoked by some modernist women artists who portrayed themselves as iconic female nude figures from the history of art. Whereas in previous decades, some women had felt pressured to downplay their femininity to be taken seriously as the equals of their male colleagues, these artists’ radical nude self-portraits make bold statements about their womanhood and their professional identities. At the same time, by representing themselves as canonical nudes, they could maintain a degree of psychological distance that allowed them to declare their femininity, but not feel as though they were exposing their actual nude bodies. As will be discussed in Chapter Three, others also went a step further and used the figure as a more personal form of self-expression during this time.

Florine Stettheimer is an artist who took representations of the female body into uncharted territory by depicting herself in a nude self-portrait. For example, in her 1915 *Self-Portrait Nude* [fig. 2.15] Stettheimer portrays herself completely nude, which seems like a perplexing choice for such a normally reserved person.<sup>124</sup> At the same time, she refers to herself as a recognizable female nude character from the works of past masters: Titian's painting *Venus of Urbino* [fig. 2.16] and Édouard Manet's *Olympia* [fig. 2.17]. In all three paintings, the nudes appear in interior settings and lying on beds with their backs slightly elevated and their right legs crossed over their left. Most importantly, the figures gaze out at the viewer.<sup>125</sup> The correlations that Stettheimer draws to these iconic paintings, which her artistic peers would have readily identified, diverts attention away from herself as the subject of the work. In addition to being a study of the psychological self, Stettheimer's self-portrait aligns her with the masters who painted these famous earlier works. It is also interesting to consider how Stettheimer adapts Titian and Manet's compositions to change the placement of the bouquet of flowers. While Titian's *Venus* casually holds the bouquet in her hand and the nude in Manet's painting is presented with the bouquet by her servant, Stettheimer portrays herself in her painting holding up the flowers as if giving the viewer a chance to admire their beauty. With this alteration, in combination with the gesture of the figure's left hand, Stettheimer seems to almost mock the viewer by presenting them with something else to look at in addition to her nude body. It is also

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<sup>124</sup> Steven Watson, *Strange Bedfellows: The First American Avant-Garde* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), 259. Stettheimer was very guarded about her art. For her first one-woman show in 1916 at the Knoedler's gallery, she felt so uncomfortable about showing her art to the public that she decorated the walls of the gallery and made all the frames so that it would evoke a home. About the idea of selling one of her pieces she exclaimed, "what if one of her paintings hung in the bedroom of some man!" In this respect, her choice of a nude self-portrait is unusual. This painting was never exhibited, but given the fact that the Stettheimer's frequently held salons in their home, it was certainly seen by her close friends and family.

<sup>125</sup> However, it is true that the nude in Stettheimer's painting looks as if she is slightly gazing to her right.

likely that she meant for this to be a sarcastic comment on the way the figures in the earlier two paintings seem to be solely focused on pleasing the viewer.

### Conclusion

Many women artists found a solution in using traditional themes and motifs to portray the female nude. While these motifs had been shaped within a patriarchal system, women artists adapted them to incorporate the female nude into their art in ways that felt truthful to their gendered identities as well as their personal ambitions to be professionals in their fields. In one respect, this reflects the restrictive social environment in which they worked during this period, which disallowed them to stray from gendered stereotypes of women as existing for the sexual gratification of men and as their subservient counterparts. On the other hand, they benefited from this approach by promoting the idea that they were tied to a long lineage of European and American masters, thereby enhancing their professional statuses as artists. Further, many women artists exploited traditional motifs and themes involving the female nude as a means of declaring their revolt on conventional society and the conservatism of institutional systems.

Framed within the larger context of American culture of this period, the desire of several women artists to reclaim the figure of the female nude in their art parallels the larger American female population's assertion to control their own lives. The new narrative that women artists proposed for the female nude in their artworks arrived precisely when American women were figuring out their own future narratives.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ANNE BRIGMAN AND MARGUERITE ZORACH:

#### THE MODERN FEMALE NUDE IN NATURE

As discussed in Chapters One and Two, the value placed on artistic genres that incorporated the human figure in the late nineteenth century drove many women artists to depict the female nude despite the inherent risk that their gender posed to such representations being viewed as forms of self-identification. While some made efforts to subvert the conventional modes of representing the figure, women artists largely worked before the twentieth century within the framework of traditional motifs, which required assuming unnatural perspectives already predefined by patriarchal society.

In the early twentieth century, the development of modernism introduced the possibility for new layers of meaning and transformed the significance of the female nude as it appeared in the works of women artists. Several recognized that this figure could serve as a powerful tool for self-expression and took up such images in their art with a new vigor and confidence. However, while working with this theme offered new expressive possibilities, some of the ingrained narratives connected to its traditional representations continued to problematize their ability to use it as a form of personal symbolism or biographical self-reference.

Anne Brigman and Marguerite Zorach are two artists whose choice of the female nude as a prominent iconographical element in their work presents an opportunity to understand an under-explored aspect of the theme's prevalence within the new modernist terrain. Separated by artistic medium, style, location and a generation in age, Brigman and Zorach seem an unlikely pair for comparison. Though active during the same period, it's unlikely that they ever met and or became familiar with each other's work. However, an important similarity between Brigman

and Zorach emerges at an early point in their careers when both artists seem to have relied on images of the female nude portrayed in natural settings as a means to merge their professional and feminine identities. By drawing on the positive associations of women's seemingly inherent connection to the natural world, a notion which gained pronounced interest from modernists in the early twentieth century, Brigman and Zorach attempted to subvert a common traditional motif for the female nude that had been founded on expectations of sensual male desire and idealizations about feminine purity. Instead, both artists frame nature as a symbolic source of empowerment and liberation for the nude female figures in their art that mirrored their personal experiences.

While analyzing the work of these women artists allows for an appreciation of the new meanings that were being assigned to the female nude, the difficult balance between personal expression and professional aspiration that modernists such as Brigman and Zorach faced becomes clearer. Although both artists achieved notable success they also were subject to marginalization in the art world and faced essentialist readings of their work because of their gender. While Brigman was one of many Pictorialist photographers who depicted the female nude, her photographs were often reduced to visual manifestations of feminine sexuality. Such interpretations plagued the work of Marguerite Zorach as well, and she was also typically seen as the less significant, feminine counterpart to her artist husband, William Zorach. Over time, both of these women artists became acutely aware of the inequalities that existed between the sexes in the art world and spoke out against them. In this chapter, I propose that the diminished presence of the female nude in both artists' later oeuvres may have been their response to the way their gender had come to be perceived in connection to their professional identities as artists. However, prior to this, Brigman and Zorach both demonstrated a strong interest in the theme of

the female nude at crucial early stages of their careers, and this focus may be read on both their parts as an attempt to reclaim the female nude figure as a modern woman and to positively reinforce their avant-garde professional images.

### Anne Brigman and the Female Nude in Pictorialist Photography

Brigman's 1908 photograph, *Soul of the Blasted Pine* [fig. 3.1], exemplifies the photographer's distinct aesthetic that was centered on depictions of the female nude in nature. In this photograph, a female figure rises from the remnants of a tree on a rugged outcrop in the mountainous California landscape. The low vantage point highlights the rough surface of the mountainside in the immediate foreground as the viewer's gaze gravitates towards the scene enfolding near the center of the pictorial space. The extended arm and splayed fingers the figure create a theatrical, yet ambiguous gesture, as her head is turned toward the sky, making her facial expression unreadable. In contrast, Brigman makes no attempt to hide the model's body, leaving the viewer free to contemplate the sense of vitality the female form shares with her natural surroundings.

Brigman is best known for her photographs of the female nude in natural landscapes, ranging from serene, ethereal environments to the volatile, jagged terrain of the Sierra Nevada mountain range in the Western United States as seen in *Soul of the Blasted Pine*. The female nude has a well-defined place within Pictorialist photography of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but in her photographs Brigman presented such figures in a way that had not been seen before. Whereas previously the nude was primarily pictured by male photographers within the controlled environment of a studio Brigman was innovative in placing her nudes within sublime natural landscapes to imbue the female body with certain qualities that were not

typically associated with women.<sup>126</sup> Often portraying the figures alone, Brigman relied heavily on the natural environment to create the associative meaning of her photographs. In some instances, nature acts as a source of quiet, mystic spirituality for the female nude, while in others it conveys a more ardent sense of empowerment and strength. In doing so, Brigman liberated the nude female form from its traditional role as an object of desire and beauty and transformed it into a vehicle of expression for the modern woman that evoked notions of independence and power that she identified with on a personal level.

