

Plain Facts

The importance of acknowledging women artists

By Jennifer Higgin

In 1881 in Paris, the sculptor H el ene Bertaux – the founder of the newly established Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs (Union of Women Painters and Sculptors) – made her inaugural address. Pulling no punches, she proclaimed that:

The woman artist is an ignored, little-understood force, delayed in its rise! A social prejudice of sorts weighs upon her; and yet, every year, the number of women who dedicate themselves to art is swelling with fearsome speed.¹

Despite the fact that more and more women were becoming professional artists when Bertaux made her speech, it was 16 years away from the time when female students could study alongside men at Paris’s  cole des Beaux-Arts. Until well into the 20th-century, women were expected to be wives and mothers, not artists or writers; they had little or no political agency and, unless they had a father who was an artist (as Bertaux’s was), they had no access to any kind of professional training.

Gender exclusion isn’t a theory: it’s a fact. Notwithstanding the myriad restrictions they faced (and often still do) women have always been creative. Barred from the life room and the art academies, forbidden to work on scaffolds or to become apprentices, women artists didn’t begin to be treated as equals until well into the 20th century – and then often begrudgingly. Yet, they persisted. A good example is the history of London’s Royal Academy in 1768: Sir Joshua Reynolds was made president and the 36 founder members were named: among them, were two gifted artists, Angelica Kauffman and Mary Moser. Johan Zoffany was commissioned to commemorate this momentous occasion with a group portrait: *The Academicians of the Royal Academy* (1771-72). All of the founders are portrayed in the life studio – a room from which women were barred. As a result, Kauffman and Moser are depicted

¹ Laurence Madeline, ‘Into the Light: Women Artists 1850-1900’ in *Women Artists in Paris 1850-1900*, catalogue published on the occasion of the travelling exhibition ‘Women Artists of Paris, 1850-1900’ pp.2-3

not standing amongst their fellow artists, but in two small, monochrome, near-unrecognisable portraits on the wall.

Another story: when, in the mid-18th century, the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna acquired a self-portrait from 1554 by the great Cremonese artist Sofonisba Anguissola, it was considered so extraordinary that a woman should be an artist, that her painting was hung amongst the Cabinets of Curiosities² – even though she had been trained by Michelangelo, appointed court painter to Philip II of Spain and praised by Giorgio Vasari in the second edition of his *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori* (The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, 1568). In 15th and 16th-century Italy, we know of at least 120 women who were working as professional artists³ and yet much of what they created is either lost or – we can assume – misattributed. Take, for example, the Venetian writer and artist Irene di Spilimbergo, who was considered so gifted that when she died at only 19 in 1559, she was praised not only Vasari but by no less than 140 poets. Nothing she created has survived.⁴ Likewise, no works by di Spilimbergo's contemporary Lucrezia Quistelli (1541-94), (also praised by Vasari) definitively exist. (There is some debate around attributions.)⁵ North of Italy, one of the most prolific portraitist in the 17th-century was the Dutch painter Judith Leyster, the only woman amongst 30 men to be accepted as a member of the Haarlem Guild of St Luke. Soon after she died in 1660, Leyster was seemingly forgotten; until the late 19th-century, most of her paintings were credited to either her rival Frans Hals or her husband, Jan Miense Molenaer. In France, the prodigy Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun became Marie-Antoinette's favourite artist and at her death in 1842, she left behind a staggering 600 or so paintings – and yet she had her first retrospective in Paris in 2015. These are just a few examples: the list is long – and increasingly so, thanks to the dedicated scholarship of art historians.

² Confirmed in email dated 3 February 2020 from Jasper Sharp, curator at the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum.

