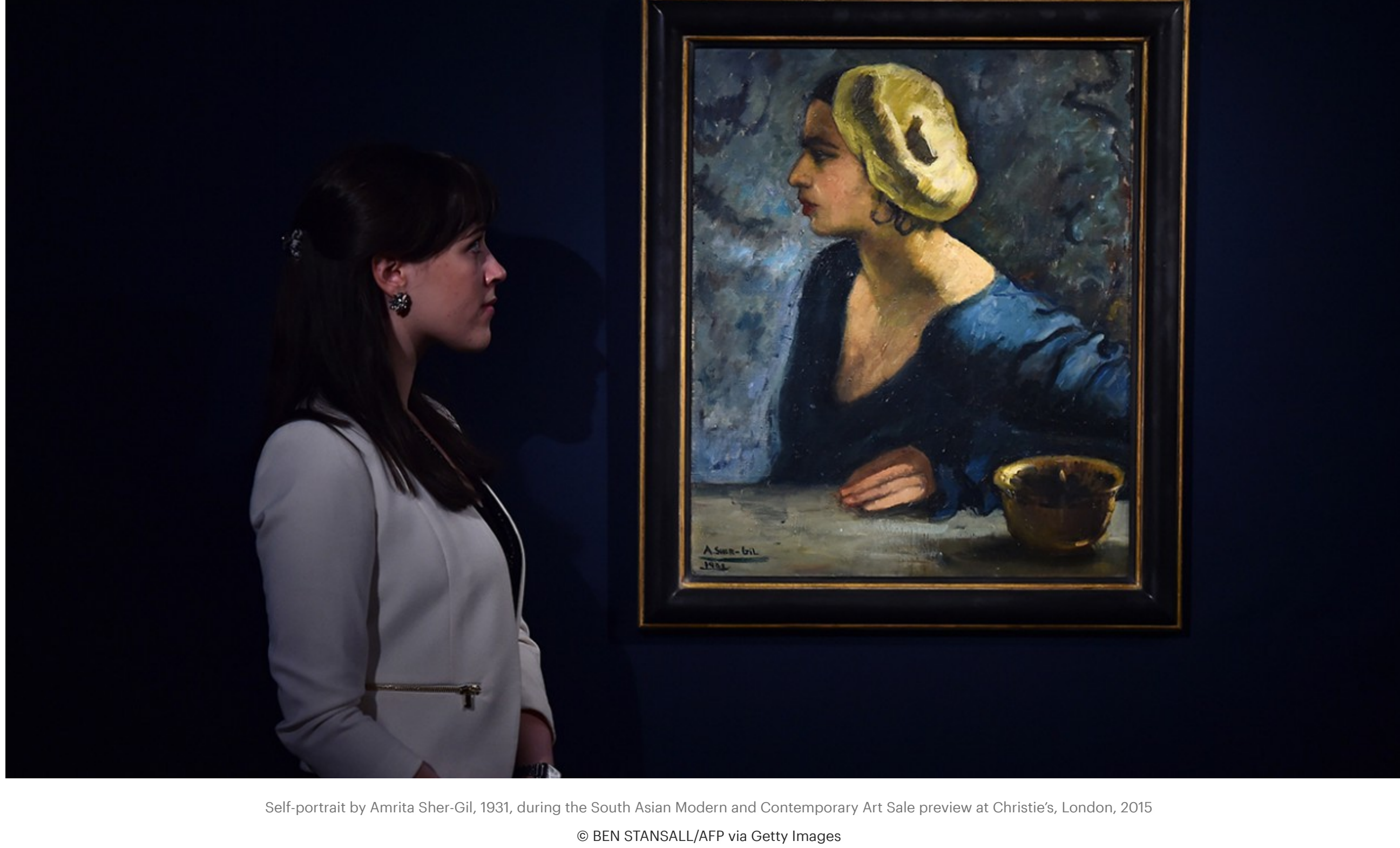


You can't stop me

How women artists have portrayed themselves

By Julie M. Johnson



Self-portrait by Amrita Sher-Gil, 1931, during the South Asian Modern and Contemporary Art Sale preview at Christie's, London, 2015 © BEN STANSALL/AFP via Getty Images