To understand how the appearance of the female nude in Brigman's photographs conformed to her conception of the modern woman, one must look back to her unconventional upbringing in Victorian America in the late nineteenth century. From the onset, her life was marked by a certain degree of deviation from normalcy. She was born in Hawaii in 1869 into a Christian missionary family with ties to the area dating back to 1828.<sup>127</sup> However, rather than embrace the religious ideologies espoused by her family, she revered aspects of native Polynesian religious customs and the natural Hawaiian locale, which would later have a significant impact on value she assigned to nature later in life.<sup>128</sup> At sixteen, she moved with her family to California and in 1894, at twenty-five, she married a sea captain.<sup>129</sup> Little has been documented about Brigman's life during these years, but supposedly she accompanied her

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<sup>126</sup> Susan Ehrens, "Sacred Quest: The Life and Work of Anne Brigman," in *A Poetic Vision: The Photographs of Anne Brigman* (Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1995), 27.

<sup>127</sup> Ehrens, *A Poetic Vision*, 18.

<sup>128</sup> Robin Lynn Wallace, "The Glory of the Open: Spirituality and Nature in the Photography and Poetry of Anne Brigman" (master's thesis, University of Louisville, 2000), 2-9. Wallace notes also the exposure to Polynesian religion that Brigman was exposed to through her grandparents. Her grandparents were missionaries and were interested in Polynesian culture and religion, collected Polynesian idols and translating a volume of myths from the culture.

<sup>129</sup> Ehrens, *A Poetic Vision*, 19.

husband on several voyages.<sup>130</sup> Most of Brigman's married life, however, was probably spent living apart from her husband while he was away at sea. During an era in which social expectations asserted that the primary roles of women were as wives and mothers, long periods of separation from her husband would have given Brigman more agency over the course of her life than majority of women experienced. In addition, the couple did not have children, leaving her largely free from traditional familial social obligations. Unrestrained in how she spent her time, she became involved with the bohemian artists and intellectuals of the San Francisco Bay area, dabbling in acting, poetry and painting before discovering photography and dedicating herself fully to the art form.<sup>131</sup>

Brigman's career as a photographer followed an equally unconventional and independent trajectory. Because she did not decide until the age of thirty-two to transform her passion for photography into a professional pursuit, the delayed start of her career placed her outside the community of "girl art students," which had gained broad acceptance in the United States by the twentieth century.<sup>132</sup> Moreover, her isolation in the Western United States, away from the happenings of the New York art world, and the predominate view that still existed in the early twentieth century that photography was a mechanical technique rather than a form of fine art, presented her with limited opportunities for receiving an artistically-oriented education or training in the medium. Like many other artists interested in photography as an artform during this period, Brigman was largely self-taught and gained experience by participating in the

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

thriving network of amateur photograph clubs that existed in major cities on the east and west coasts, particularly in California.

Difficulty in dating Brigman's few early unpublished photographs and a general lack of extant examples of her earliest work complicate efforts to trace the emergence of the female nude in her oeuvre. However, aspects of what we know about her early aesthetic ideas prefigure her later focus on the female nude in nature. Susan Ehrens describes the few examples of her early photographs as mainly consisting of portraits and landscapes that were stylistically reminiscent of the then-popular Tonalist style of painting.<sup>133</sup> However, she also calls attention to the symbolic titles that Brigman used for several of her early photographs such as *Madonna*, *Conscience*, and *Motherhood*.<sup>134</sup> These titles share in common a sense of rebirth and renewal sometimes associated with the female sex, and may be read as the artist's emerging interest in positive displays of female empowerment and authority that would later become a theme in her work. In one early undated photograph, entitled *Spring* [fig. 3.2] her unique use of the female form in nature begins to take shape. The dark tones and subtle contrast gradations in the foreground lends a romantic quality to the scene. At the same time, the figure's nudity is implied but not prominently displayed as it would be in her later works.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Possibly the first example of Brigman's experimentation with a nude figure is in her 1904 photograph *Exultation*, which portrays a nude male. It is interesting to consider how the sense of the figure's physical detachment from nature, which Brigman renders through certain compositional choices, differs from her images of the female nude in nature. Set against a monochromatic sky, the model's body and jagged profile of the cliff are sharply outlined. In contrast to the sense of the figure being surrounded by nature that is suggested with the low vantage point in *Soul of the Blasted Pine*, in *Exultation* there is no overlap of the figure's body and natural elements. Instead, the angle Brigman chooses for *Exultation* conjures an image of the figure looking down onto an expansive valley that is more suggestive of a proprietorship of nature than the harmonious unification that many of her later photographs that feature nude female figures suggest.

While Brigman's isolated position out West provided her some artistic autonomy, she eventually became involved with the Photo-Secession photography movement and this had a major impact on both her aesthetic ideas and on the development of her career. In 1902, Brigman obtained one of the first copies of *Camera Work*, a periodical published by Alfred Stieglitz that contained reproductions of photographs by Photo-Secession members as well as some works by modernist artists.<sup>136</sup> The periodical was especially valuable in connecting her to a large network of like-minded, professional photographers which promoted a sense of community. Shortly after reviewing her first copy of *Camera Work*, she wrote to Stieglitz and initiated a professional relationship with the notable leader of modern photography that would last for several decades.<sup>137</sup> After seeing examples of her work, Stieglitz named Brigman first a Photo-Secession member and then a fellow; a title that, as Michael G. Wilson points out, had not previously been granted to any photographer in the West.<sup>138</sup> Formally accepted into the Photo-Secession community, Brigman received valuable professional opportunities to build her reputation as an artist. For example, between 1909 and 1913, Brigman's photographs were published in three issues of *Camera Work*, gaining important public exposure, which contributed to the establishment of her professional identity.<sup>139</sup>

Also significant for the development of her career were the photographs and theoretical essays published in *Camera Work*, which exposed Brigman to important themes in Pictorialist

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<sup>136</sup> Ehrens, *A Poetic Vision*, 22.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>138</sup> Michael G. Wilson, "Northern California: Heart of the Storm," in *Pictorialism in California: Photographs, 1900-1940* (Malibu, California: The J. Paul Getty Museum), 10. Michael G. Wilson has pointed out that she accomplished this after having only exhibited in two regional salons.

<sup>139</sup> Brigman's photographs were published in *Camera Work*, no. 25 (January 1909), *Camera Work*, no. 38 (April 1912) and *Camera Work*, no. 44 (October 1913).

photography and modernist art that would come to influence her own images. In her early correspondence with Stieglitz, she expressed her fascination in specific photographs she saw published in the periodical, singling out the Stieglitz's *The Hand of Man* [fig. 3.3] and Gertrude Kasebier's *The Manger* [fig. 3.4] as particularly striking.<sup>140</sup> Her attention, especially, to Kasebier's work is noteworthy for its depiction of a subject with a strong female protagonist. However, more relevant in terms of the eventual direction that Brigman's art would take are numerous images of the female nude, which appear as early as 1903 in the second issue of the periodical.<sup>141</sup> In the years leading up to Brigman's own photographs being published, seven of Steichen's images depicting unclothed female models could be seen in the pages of *Camera Work*. The year 1906 was a particularly popular year as the periodical published the work of four different photographers, all of whom portrayed the female nude.<sup>142</sup> While it's true that these numbers may tell us more about Steiglitz's own preferences as the editor than the individual interests of each photographer, they add to the likelihood that Brigman, an aspiring professional, came to correlate professional excellence with representations of the female nude as artistic subject matter.

The photographs of the female nude that Brigman saw in the pages of *Camera Work* were largely a continuation of the paradigm for portraying it that existed among other fine art mediums, which depicted the female body as an object of aesthetic beauty and visual pleasure. The figures in these photographs are mostly shown alone, in obscure, undefined spaces. Often

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<sup>140</sup> Ehrens, *A Poetic Vision*, 22. Given Brigman's own aspirations, one can imagine the inspiration that she derived from seeing Kasebier's photographs published.

<sup>141</sup> *Camera Work* no. 2 (April 1903). Two photographs of the female nude by Edward Steichen appear in this issue entitled *Dawn-Flowers* and *Doler*.

