

Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?

Linda Nochlin

Why have there been no great women artists? The question is crucial, not merely to women, and not only for social or ethical reasons, but for purely intellectual ones as well. If, as John Stuart Mill so rightly suggested, we tend to accept whatever *is* as “natural,”¹ this is just as true in the realm of academic investigation as it is in our social arrangements: the white Western male viewpoint, unconsciously accepted as *the* viewpoint of the art historian, is proving to be inadequate. At a moment when all disciplines are becoming more self-conscious—more aware of the nature of their presuppositions as exhibited in their own languages and structures—the current uncritical acceptance of “what is” as “natural” may be intellectually fatal. Just as Mill saw male domination as one of many social injustices that had to be overcome if a truly just social order were to be created, so we may see the unconscious domination of a white male subjectivity as one among many intellectual distortions which must be corrected in order to achieve a more adequate and accurate view of history.

A feminist critique of the discipline of art history is needed which can pierce cultural-ideological limitations, to reveal biases and inadequacies *not merely in regard to the question of women artists, but in the formulation of the crucial questions of the discipline as a whole*. Thus the so-called woman question, far from being a peripheral subissue, can become a catalyst, a potent intellectual instrument, probing the most basic

From *Art and Sexual Politics*, eds. Thomas B. Hess and Elizabeth Baker, copyright © 1971, 1973 ARTNEWS Associates. Reprinted by permission of the author and the publisher.

and "natural" assumptions, providing a paradigm for other kinds of internal questioning, and providing links with paradigms established by radical approaches in other fields. A simple question like "Why have there been no great women artists?" can, if answered adequately, create a chain reaction, expanding to encompass every accepted assumption of the field, and then outward to embrace history and the social sciences or even psychology and literature, and thereby, from the very outset, to challenge traditional divisions of intellectual inquiry.

The assumptions lying behind the question "Why have there been no great women artists?" are varied in range and sophistication. They run from "scientifically" proven demonstrations of the inability of human beings with wombs rather than penises to create anything significant, to relatively open-minded wonderment that women, despite so many years of near equality, have still not achieved anything of major significance in the visual arts.

The feminist's first reaction is to swallow the bait and attempt to answer the question as it is put: to dig up examples of insufficiently appreciated women artists throughout history; to rehabilitate modest, if interesting and productive, careers; to "rediscover" forgotten flower-painters or David-followers and make a case for them; to demonstrate that Berthe Morisot was really less dependent upon Manet than one had been led to think—in other words, to engage in activity not too different from that of the average scholar, man or woman, making a case for the importance of his own neglected or minor master. Such attempts, whether undertaken from a feminist point of view, like the ambitious article on women artists which appeared in the 1858 *Westminster Review*,² or more recent scholarly reevaluation of individual women artists, like Angelica Kauffmann or Artemisia Gentileschi,³ are certainly well worth the effort, adding to our knowledge of women's achievement and of art history generally. A great deal still remains to be done in this area, but unfortunately, such attempts do not really confront the question "Why have there been no great women artists?"; on the contrary, by attempting to answer it, and by doing so inadequately, they merely reinforce its negative implications.

There is another approach to the question. Many contemporary feminists assert that there is actually a different kind of greatness for women's art than for men's—They propose the existence of a distinctive and recognizable feminine style, differing in both formal and expressive qualities from that of men artists and posited on the unique character of women's situation and experience.

This might seem reasonable enough: in general, women's experience and situation in society, and hence as artists, is different from men's, and certainly an art produced by a group of consciously united and purposely articulate women intent on bodying forth a group consciousness of fem-

inine experience might indeed be stylistically identifiable as feminist, if not feminine, art. This remains within the realm of possibility; so far, it has not occurred.

No subtle essence of femininity would seem to link the work of Artemisia Gentileschi, Mme. Vigée-Lebrun, Angelica Kauffmann, Rosa Bonheur, Berthe Morisot, Suzanne Valadon, Kaethe Kollwitz, Barbara Hepworth, Georgia O'Keeffe, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Helen Frankenthaler, Birdget Riley, Lee Bontecou, and Louise Nevelson, any more than that of Sappho, Marie de France, Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, George Sand, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Anaïs Nin, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, and Susan Sontag. In every instance, women artists and writers would seem to be closer to other artists and writers of their own period and outlook than they are to each other.