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IN THIS REVIEW

THE MIRROR AND THE PALETTE
Rebellion, revolution and resilience: 500 years of women's self-portraits
356pp. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. £20.
Jennifer Higgie



In a poignant moment near the beginning of *The Mirror and the Palette*, Jennifer Higgie is strolling through the Grand Palais, looking at room after room of works by Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun. It is 2015, and this is Vigée-Le Brun's first major retrospective exhibition, 173 years after her death. Vigée-Le Brun painted 660 portraits, 40 self-portraits and 200 landscapes; she also published her memoirs. Yet when Higgie was studying art history at the end of the 1980s, Vigée-Le Brun's name was not mentioned; nor was that of any other woman artist from the eighteenth century. "How many more times should she have portrayed herself before she was permitted to enter the canon?", Higgie wonders. "What else should she have done?"

Belated rediscovery and the long battle for inclusion in the story of art are running themes in *The Mirror and the Palette*, which takes a new look at women artists and the ways in which they have portrayed themselves. Higgie is indebted to the prior work of feminist art historians, taking her cue from Whitney Chadwick, who in *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (1985) warned that the "generalized language" of art history - a language "of movements and groups rather than that of individuals" - obscures or obliterates "the realities" of women artists. She joins the conversation not with new archival findings or theoretical breakthroughs, but with writerly magic and fresh readings of paintings. A master storyteller and brilliant translator of sensory experiences, she makes us care about her artists as people. And it is this that makes *The Mirror and the Palette* so noteworthy. Women artists have been subject to cycles of erasure and rediscovery for a long time. Reaching new and wider audiences is absolutely necessary if we want to shorten those recurring memory gaps.

Higgie describes her approach as "meandering and personal", more sampler than encyclopedia. It is an open-ended, curatorial method that allows her to be broadly inclusive. Organizing her artists in constellations around seven key themes - Easel, Smile, Allegory, Hallucination, Solitude, Translation and Naked - she gives us a new set of names to set beside those we know well. Here, for example, is Amrita Sher-Gil, considered a major figure in India, where she died in 1941 at the age of twenty-eight, leaving behind 174 documented works; Rita Angus, who transformed the artistic scene of New Zealand with her original style; and Helene Schjerfbeck, who until recently was all but unknown outside her native Finland. Higgie explains the social history and aesthetic context for each artist: we learn why a toothy smile was cause for scandal in 1786, or how allegory allowed early modern women a "freedom to express themselves with a complexity that was unthinkable in daily life". She describes how each woman navigated art world circumstances, their triumphs, and sometimes their personal despair or grief.

Underpinning these stories is a larger, related claim: self-portraiture was a genre readily available to women, who were historically excluded from art institutions. Facing social restrictions or other forms of marginalization, a woman with access to a mirror, palette and brushes could turn to herself as subject matter. Women used the self-portrait as a space of freedom - to create subversive statements, to engage with art history, and to consider themselves. In her audacious and clever commentary on the art of painting, for example, Sofonisba Anguissola portrayed her teacher in the act of depicting her - she gazes at us from the painting within the painting in a "wonderful riddle", an illusionistic game with the spectator. Sofonisba conflated herself with the artwork, "literally insert[ing] herself into the easel: its wooden structure is so close to her that it's like an extension of her body". Painted around 1550, it is the kind of self-referential picture that calls the whole enterprise of representation and authorship into question, while commenting on the interchanging roles of student, teacher, model and artist. Elisabetta Sirani (1638-65), who ran an academy for women artists, "the first in Europe outside a convent", often inserted herself into her history paintings. She painted her own face onto that of Timoclea of Thebes, a woman who, according to Plutarch, tricked her rapist into looking down a well, then pushed him in and stoned him to death. He is in a humiliating, out-of-control cartwheel, no match for the dignified Timoclea, who assists his plunge into oblivion with grace. It is a "defiant" treatment of the Timoclea story, that "upturned contemporary stereotypes of women, who were considered virtuous but physically weak and intellectually without initiative".