<sup>142</sup> The photographers whose works depicting the female nude that were published in 1906 were Edward Steichen, René Le Bègue's, Constant Puyo and Robert Demachy.

the subject's faces are hidden, thereby leaving the viewer's attention to focus on the nude bodies in the image. Further objectifying the figures are the titles used for the photographs, which sometimes refer to the subjects as animals or simply suggest a mood. For example, in Frank Eugene's photograph entitled *La Cigale* or *The Cicada* [fig. 3.5], one of the first examples of a female nude published in *Camera Work*, the figure is portrayed in a hunched position with her body collapsing into itself.<sup>143</sup> Her left hand rests lethargically on the back of her head while her right arm blocks her face from the viewer's gaze. The foliage background is generic and provides little contextual information for how to read the image. In another photograph by Robert Demachy simply called *Struggle* [fig. 3.6], which appears in the same issue, the background is rendered even less important as Demachy has opted to use the frequent Pictorialist technique of scratching the negative so that the figure claws at a fictitious abstraction of waves.<sup>144</sup> The feeling of vulnerability evoked in Demachy's photograph is echoed again in photographs by Edward Steichen that appeared a few years later in *Camera Work*. In both *The Little Model* [fig. 3.7] and *Model and Mask* [fig. 3.8] the figures appear in interior settings, and seem to shun the lens of the camera, which creates an uncomfortable voyeuristic interplay between the viewer and subject. Evoking introspection, these images recall the modernist fascination with the female psyche that captured the interest of artists like Stieglitz in the early twentieth century. Still other photographs continue along traditional lines by framing the female nude body as that of the artist's model as

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<sup>143</sup> This photography by Frank Eugene was published in the sixth issue of *Camera Work* and were the first to be published after Steichen's photographs that were published in the second issue of the periodical.

<sup>144</sup> Kathleen Pyne, "The Speaking Body and the Feminine Voice: Anne Brigman," in *Modernism and the Feminine Voice: O'Keeffe and the Women of the Stieglitz Circle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 69. Pyne believes that Brigman was clearly looking at this photograph when she created her 1911 photograph *Via Dolarosa*.

exhibited by Constant Puyo's *Nude Against the Light* [fig. 3.9] and René Le Bègue's *Study* [fig. 3.10] both from 1906.

It is evident from Brigman's photographs that she was heavily influenced by the other Pictorialist photographers whose works she saw in the periodical and in the amateur photography exhibitions in which she participated. For example, all but two of Brigman's ten photographs that were published in *Camera Work* feature the female nude, reflecting her awareness of the iconography's value within the Pictorialist field. At the same time, Brigman's distinctive approach in situating the figure in nature and allocating it a degree of agency not seen typically seen in the work of her contemporaries is also evident in these images.

In her 1906 photograph, *The Source* [fig. 3.11], Brigman departs from conventional mode of depicting the female nude in interior settings. Ehrens notes how historically the female nude was a subject primarily photographed in a studio where photographers, who were usually male, could manipulate technical aspects, such as lighting, which dictated the model's appearance.<sup>145</sup> In contrast, the outdoor setting and the model's naturalistic stance in *The Source* downplay the photographer's role in the forming the composition. In this image, the figure crouches among a creek bed of pebbles and river stones while behind her, wildflowers and brush form a natural screen, which, despite being outdoors, creates an intimate scene. However, this sense of privacy is not to be confused as an invitation for the viewer to assume the role of a voyeur. Rather than render her anonymous by hiding her face, the model's identity is clearly discernable, which creates a feeling of closeness between the viewer and the subject that complicates her being objectified.

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<sup>145</sup> Ehrens, *A Poetic Vision*, 27.

While a select number of her works include small groups of two or three figures, more frequently Brigman depicts her nude female subjects alone. In doing so, she participates in traditional conventions for representing the female nude. However, the sense of vulnerability that often accompanies such lone representations of the figure in the work of other photographers is notably absent in Brigman's images. This is exemplified Brigman's representation of the female nude in her 1909 photograph *Dawn* [fig. 3.12], in which the woman appears to enjoy her solitary state in nature. Lying next to a small pool of water that has collected in rocky crevice, the curve of the model's hip and the graceful bend of her arm mimic the layers of rolling mountains that appear in the distant landscape. In addition to the interesting composition that the contour of the nude's body helps to form in the image, her languid pose suggests a feeling of ease and comfort with the state of her nudity and her enjoyment of this quiet moment alone in nature. This is further evoked in how the figure tilts her head to admire the reflection in the pool of water. In showing the figure enjoying the vision of her own nude body, Brigman upsets the normal exclusivity of the viewer's gaze.

The positive affirmation of solitude exhibited by the female figures in Brigman's photographs can be connected to the value that she placed on her own independence, which she saw as a prerequisite for her professional success. Evidence that Brigman correlated professional opportunity with freedom from traditional feminine social roles is found in the personal sacrifices that she seems to have made in her life to further her career. Notably, her separation from her husband at a crucial point in the development of her career, shortly after her return from a ten-month long trip to New York in which she visited Stieglitz and received training at Clarence White's photography school in New Hampshire, may be viewed as a possible move to release herself from her traditional obligations of being a wife in order to focus on solidifying her

profession as an artist.<sup>146</sup> The response that Brigman regarding her decision to separate from her husband in a published interview not long after the informal dissolution of her marriage support this assumption.<sup>147</sup> In the article, she defends her actions as necessary to provide her “absolute freedom” to “work out her destiny.”<sup>148</sup> While it’s possible that her parents’ divorce a few years prior had desensitized her to the threat that divorce, still highly controversial and rare in the early twentieth century, posed to her reputation, it’s more likely that Brigman saw her independence as necessary in order to build her career.<sup>149</sup> Lois Rudnick explains that this either-or mentality of having either to fully dedicate oneself to one’s career or not have one at all was common among “New Women” artists of Brigman’s generation, who frequently abstained from marriage and starting families and instead formed systems of support with other members of their sex.<sup>150</sup> As will later be discussed, the personal symbolism that Brigman ascribed to nature as a space to act out nonconventional displays of feminine behavior such as independence and empowerment, which she valued in her personal life, would lead her to use the natural environment to subvert traditional modes for representing the female nude in her photographs.

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<sup>146</sup> Pyne, *Modernism and the Feminine Voice*, 82.

<sup>147</sup> “Fear Retards woman, Avers Mrs. Brigman,” *San Francisco Call* (San Francisco, California), June 8, 1913. Brigman sets the record straight when asked about her “divorce,” saying that she was indeed not divorced, but has been separated from her husband for the past three years. Given the date of the article, this would place the time of Brigman’s separation from her husband around the summer of 1910, prior to her stay in New York, which started in mid-February 1910. It is likely that Brigman is approximating the time she separated from her husband, but if indeed they separated before her trip to New York, it would emphasize her regarding the advancement of her career as conditional to her being released from the marriage.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> Ehrens, *A Poetic Vision*, 19.

<sup>150</sup> Lois Rudnick, “The New Woman,” In *1915, the Cultural Moment: The New Politics, the New Woman, the New Psychology, the New Art and the New Theatre in America*, ed. by Adele Heller and Lois Rudnick, 69-81. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 75.

## Marguerite Zorach and the Avant-Garde Nude

The female nude also occupies a prominent position within the early oeuvre of artist Marguerite Zorach. In her 1915 print *Provincetown Players* [fig. 3.13] a group of male and female figures stand out against a background of abstracted forms. The print illustrates a scene from Louise Bryant's 1916 play *The Game*, put on by the Provincetown Players, an avant-garde theatrical troupe with which Marguerite and her husband, William Zorach, became involved in the mid-nineteen teens.<sup>151</sup> Efram Burk describes the narrative unfolding in the scene: "a poet (the figure on the far left) challenges and eventually beats Death (the second figure to the left) in a game of dice for the souls of two lovers (on the right)."<sup>152</sup> Zorach has chosen to portray the figures as nude, breaking down the bodies of both sexes into their most elemental shapes.<sup>153</sup> The series of repeating elongated oval shapes that make up their arms and legs forms a chain across the horizontal axis of the picture plan, and the strong sense of syncopation creates a formal unity within the entire composition, most explicitly among the figures themselves. Treating each with an equal sense of scale, Zorach influences the viewer to divide their attention equally between the male and female figures in the print.

The multiple figures and mix-sexed grouping in *Provincetown* is one of several approaches that Zorach used to portray the female nude in her early work. In contrast to the solitary figures in Brigman's Pictorialist landscapes, in Zorach's art the female nude frequently

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<sup>151</sup> Efram Burk, "The Graphic Art of Marguerite Thompson Zorach," *Woman's Art Journal* 25, no. 1 (Spring-Summer, 2004): 14. Burk notes that *Provincetown Players* became one of the artist's best-known graphic works and was repeatedly reproduced by the Provincetown Players in their publicity material.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., Burk aptly notes how Zorach has rendered the musculature of the figures which is reminiscent of Assyrian carvings and black and red-figure style painting found in ancient Greek pottery. Also interesting is that Marguerite designed the costumes for the play.

appears in groups and with the opposite sex in addition to instances where the figure appears alone, more typically, in her later work. Examples of such representations are found across a multitude of different mediums and artistic styles. Although Zorach began her career primarily as a painter, she later took up printmaking, batik and embroidery. Zorach incorporated this kind of imagery into her work in each of these mediums, ranging from fauvist stylizations of the figure outlined in blue to the cubist-inspired paintings from the early nineteen-twenties.