³ Edith Krull, *Women in Art*, Edition Leipzig, 1989, translated from the original German by T Lux Feininger, p.11

⁴ Jacobs, Fredrika Herman, *Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p.2

⁵ Sheila Barker, 'Lucrezia Quistelli (1541-94), A Woman Artist in Vasari's Florence', in *Women Artists in Early Modern Italy: Careers, Fame, and Collectors*, Edited by Sheila Barker, The Medici Archive Book Project, Harvey Miller Publishers, 2016, p.47

Even though there are countless examples of pre-20th-century women artists, most people can't name even one. This isn't surprising: how is anyone to know anything if it's been treated as a secret for so long? Take, for example, two of the best-known textbooks of the 20th century: E.H. Gombrich's *Story of Art* (1961) and W.H. Janson's *History of Art* (1962). Although they have been updated in recent years, in their original printing, not a single woman artist is mentioned. Bluntly speaking, until recently, art history has been understood as a record of male achievement. It's ironic, then, that Janson himself was fully aware that knowledge is a work in progress. In his introduction to the original edition he wrote:

There are no 'plain facts' in the history of art – or in the history of anything else, for that matter, only degrees of plausibility. Every statement, no matter how fully documented, is subject to doubt and remains a 'fact' only so long as nobody questions it.⁶

I recently interviewed the Director of Tate Modern, Frances Morris, about her time studying art history at Cambridge University and the Courtauld Institute in the 1970s and '80s.⁷ She was blunt about the 'plain facts' she had been taught: not one female artist was mentioned in the entirety of her studies apart from, curiously, the Bauhaus weaver Anni Albers, possibly because she was the first female textile artist to be granted the honour of a solo exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1949. I studied painting at art school in Canberra and Melbourne in the 1980s and '90s. Apart from a few feminist artists of the late 20th-century, I can only recall, at best, a couple of pre-20th-century women artists being mentioned. It wasn't until I read two dazzling surveys – Germaine Greer's *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work* (1979) and Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker's *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (1981) – that I became aware of the gender discrimination that beat at the heart of my art education. I had no idea that so many successful women artists were working in the Renaissance and the Baroque periods, let alone in the 18th and 19th centuries. But although these books were published four decades ago, and much has been written on the subject since then, still the bias persists. Four years ago I

⁶ H.W. Janson, *History of Art: The Western Tradition*, Preface and Acknowledgment to the First Edition, Pearson Education, 1962, p.12

⁷ Frieze Academy, 'Art and Feminism: Re-thinking Art History', Frances Morris and Jennifer Higgin in discussion, 18 July 2018

began a daily Instagram account in order to honour female artists from the past. At first, it was a struggle to fulfil my brief, as you have to dig deep to uncover lesser-known women artists. Anecdotes flowed my way from readers astonished about the ongoing levels of discrimination. One friend told me that in her seven-year-old daughter's art class, the teacher had devoted a week to studying great artists and hadn't included one woman. And this, in 2020.

Even today, although many more women than men graduate from art schools, commercial galleries, on the whole, represent significantly more men and important collections are heavily weighted to male achievement. That women are increasingly being given solo exhibitions and their work is finally being acquired by museums is a sign that things are moving in the right direction, but there's still a long way to go. In 2018, for example, I visited an exhibition at the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence. Titled 'Dawn of a Nation' it explored the intertwining of art and politics from the 1950s to the late '60s – a period in which many remarkable women artists were working in Italy. It included more than 80 works of art and yet only one was by a female artist: Giosetta Fioroni.⁸

Deeply entrenched biases take generations to fully redress. It's essential that a very bright light continues to be cast on the dark spaces of discrimination that continue to flourish in the arts. Annual statistics revealing the degrees to which women's work is exhibited, represented, rewarded, collected and written about are invaluable: no-one can argue with plain facts. The sheer variety and volume of paintings and sculptures by women that have been erased from history is staggering – and, quite simply, it's no longer acceptable. History is a story told in words as well as deeds: if the accomplishments of creative women aren't acknowledged, they may as well have never existed.

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⁸ <https://www.palazzostrozzi.org/en/archivio/exhibitions/dawn-of-a-nation/>