Though these stories are known to specialists, few have been integrated into the larger story of art; women simply haven't been getting enough credit for their inventions. The self-portrait at the easel became one of the great conventions of self-portraiture, but when twenty-year-old Catharina van Hemessen painted herself at her easel in 1548, she was the first to do so. Higgie compares Hemessen to a twentieth-century conceptualist exploring the boundaries of social convention and identity. Hemessen painted three versions of her self-portrait in the same year, at "a time when the contributions of women were rendered invisible". Higgie sees them as a form of protest: "I am a woman working, and you can't stop me".

Astounded by the works she found during her research, Higgie concludes that "the fact of their existence makes very clear that a segregation of the history of creativity - or anything else, for that matter - no longer makes any sense". This is why she includes details of support frameworks, which mattered a great deal, even if they didn't solve the general bias and misogyny that women encountered. Stories of support coming from emperors, curators, collectors and fellow artists are woven through the book. The Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI and the Elector of Saxony acquired Rosalba Carriera's pastels in the hundreds. Marie Bashkirtseff's mother paid for a shrine-like memorial at the Père-Lachaise cemetery and published her daughter's memoirs, which become an instant bestseller. Sher-Gil's whole family moved from India to Paris so that she could study art. The art historian Lou Klepac single-handedly revived the reputation of Australian Nora Heysen with a retrospective of her work in 2000, a first for her. She was eighty-nine, and it changed her life and the way she saw herself: "I only just thought that I am a person, painter in my own right since Lou Klepac discovered me and put on this retrospective show and produced the book". Dürer and Degas bought works by women. (Mary Cassatt, who is not included here, was the only American to exhibit with the Impressionists. The one behind the scenes making it happen? Degas.) Another unexpected ally, Marcel Duchamp, suggested to Peggy Guggenheim that she hold two exhibitions of women artists. He was on the selection committee. Opening just after the war ended, the exhibitions showed sixty-four women artists, among them Frida Kahlo, Leonora Carrington, Lee Krasner and Louise Bourgeois.

The reason these artists have been forgotten or struggled for recognition has nothing to do with their work, Higgie argues. It is pure bias, a failure to properly look and see. In the case of Lois Mailou Jones, who was born in Boston in 1905, it was clearly racism. As a Black artist, Jones was celebrated in France long before being recognized in her own, very racist, country. She couldn't even eat in a restaurant in Washington DC, where she taught at Howard University, but in the south of France, when she married the Haitian graphic artist Louis Vergniaud Pierre-Noel at a friend's home, the entire village celebrated them. The mayor himself served champagne. They were the only people of colour. In addition to pursuing her studio practice, Jones tirelessly promoted and researched the art of the African diaspora. She interviewed hundreds of artists in Dahomey (now Benin), Tanzania, Uganda and Zaire, curated exhibitions and lectured on ancestral and contemporary African art. She was honoured at the White House in 1976, and in 1984, July 29 was declared Lois Jones Day in Washington. But the Smithsonian American Art Museum did not acquire her work until 1990 - "forty-five years late", as Jones herself remarked.

There are very few illustrations here (you will find yourself googling quite a few of the paintings mentioned), but Higgie's account is powerful on its own, full of stories of misfortune or daring, and every once in a while she slips in some poetry: "Her dress, of blue silk and white lace, cascades down her body like a waterfall. The room is lush, dark: the carpet is a deep crimson and the shifting, aquatic colours of the wall like the memory of a rock-pool at night", she writes, describing a painting by Sher-Gil. She is able to retrieve personalities from historical obscurity with just a few words: "You can almost hear the sound of her distant laughter echoing across nine centuries", she writes of a scribe named Claricia. We know next to nothing about Claricia, except that she is a German illuminator from the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, and her name, which she has carefully written in tiny letters around her smiling face. She has made herself into the tail of the letter Q and is dangling from her sleeves "like a trapeze artist". An eye-opening intervention in the memory system of art history, *The Mirror and the Palette* is a major contribution, not least for the author's appealing, accessible writing. As Higgie puts it, "history is a story told in words: if women aren't in books, they may as well never have existed". She shows that we are still just coming to terms with how biased our institutions have been, and how much bigger the story of art really is.

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