While the style, medium or composition may vary, nature is a constant theme in Zorach's early works that depict the female nude. Like Brigman, she bounds her images of the figure in natural settings. Using it as symbolic terrain for the nudes in her artworks, Zorach frames nature as a neutral space in which, free from the pressures of modern society, a sense of harmonious cooperation and equality exists between men and women. In other instances, women appear in nature alone in idyllic moments of self-sufficiency or in scenes of camaraderie with other women. Like Brigman's photographs, Zorach's works can be viewed as adding an important feminine perspective to the figure's more traditional narratives.

Zorach's approach in depicting the female nude was shaped by her experience in establishing a professional career as a modernist woman artist in the early twentieth century. While her training and educational path differed from those artists working in more academic artistic styles, opportunities for her to become familiar with the important status of the female nude in European and American art and its dominant narratives were no less accessible. Like Brigman, Zorach was from the West; she was born in Santa Rosa, California in 1887.<sup>154</sup> However, unlike the elder photographer, Zorach marked her intent to become an artist at an early

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<sup>154</sup> Robert Tarbell, *Marguerite Zorach: The Early Years, 1908-20* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1973), 14.

age. As an adolescent, she took an interest in drawing and in high school she took art courses, which also exposed her to study of Ancient Greek and Roman sculpture and the work of the old masters.<sup>155</sup> The verisimilitude of a drawing [fig. 3.14] in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, which she completed around the age of thirteen, reveals her early artistic aptitude. Shortly after graduating from high school, Zorach formally declared her intent to become an artist, and in 1908 she accepted an invitation from her Aunt Adelaide to move to Paris to study art. Her attempt to study at the premiere Parisian art academy, the *École des Beaux-Arts*, however, was thwarted by her inability to pass the entrance exam due to having never drawn from the live nude model.<sup>156</sup> As an alternative, Zorach tried a short enrollment at another traditional Parisian academy before realizing her stylistic preference for the avant-garde; she then enrolled at the *Académie de La Palette* in 1911 where she studied with the Scottish Colorist artist John Duncan Fergusson.<sup>157</sup>

From her experience in the Parisian art world it would have been immediately clear to Zorach that the female nude was a favored subject among modernist as well as traditionalist artists, thereby influencing the young, aspiring painter to adopt the female nude as a key element in the iconography of her early oeuvre. While the conservative climate in the United States had made the nude a rarity in American art until the end of the nineteenth century, by the beginning of the twentieth century, artists working in more traditional academic styles on both continents

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid. Tarbell also notes that Zorach took a "university extension art history course" in old master paintings.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 15. Zorach also studied at *École de la Grande Chaumiere* with Francis Auburtin.

were beginning to incorporate the figure in their art.<sup>158</sup> In particular, modernist artists were enthusiastically portraying the nude figure using a variety of mediums; evidence of which Zorach likely experienced on her first day in Paris when she reportedly visited the 1908 Salon d'Automne.<sup>159</sup> While it's unclear which works representing the female nude she may have seen on this day, it is evident that she gained at least some familiarity with Matisse's work which, at this time, frequently incorporated the figure. For example, Efram Burk has documented Zorach's commentary on some visitors' quizzical reactions to seeing Matisse's *Green Stripe (Madame Matisse)* in the 1908 exhibition.<sup>160</sup>

A drawing titled *The Desert* [fig. 3.15] from 1909 may be one of Zorach's earliest depictions of a nude figure and it offers a sign that she was influenced by similar depictions found in Matisse's work from the same period. While we can't tell if the figure in Zorach's small sketch is meant to represent a man or woman, the figure's posture bears striking resemblance to the crouching figures in three of Matisse's major paintings of only two years prior that portray female nudes as bathers: *Bathers with a Turtle* (1907), *Le Luxe I* (1907) and *Les trois baigneuses (Three Bathers)* (1907). Further, the inclusion of a dog in Zorach's drawing recalls the peculiar, yet comparable combination in Matisse's 1907 painting *Bathers with a Turtle* [fig. 3.16].

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<sup>158</sup> E. McSherry Fowble, "Without a Blush: The Movement toward Acceptance of the Female Nude as an Art Form in America, 1900-1925," *Winterthur Portfolio* 9, (1974): 103-121. In her article, Fowble contrasts the reception of the female nude in the United States versus in Europe.

<sup>159</sup> Efram Burk, *Clever Fresno Girl: The Travel Writings of Marguerite Thompson Zorach (1908-1915)* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 29-30. Burk notes that the 1905 Salon d'Automne was famous for introducing Fauvism into the avant-garde art scene. Matisse, Maruice Vlaminck and Andre Derain showed their work at this exhibition.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., Zorach recorded her observations to visitors' reactions to artwork exhibited in the 1908 Salon d'Automne in an article she wrote entitled "The Impressionist School of Art."

In addition to attending exhibitions around Paris that featured modernist works of art, through her aunt's friendship with Gertrude Stein, whom her aunt knew from her childhood in San Francisco, Zorach had the opportunity to attend the collector's infamous salons.<sup>161</sup> At such events, Zorach could have viewed important modernist works in the Stein family's private collection as well as gained the opportunity to meet significant figures in the Parisian avant-garde community. For example, the extensive provenance information delineated in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's 2011 show, "The Steins Collect: Matisse, Picasso, And The Parisian Avant-Garde" reveal that by 1908 a plethora of examples of modernist works had been acquired by Gertrude and Leo Stein that depicted the female nude as early as 1904.<sup>162</sup> Images [fig. 3.17] [fig. 3.18], which show the artworks that were hanging in Gertrude Stein's 27 Rue de Fleurus apartment around the time that Zorach may have visited with her aunt in 1910, reveal the significant presence that the female nude occupied in the visual lexicon of the Parisian avant-garde.<sup>163</sup>

The female nude's emergence in Zorach's work while in Paris exemplifies her recognition of its value within modernist iconography. One of her earliest paintings, *Rite of Spring Olympic Offerings* [fig. 3.19] from 1909, illustrates the stylistic and ideological influences that the young artist had encountered in her first year in Paris. A group of nudes have

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<sup>161</sup> Tarbell, *Marguerite Zorach*, 15.

<sup>162</sup> Bishop, Janet, Cecile Debray and Rebecca Rabinow, eds. *The Steins Collect: Matisse, Picasso, and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (New Haven: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Yale University, 2011), 395-454. Notable modernist examples of the female nude were the Steins' collection before 1910 include: Matisse's 1907 *Le Luxe I* (acquired by December 1907) and *Blue Nude* from 1907 (acquired by spring 1907), Henri Charles Manguin's 1904 *The Studio*, *The Nude Model* (acquired by April 1905) and Paul Cezanne's two 1892 works *Bathers* (acquired by November 1907) and *Group of Bathers* (acquired by October 1904).

<sup>163</sup> *The Steins Collect*, 366-367. Artworks of the female nude that are visible in fig. 3.17 are Elie Nadelman's 1907 sculpture, *Standing Female Figure*, and a partial view of Henri Matisse's 1907 *Blue Nude* (upper left corner). In fig. 3.18, two of Pierre-Auguste Renoir's paintings of female nude figures are visible: *Bather*, from 1890, and *Seated Bather*, from 1882.

been arranged into a pyramid-like composition in an intensely colored landscape. The expressive colors used for the vibrant red hillside and blue bodies reveal the influence of Fauvism that Zorach was exposed to in Paris, which characterized her aesthetic throughout the first few years of her career.

Another intriguing source of influence in Zorach's developing interest in the female nude comes through John Duncan Fergusson, her teacher at La Palette, and Anne Estelle Rice, an American artist in Fergusson's circle, who both were engaged in exploring the theme of the female nude at the time of Zorach enrollment in 1911.<sup>164</sup> Serving as Fergusson's model, Rice is depicted nude in a few of the male artist's paintings. For example, in his 1907 painting *Anne Estelle Rice Washing* [fig. 3.20], Rice appears at a washbasin, bare from the waist up, looking out at the viewer with an immodest expression. Rice also explored the motif of the female nude as a bather in her own work in *La Toilette* [fig. 3.21]. Albeit, her work takes on a different tone than that seen Fergusson's paintings. In contrast to the overt identification of the nude in Fergusson's works, Rice depicts the bather with her back turned to the viewer and her face obscured by her shoulder, concealing her identity.<sup>165</sup> Conversely, in other works in which Rice portrays the female nude as the exotic "other" the figure exudes a degree of confidence that far exceeds that evoked by Fergusson's bather. For example, in one of Rice's drawings [fig. 3.22] published in the periodical *Rhythm*, an avant-garde periodical that Fergusson, Rice and other artists contributed to, including Zorach, a woman clad in a turban casts a rather mischievous,

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<sup>164</sup> Carol A. Nathanson, "Anne Estelle Rice: Theodore Dreiser's "Ellen Adams Wrynn,"" *Woman's Art Journal* 13, no. 2 (Autumn, 1992-Winter 1993): 4. Nathanson insinuates that Rice and Fergusson were lovers.

<sup>165</sup> It is unclear where this painting may have been exhibited and whether its title, which reveals Rice's identity, was made public. However, considering the damage that it could do to Rice's identity, I would suspect that the artwork remained in the artist's private collection.

side-eyed glance.<sup>166</sup> With her arms casually clasped behind her head, she unabashedly exposes her breasts to the viewer; such a bold and explicitly sensual manner of a member of her own sex being sanctioned by the represented woman because of her perceived “otherness.”

Considering the way in which Zorach may have seen Rice as a sort of role model, it’s probably that she looked to the older artist’s work as a source of artistic influence. In studying with Fergusson and then collaborating with both him and Rice on *Rhythm*, Zorach would have been familiar with Rice’s work. Just then embarking on her own career, it’s not hard to imagine how Zorach would have felt emboldened by the older, more established American woman artist who, in laying claim to her professional career as an artist, defied standards of proper feminine behavior. Against the best wishes of her parents, Rice chose not to marry and sought training at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which at the time was called the “School of Industrial Art of the Pennsylvania Museum.”<sup>167</sup> Once in Paris, she continued to defy late nineteenth century social norms by freely participating in the seedy forms of entertainment the city had to offer, including visiting a brothel to see the radical artwork of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.<sup>168</sup> In addition to defying social norms, Rice’s openness with appearing nude in Fergusson’s work and depicting female nudity in her own art would have served as an approbation for Zorach to adopt such possibilities in her own art as a form of self-expression. A batik silk scarf [fig. 3.23] that Zorach completed in 1918 reveals another example of her admiration for Rice’s exoticization of the female nude. For example, the fluid sense of movement of the bare breasted figures in Zorach’s batik recall the blissful prancing dancers in another drawing [fig. 3.24] by Rice published in

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<sup>166</sup> Burk, “Graphic Art,” 12.

<sup>167</sup> Nathanson, “Anne Estelle Rice,” 3-4.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

*Rhythm*. In both images, the female nudes are made to look “primitive.” This is signified in Zorach’s batik through the sarongs that the figures wear and in Rice’s drawing through the rather large basket of fruit that the dancers seem to effortlessly hoist above their heads that is suggestive of a bacchanalian celebration. As a result, their nudity becomes acceptable.

While working with such imagery, Zorach acquired some success early on in her career. In September 1912, after a nearly eight-month-long journey home from Paris to the United States through Asia and the Middle East, a trip that was chaperoned by her aunt, Zorach returned to California.<sup>169</sup> Having published several accounts of her experience studying in Paris and her subsequent trip home in the *Fresno Morning Republican*, the artist had acquired some celebrity status in her local community, with one article published in the *San Francisco Examiner* praising her as a “California girl back from Paris” with knowledge of the progressive new art.<sup>170</sup> Prior to leaving Paris, Zorach had participated in exhibitions organized by the Société des Artistes Indépendants and in the 1911 Salon d’Automne.<sup>171</sup> Shortly after her return to the United States, she received her first solo exhibition.<sup>172</sup>

Motivated to continue building her career as an artist, in December 1912, Zorach moved to New York City. Shortly after her arrival, she married American artist William Zorach, whom she had met in Paris and with whom she kept close contact both on her journey home and after her return.<sup>173</sup> Together, the couple settled into the thriving bohemian community that had

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<sup>169</sup> Tarbell, *Marguerite Zorach*, 35.

<sup>170</sup> “California Girl Back from Paris: Miss Thompson Tells of New Art,” *San Francisco Examiner* (San Francisco, California), 1912.

<sup>171</sup> Tarbell, *Marguerite Zorach*, 26.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

developed in Greenwich Village where they enjoyed a supportive personal and professional partnership characterized by a rich exchange of ideas on artistic subject matter, and stylistic trends in modernist art and poetry.<sup>174</sup> In 1915 the couple had their first child, followed by another in 1917.

Whereas earlier generations of women artists of lesser economic status who were unable to afford domestic help often found it necessary to either sacrifice the full development of their professional lives or opt out of marriage and motherhood completely to advance their careers, Zorach seems not to have viewed her new roles as a wife and mother as an end to her profession as an artist. Several scholars have noted how William's exceptional behavior as a husband and father, who was willing to help with domestic tasks and childrearing duties, was integral to Marguerite being able to continue her career.<sup>175</sup> While this is certainly true, in her readiness to balance her personal and professional ambitions, Marguerite's conception of herself as a modern woman also deserves acknowledgement as a contributing factor to the artist's success. Described by Lois Rudnick as "the radical New Woman," Zorach identified with others from her generation who believed that free sexuality and equality between the sexes would bring about the liberation of the modern woman.<sup>176</sup> In the Zorachs' relationship, this equality was asserted in the prioritization of Marguerite's professional career. Despite the young family's extremely meager

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 41. Tarbell notes the rare instance of the Zorach's artistic partnership in how similar their artistic styles were until the early 1920s when they began to diverge. Both receiving their training at La Académie de La Palette and moving in the same social circles in Paris, they were exposed to many of the same influences.

<sup>175</sup> Swinth, *Painting Professionals*, 191. Swinth rightly credits the equality in the Zorach's marriage to enabling her to continue her career. Burk, "Graphic Art," 14. In contrast, Burk notes that Marguerite had to handle most the childcare duties, because while William was willing to help, it did not come easy to him.

<sup>176</sup>Rudnick, "The New Woman," 75.

financial resources, they found means to hire a caretaker for their children.<sup>177</sup> Furthermore, in a letter that Marguerite wrote to her artist friend Jessie Dismor she described at times being able to completely ignore her children, commenting, “I can put them quite out of my mind,” expressing a sentiment that was at odds with the sanctity of motherhood espoused by the cult of the true womanhood of earlier generations.<sup>178</sup>

The evolving appearance of the female nude in Zorach’s work reflects a pattern resembling the narrative of the artist’s personal life. After her marriage and the births of her daughter and son, the female nude is often joined in her paintings, batiks and prints by figures of men and children. Zorach’s tendency to reflect her personal feelings and new developments in her life through the female nudes in her artworks reveals a level of transparency between her feminine and professional identities that had previously not been seen in the work of other women artists. For example, her embroidery *Eden* [fig. 3.25], which was shown in the professional context in the 1917 exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, evokes of the intimacy she shared with her husband.<sup>179</sup> The embroidery illustrates the biblical story of Adam and Eve and many of the usual trappings are present, including an abstractly patterned serpent and the forbidden fruit. However, the figures embrace in a tender show of expression and sympathy that departs from traditional visual narrative. Rather than isolate Eve as a villain, the two figures appear to almost be conjoined in the mirror-like representation in the lower halves of

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<sup>177</sup> William Zorach, *Art Is My Life*, William Zorach, *Art is My Life: The Autobiography of William Zorach* (Cleveland, OH: The World Publishing Company, 1967), 53. William Zorach describes, Ella Madison, their nanny as the family’s one extravagance. She was paid three dollars a week.

<sup>178</sup> Marguerite Zorach, letter to Jessie Dismorr, April 6, 1922.

<sup>179</sup> Tarbell, *Marguerite Zorach*, 47.

their bodies, evoking a physical and emotional display of support like that which characterized her marriage with William.

In other artworks from this period, however, it's also clear that Zorach maintained an interest in the concept of a feminine existence that was independent of the opposite sex. For example, the artist's painting *Bathers* [fig. 3.26] that was created sometime between 1913 and 1914 is a scene of sensual female nudes moving through a landscape accentuated by bold bursts of color. Multiple aspects of this work point to Zorach drawing on the influence of the modernist works she saw two years previously in Europe. For example, the fragmentation of the hillside to the left of the waterfall demonstrates Zorach's incorporation of cubism that both she and her husband explored in their work after their return to the United States. Zorach also draws on the traditional theme of bathers. At the same time, in considering the important personal symbolism that nature held to Zorach, the veneration and bliss found in nature that the nudes in this painting communicate, particularly in the upward hand movements of the figure on the far left, gives this work a more expressive existence.

### Liberating the Female Nude through Nature

Many scholars have drawn attention to the way that the popular belief of women's possession of a seemingly inherent connection to the natural world materialized in artistic representations of women and shaped various ideologies surrounding their social status. For example, Frances Pohl explains in the context of nineteenth century art how "women were perceived of and *as* nature, both literally and figuratively" and how this was interpreted to perpetuate limiting social stereotypes such as "their supposed inability to engage in sophisticated

intellectual activity.”<sup>180</sup> In the early twentieth century, there was a renewed interest in nature among many modernists often motivated by fascination with the primitive. The conception of nature as a means by which to tap into a primordial force to inform one’s art and the continuing social construct of women as natural created a difficult working environment for modernist women artists. While it is important to understand how these ideologies stripped agency from women modernists, the personal and professional reasons that motivated some to embrace nature as a prominent theme in their work have not been fully explored.

The deep connection between nature and the female nude, although visualized somewhat differently in the artwork of Brigman and Zorach, may be understood as an effort to create an imaginative narrative that agreed with each artists’ personal conceptions of the modern woman. In both artists’ works, nature plays a symbolic role as a source of female liberation and empowerment. The complexity of this relationship comes to light in examining the personal meanings that nature held for Brigman and Zorach as they defied normative gender roles while pursuing professional careers as artists in the early twentieth century.

For Brigman, nature is a space where her identities as a modern woman and professional artists converge. This becomes clearer when we consider the way that how the strenuous engagement with nature that was part of her creative process defied normal definitions of feminine behavior. The qualities of her interaction with nature are made visually manifest in the strength and power that the female nudes in her photographs exhibit. For example, in her 1905 photograph *The Dryad* [fig. 3.27] a model is pictured perched on the branch of a pine tree. Brigman has emphasized the figure’s precarious position by closely cropping the image so that

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<sup>180</sup> Frances Pohl, *Framing America: A Social History of American Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2012), 171.

the viewer is unable to tell exactly how far to the ground she is at risk of falling, and her downward gaze hints at the danger of her situation. Despite this, the figure appears steadfast and forceful in contrast to the more gentle and vulnerable looking figures that appear in the works of Brigman's peers around this time. Wilson further explains how the more athletic bodies of Brigman's nudes contradicted contemporary taste for the voluptuous and sensuous bodies that were characteristic of academic painting, which on one occasion resulted in calls for Brigman's photograph *Soul of the Blasted Pine* to be removed from an exhibition.<sup>181</sup>

The female nudes in Brigman's images embody the liberating experience in nature that was part of her creative process. The hazardous conditions that Brigman endured to capture her photographs are encapsulated in an essay she wrote entitled "Glory of the Open" where she describes the making of her image *Invictus* [fig. 3.28] from 1906:

"Then I started up hill, fighting through manzanita and buckbrush. The heat was intense, for I was too far below the immediate peaks to get the breeze...It was too hot to go further, so I took refuge under a low juniper, the knapsack for a pillow. Red ants came out and skated over me and bit me, and when I knocked them off they hurried back in a most undaunted fashion for new onslaught."<sup>182</sup>

Favoring remote areas of the Sierra Nevadas for her photographs, such as Desolation Valley which teeters along the crest mountain range, Brigman frequently undertook difficult hikes to altitudes as high as 10,000 feet and embarked on month-long camping trips to find settings for her images.<sup>183</sup> Heather Waldroup has explained that mountaineering would have appealed to Brigman and others around the turn of the century because of its modern celebration of the

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<sup>181</sup> Wilson, "Northern California: The Heart of the Storm," 17.

<sup>182</sup> Anne Brigman, "Glory of the Open," *Camera Craft* 33, no. 4 (April 1926): 160.

<sup>183</sup> Ehrens, *A Poetic Vision*, 25.

individual and the transformative experience of nature it could provide.<sup>184</sup> Further, for women the modernity of the typically masculine leisure activity was an opportunity to exhibit behavior that broke with strict social codes such as engaging in physically strenuous activity and wearing men's attire, as seen in an image of the photographer wearing pants from 1915 [fig. 3.29]. The feelings of independence and self-reliance that Brigman as a woman derived from such experiences is easy to imagine, as they take specific form in her photographs like *Invictus*, where the figure's confident gaze and erect stance personify the "unconquerable," suggested by the image's title.<sup>185</sup>

In other photographs, the female nudes assert agency by drawing on a different, albeit equal, kind of spiritual, mystical power based in nature. For example, in *Ballet de Mer* [fig. 3.30], the figure appears to have an uncanny connection to her natural surroundings. Engaged in a careful focus on the nearby water, she balances on one leg and extends her arms in a graceful motion that seems to suggest her ability to channel ocean's movement. In another image, entitled *The Bubble* [fig. 3.31], a woman leans near a pool of water and reaches out to touch a clear glass orb and while the meaning of the orb is ambiguous, the figure appears to possess the transcendent ability to grasp the elusive object.

The idea of possessing an exclusive connection with nature that is evoked in *Ballet de Mer* and *The Bubble* was incorporated by Brigman in the formation of her professional identity. Kathleen Pyne draws attention to how Brigman stressed the role that her exotic upbringing in Hawaii played in shaping her as an artist suggesting that her "primitive origins" had given her a

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<sup>184</sup> Heather Waldroup, "Hard to Reach: Anne Brigman, Mountaineering, and Modernity in California," *Modernism/Modernity* 21, No. 2 (2014): 453.

<sup>185</sup> "Invictus" means Unconquerable or undefeated.

special “sensibility as one that was always in touch with the senses and the body.”<sup>186</sup> For example, Pyne notes the great detail in which Brigman describes natural surroundings of her childhood home in her book of poetry, *Songs of a Pagan*, which was published in 1946 when the photographer was 80 years old.<sup>187</sup> Prior to this and at the height of her career, Brigman underscored of her connection to nature when she responded to an interviewer in 1913 about her unique ability to run barefoot on the pebbly beaches of the Bay Area without it hurting her feet because “she had learned how to walk.”<sup>188</sup>

As with Brigman, nature held important symbolic meaning to Zorach both in terms of her identity as a professional artist and as a woman. Her personal experience of nature was as free space characterized by equality with the opposite sex and an escape from socially proscribed gender roles. It also served as an important source of artistic inspiration and creativity. Aligned with these personal connotations, Zorach uses the natural environment to create a new narrative for the female nude figures in her artworks that reflected her self-construct.

This is apparent in Zorach’s artworks that incorporate both nude male and female figures. Focusing on artist’s work in embroidery, Cynthia Fowler has noticed how “the natural landscape provided a springboard for [Zorach] to explore sex roles for both men and women outside of their usual societal constraints.”<sup>189</sup> For example, Fowler draws attention to the artist’s embroideries that depict family scenes, which increasingly became more prevalent after the Zorach’s began their own family. In these works, Zorach often paired the male figures with

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<sup>186</sup> Pyne, *Modernism and the Feminine Voice*, 66.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> “Fear Retards Women Avers Mrs. Brigman.”

<sup>189</sup> Cynthia Fowler, “Early American Modernism and Craft Production: The Embroideries of Marguerite Zorach,” (dissertation, University of Delaware, 2002), 95.

children, thereby associating them with the traditional feminine task of childcare.<sup>190</sup> Such an arrangement is exemplified in her embroidery *Maine Islands* [fig. 3.32] from 1919. In this work, two groups of figures are arranged at either end of the composition further punctuating its already strong horizontal emphasis. On the left, a child is coupled with a male figure who stares in the direction of two women on the opposite bank. However, the female figures appear oblivious to the attention that they receive from across the lake. In the context of this image, the landscape physically separates the women from the man and child, sanctioning their disregard for their traditional feminine responsibilities of caring for children.<sup>191</sup> Furthermore, Zorach's decision to include a cow with the two women, a symbol of the ancient Egyptian goddess Hathor associated with traits of fertility and love, may have been intended by the artist to positively reflect on her satisfaction with the balance achieved between her independence as a professional artist and motherhood.

The non-exclusivity of childcare as a strictly feminine task is underscored again in a coverlet embroidered by Marguerite entitled *The Tree of Life* [fig. 3.33] from 1918. In each corner of the blanket are scenes of clothed women caring for children. At the same time, the artist includes two vignettes of male nudes displaying tender signs of affection toward children. In the center is a nude couple surrounded by references to the natural world including animals, trees and floral designs, likely borrowed from traditional Javanese batik designs, an art form with which Zorach herself had begun to experiment around this time. The slight lift of each figure's foot and the raised arm of the woman indicate dance movements. Coinciding with the early years

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 93-99.

<sup>191</sup> Fowler, "Early American Modernism," 98. Fowler also make a valid point about the way in which the figures are connected through the landscape in the abstracted rocks and land that appear in the bottom foreground of the image.

the Zorachs' marriage and new role as a parent, the scenes in this coverlet evoke a joyousness and sense of equality that Zorach likely felt around that time in her personal life.

The artist's personal experiences of nature explicate the important symbolic functions that it is assigned in her work. Throughout her life, Zorach strove for a physical closeness to nature, which she saw as imperative to her creative process as an artist. A quote by the environmentalist John Muir, which Zorach admired, hung on the wall of her studio in Paris elucidates her belief in nature's transcendent power to inspire her art: "Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves."<sup>192</sup>

So integral was Zorach's desire to be close to nature, she made it a non-negotiable condition of her marriage to William Zorach, telling him that she would only agree to move from her home in California to New York City if they spent every summer retreating to the country.<sup>193</sup> Given the importance of nature to Zorach as a source of artistic creativity, her insistence on continued access to it while married can be read as an insistence on the prioritization of her career. During the few months that Zorach spent in California after her return from Europe, nature had become a frequent subject in her art. For example, in *Man Among the Redwoods* [fig. 3.34], which was likely painted during this period, the artist has selected the natural wonder of her local environment, the giant Redwoods of Northern California, as the focus of her painting. The feelings of independence and freedom from such encounters with nature had further

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<sup>192</sup> Burk, *Clever Fresno Girl*, 54.

<sup>193</sup> Jessica Nicoll, "To Be Modern: The Origins of Marguerite and William Zorach's Creative Partnership, 1911-1922," *Portland Museum of Art*, <http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/3aa/3aa85.htm>.

significance to Zorach as a young woman. Before she departed for New York, in July 1912 Marguerite spent a month and a half camping in the Sierra Nevadas, which had also provided the setting for Brigman's photographs, and likewise experienced the thrill of wearing traditional male garments [fig. 3.35], telling her future husband, "I never realized before how much freer one is in boy's clothes."<sup>194</sup> While Marguerite and William returned to her native California after they were married and later camped for several months together in the same area, the self-sufficiency of the exclusively female cast in her painting, *Camp in the Woods Yosemite* [fig. 3.36] from 1920, seems more likely to have been inspired by the sense of independence the artist's felt during her prior experience in nature.<sup>195</sup>

As promised, the Zorachs escaped the city with annual country retreats to such places as the White Mountains of New Hampshire, Chappaqua, New York, Provincetown, Massachusetts and Yosemite before purchasing a farm on an island off the coast of Maine. In his autobiography, William described the challenges that the family endured during these first few summers spent in the country due to their limited financial resources as both artists struggled during their early careers. He describes Marguerite's aptitude for growing vegetables in their garden that was an important source of food for the family.<sup>196</sup> The positive feelings of being able to provide for their family may have prompted Marguerite to portray the scenes of farming and gardening that show up in her art after her marriage to William. For example, in her painting *The Garden* [fig. 3.37], also known as *The Magnificent Squash*, painted during the summer that the Zorachs spent in Chappaqua, New York in 1914, women appear as both supportive and active participants in

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<sup>194</sup> Swinth, *Painting Professionals*, 180.

<sup>195</sup> Zorach, *Art is My Life*, 60. William Zorach also describes meeting a woman named Doris during this trip to Yosemite, whom he had an intimate, but not physical relationship with for ten years.

<sup>196</sup> William Zorach, *Art is My Life*, 37.

working the land.<sup>197</sup> In another work, *The Mowers* [fig. 3.38] from 1920, Zorach makes the female nude her central focus, a figure who appears in the bottom left corner of the sketch close to a child, seeming to be leisurely stepping into a pool of water that gathered in between a few rocks. While not physically engaged in the mowing that the figures in the background perform, the image conjures scene of joyous and productive existence between humans and the natural environment that Marguerite experienced during the Zorach's summer retreats, where she was able to fully live out her roles as wife, mother in conjunction with being an artist.

### Professionalism and Feminine Identity

While Brigman and Zorach achieved notable success in their respective fields, their paths to professionalism were not without obstacles, which arose in large part in connection to their gender. In trying to establish their careers in a male-dominated art world, they were forced to consider how outward displays of their femininity would influence their professional careers. Both artists' creation of self-expressive new narratives for the female nude that reflected their own versions of modernity may be read as attempts to assert agency in how their feminine identities were perceived in relation to being artists. However, the diminished role that Brigman and Zorach allocated to the female nude in their later works ultimately reveals the way in which they were limited in using representations of their gender as a form of personal expression.

In examining Brigman's professional relationship to Stieglitz, Pyne has elucidated the role that gender played in her success during the early years of her career. For example, Pyne has examined the way in which Stieglitz embraced Brigman as the "feminine face" of the new

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<sup>197</sup> Tarbell, *Marguerite Zorach*, 43.

modernism that he wanted to promote.<sup>198</sup> His fascination was so strong, Pyne goes on to say, that despite his waning interest in pictorialism, which began as early as 1908, in favor of a new, straight style of photography, he remained committed to supporting Brigman through 1913 by publishing her images and promising to exhibit her photographs, though an exhibition of her work never materialized.<sup>199</sup>

At the same time, the way in which Brigman's femininity was upheld as the central facet of her identity in such critical views limited her from exercising, to the full extent, her artistic identity. For example, Pyne explains how Stieglitz's preoccupation with her images of the female nude overshadowed the broad range of subjects that her work covered.<sup>200</sup> Further, Brigman's images of the female nude were sexualized in a way she had not intended by Stieglitz and other critics. Influenced by the concepts popularized by European sexologists like Havelock Ellis, these critics understood the female nude in Brigman's photographs as authentic expressions of her inner female psyche, fueled by an innate sexuality.<sup>201</sup> As a member of the generation that preceded the early twentieth-century-radical movements celebrating free love and sexual liberation, Brigman seems to have felt uncomfortable with Stieglitz's framing of her images of the female nude along such sexualized terms.<sup>202</sup> Her urging to Stieglitz to read the sociologist Edward Carpenter's essay "Love as an Art" to learn a higher way of thinking about

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<sup>198</sup> Pyne, *Modernism and the Feminine Voice*, 76.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-84.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

human sexuality may have been indicative of her desire to introduce him to a new way of interpreting the figures in her photographs that was less erotic.<sup>203</sup>

While the female nude does not completely disappear in Brigman's later work, it takes on a less visible role as the photographer turned her attention to new subjects and approaches of expression. For example, while abstraction emerges as an interest in Brigman's photography as early as 1906 in images such as *The Philosopher – Still Life* [fig. 3.39], it appears more frequently beginning in 1915 in her formal studies of sand erosion and in 1927 with a series of photographs on clouds. For example, in her 1915 photograph *Sand Ripples* [fig. 3.40] Brigman concentrates on the way light reflects off the shimmering surface of sand. She has arranged the composition so as to show the sand mounds in a graduated pattern progressing toward the upper left corner of the image. In other photographs, Brigman examines alternative options of self-expression, which displays her femininity in a different way than that seen in her earlier photographs of the female nude in nature. For example, interesting in terms of the transitional state of Brigman's career are a series of self-portraits by the photographer in the collection of the George Eastman Museum. Gifted to the museum by Brigman's husband, it's unclear if these photographs were ever meant to be shown to the public. Taken five years after Brigman's discouraging 1910 trip to New York as well as her separation from her husband, which was followed by a nervous breakdown in 1911, the artist's urge for a close examination of the self that these photographs exhibit provoke us to consider the ways in which she may have been trying show viewers a new dimension of her identity. Particularly intriguing is terms of the

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 89.

photographer's continuing personal connection to nature is an imposing portrait of her standing on a cliff, taking survey of the monumental view around her [fig. 3.41].

Gender played an equally conflicted role in Zorach's career as an artist. Similar to Brigman, Zorach's womanhood afforded her certain professional advantages that helped to advance her profession as an artist. For example, in an interview from 1925 Zorach acknowledged how she benefited from having a husband who was also an artist in being able to have her work exhibited with his.<sup>204</sup> She talks about the lack of exhibition opportunities that existed for women modernists which stemmed in part from dealers being afraid to "gamble" on promoting women artists when it was believed they would only in a short time abandon their professional ambitions when they married and started families.<sup>205</sup> By seeming to be a "team" with her husband, Zorach expresses the sentiment that gallery owners were less "afraid" to commit to promoting her work.<sup>206</sup>

It is difficult to measure the extent to which Marguerite's role as William Zorach's wife contributed to her professional success. However, despite the inhospitable environment for avant-garde art in the United States during the early twentieth century and the numerous additional obstacles that complicated the lives of women artists, Zorach achieved considerable success as a woman artist working in a modernist idiom. Where American artists, in general, were severely underrepresented at the 1913 Armory show, Zorach had two works in the exhibition.<sup>207</sup> She was also the only woman artist to participate in the Forum Exhibition of

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<sup>204</sup> Rebecca Hourwich, "Art Has No Sex," *Equal Rights*, December 12, 1925.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Tarbell, *Marguerite Zorach*, 36.

Modern American Painters in 1916. She took part in the inaugural 1917 exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, an organization for which she would later serve as Vice President and then Director from 1922 through 1924.<sup>208</sup> This exhibition activity was complimented by financial success when Zorach took up embroidery in her art. With her sales from one exhibition in 1918 of her tapestries totaling \$1,200, today's equivalent to \$20,000, and gaining patrons such as the Rockefellers, Zorach's financial success positioned her as the head of household for a period in the late teens and early twenties, while William Zorach continued to establish his career.<sup>209</sup>

While a strong sense of gender equality pervaded her personal relationship with her husband, it is also evident that, at times, Zorach experienced her womanhood and feminine social roles as a conflict with her profession as an artist. For example, Zorach not only had trouble in securing exhibition opportunities separate from the context in which her husband's artwork was being shown, but generally struggled to maintain a separate professional identity. During the time that she was represented by the Charles Daniel Gallery between 1915 and 1918, her work was exclusively shown alongside William Zorach's art.<sup>210</sup> As a result, Zorach was often seen as the feminine and less significant counterpart to her artist husband. The extent of damage done by this perspective in the perception of Zorach as an artist in her own right is clear in a review of the 1916 Forum Exhibition in which William is called "a more robust talent than Marguerite Zorach, in the sense that his painting is more masculinely direct and plastic."<sup>211</sup> Further, as several other

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<sup>208</sup>Swinth, *Painting Professionals*, 183.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 188. Swinth indicates that this was the primary source of the Zorach family's income for that year.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>211</sup> Willard Huntington Wright, "The Forum Exhibition," *Forum (1886-1930)*, April 1916, 457. Additionally, her artworks reproduced or receiving a separate artist statement from her husband in the catalog for the Forum exhibition.

scholars have pointed out, Marguerite did not receive a separate artist statement from William or have her artwork reproduced in the catalogue for the Forum exhibition, as was granted to the other artists who were involved.<sup>212</sup>

While Zorach continued exploring the theme of the female nude throughout the 1920s, it becomes clear that she was reevaluating its function as a mode of self-expression. Ellen E. Roberts notes the more ambiguous significances that Zorach assigned to the figure in her work at the beginning of the decade. The “eternal women” set in other worldly natural surroundings that appeared in her earlier works are replaced by striking contemporary female nudes in modern environments.<sup>213</sup> For example, whereas the nakedness of the female nudes in her earlier works were presented as natural and organic, in her 1920 work *Prohibition* [fig. 3.42], the figure appears in a speakeasy, with two completely clothed men, and her nudity is unexplained in this context.<sup>214</sup> It is difficult to understand where Zorach’s self-expression may exist in this painting. On the other hand, in paintings like *Couple in a Cityscape* [fig. 3.43], from 1920-1925, her use of the figure can be viewed as continuing a more personal course of evocation. Later in her career, the female nude’s role in her art is all but absent as the majority of her artworks consist of still-lives and portraits of family and friends, as seen in her painting *Two Sisters-Marguerite and Her Sister Edith* [fig. 3.44] from 1921.

While Brigman and Zorach turned away from overt signifiers of their femininity through representations of the female nude in their artwork, they became outspoken advocates for female liberation and equality in response to the gender-based discrimination they experienced in the art

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<sup>212</sup> Fowler, “Early American Modernism,” 5. Swinth, *Painting Professionals*, 187. Swinth indicates that Zorach was only included in the Forum exhibition at William’s insistence.

<sup>213</sup> Roberts, *Women Modernists in New York*, 47.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

world. Declaring in an interview that fear is what held women back from becoming man's absolute equal, Brigman called for women to leave the safe confines of the domestic space.<sup>215</sup> Frustrated by the lack of exhibition opportunities available for women modernists, Zorach went on to become a founding member of the New York Society of Women Artists and called out the injustice of an institutionalized system that did not grant women the same opportunity to gain the background skills needed to become great artists.<sup>216</sup> Further, despite moving on to other artistic subjects, neither artist seems to have felt compelled to completely suppress her femininity. For example, Brigman continued to perpetuate her deep connection to the natural world in her books of published poetry *Wild Flute Songs* and *Songs of a Pagan*, both published in 1946, espousing the belief that women possessed a primal intuition that made them uniquely in touch with nature. In the 1920s and 1930s, Zorach embraced working with embroidery and textiles, art mediums that were traditionally associated with feminine craft production.<sup>217</sup> I would like to suggest that both artists were compelled to renegotiate their modes for self-expression in their personal experience of attempting to converge their feminine and professional identities in representations of the female nude early in their careers.

Brigman's and Zorach's variations on the theme of the female nude in nature, created during the first two decades of the twentieth century, reveal a unique effort to navigate the crossroads of gender expectations and a desire for self-expression. Seeing the potential of the

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<sup>215</sup> "Fear Retards Woman, Avers Mrs. Brigman."

<sup>216</sup> Rebecca Hourwich, "Art Has No Sex."

<sup>217</sup> Swinth, *Painting Professionals*, 188. Swinth, however, points out how Zorach tried to detract attention away from the traditionally feminine craft background of her textile works, calling them "modernist paintings done in wool." Further, despite their financial success, she further undermined the feminine associations of these works is by opting not to include any textiles and only showed her paintings and drawings when she was represented by the Downtown gallery in 1928.

female nude to serve as a tool for modernist self-expression, Brigman and Zorach were motivated to establish new narratives for the figure that conformed to their impression of the modern woman. Experiencing a strong sense of liberation and freedom in nature in their own lives, albeit in somewhat differing ways, they used the natural landscape as a stage to portray the female nude in ways that broke with the traditional expectations that existed in both society and European in American art.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, I have attempted to show the way that social attitudes toward gender differences shaped the professional pursuits of American women artists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of several ways this influence materialized was in the subject matter they selected to use, or opted to exclude, in their art. The various meanings assigned to images of the female nude made it an especially complex imagery for women artists to portray. Due to the professional connotations that the figure had come to signify in European and American art traditions, I argue that some women artists were persuaded to take up the imagery of the female nude in their art as a means of affirming their skill and taking advantage of the market that existed for the subject, among other professional motivations. In the early twentieth century, some women artists became interested in the figure's ability to serve as a form of self-expression. In their representations, women artists working across a range of artistic styles drew on traditional motifs, either adapting them or subverting them to achieve the desired objectives for their art. However, while utilizing representations of the female nude offered certain benefits, it also presented challenges. Frequent issues they had to deal with in adopting this imagery were the disrupting of normative standards of gendered behavior and the attention it detracted from their professional status. Moreover, the personal meanings and feminine perspectives that they tried to impart onto their images were often misinterpreted by viewers who continued to exhibit the same objectifying tendencies toward representations of women in art. Women artists risked their contributions as being misinterpreted as sanctions for such objectification to continue.

While I have tried to pay careful attention to the numerous factors that impacted how women artists dealt with this subject and its intersection with their feminine identities, I acknowledge that this study is far from complete. Scholarship that analyzes how issues of

sexuality, culture, socioeconomic status and race influenced the approaches that artists used to represent the female nude body in art would help to round out this very complex subject and I invite those who are interested in this daunting, but necessary effort to join me.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Due to copyright restrictions, the illustrations for this thesis are only available in the hard copy version that is on file in the Visual Resources Center in the Katzen Art Center at American University.

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