It may be asserted that women artists are more inward-looking, more delicate and nuanced in their treatment of their medium. But which of the women artists cited above is more inward-turning than Redon, more subtle and nuanced in the handling of pigment than Corot at his best? Is Fragonard more or less feminine than Mme. Vigée-Lebrun? Is it not more a question of the whole rococo style of eighteenth-century France being "feminine," if judged in terms of a two-valued scale of "masculinity" versus "femininity"? Certainly if daintiness, delicacy, and preciousness are to be counted as earmarks of a feminine style, there is nothing fragile about Rosa Bonheur's *Horse Fair*. If women have at times turned to scenes of domestic life or children, so did the Dutch Little Masters, Chardin, and the impressionists—Renoir and Monet—as well as Morisot and Cassatt. In any case, the mere choice of a certain realm of subject matter, or the restriction to certain subjects, is not to be equated with a style, much less with some sort of quintessentially *feminine* style.

The problem lies not so much with the feminists' concept of what femininity in art is, but rather with a misconception of what art is: with the naïve idea that art is the direct, personal expression of individual emotional experience—a translation of personal life into visual terms. Yet art is almost never that; great art certainly never. The making of art involves a self-consistent language of form, more or less dependent upon, or free from, given temporally-defined conventions, schemata, or systems of notation, which have to be learned or worked out, through study, apprenticeship, or a long period of individual experimentation.

The fact is that there have been no great women artists, so far as we know, although there have been many interesting and good ones who have not been sufficiently investigated or appreciated—nor have there been any great Lithuanian jazz pianists or Eskimo tennis players. That this should be the case is regrettable, but no amount of manipulating the historical or critical evidence will alter the situation. There *are* no women

equivalents for Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Delacroix or Cézanne, Picasso or Matisse, or even, in very recent times, for Willem de Kooning or Warhol, any more than there are black American equivalents for the same. If there actually were large numbers of “hidden” great women artists, or if there really should be different standards for women’s art as opposed to men’s—and, logically, one can’t have it both ways—then what are feminists fighting for? If women have in fact achieved the same status as men in the arts, then the status quo is fine.

But in actuality, as we know, in the arts as in a hundred other areas, things remain stultifying, oppressive, and discouraging to all those—women included—who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class and, above all, male. The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education—education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter, head first, into this world of meaningful symbols, signs, and signals. The miracle is, in fact, that given the overwhelming odds against women, or blacks, so many of both have managed to achieve so much excellence—if not towering grandeur—in those bailiwicks of white masculine prerogative like science, politics, or the arts.

In some areas, indeed, women have achieved equality. While there may never have been any great women composers, there have been great women singers; if no female Shakespeares, there have been Rachels, Bernhardts, and Duses. Where there is a need there is a way, institutionally speaking: once the public, authors, and composers demanded more realism and range than boys in drag or piping castrati could offer, a way was found to include women in the performing arts, even if in some cases they might have to do a little whoring on the side to keep their careers in order. And, in some of the performing arts, such as the ballet, women have exercised a near monopoly on greatness.

It is no accident that the whole crucial question of the conditions *generally* productive of great art has so rarely been investigated, or that attempts to investigate such general problems have, until fairly recently, been dismissed as unscholarly, too broad, or the province of some other discipline, like sociology. Yet a dispassionate, impersonal, sociologically- and institutionally-oriented approach would reveal the entire romantic, elitist, individual-glorifying and monograph-producing substructure upon which the profession of art history is based, and which has only recently been called into question by a group of younger dissidents within it.

Underlying the question about women as artists, we find the whole myth of the Great Artist—subject of a hundred monographs, unique, godlike—bearing within his person since birth a mysterious essence, rather like the golden nugget in Mrs. Grass’s chicken soup, called Genius.⁴

The magical aura surrounding the representational arts and their creators has, of course, given birth to myths since the earliest times. Interestingly enough, the same magical abilities attributed by Pliny to the Greek painter Lysippus in antiquity—the mysterious inner call in early youth; the lack of any teacher but Nature herself—is repeated as late as the nineteenth century by Max Buchon in his biography of Courbet. The fairy tale of the Boy Wonder, discovered by an older artist or discerning patron, often in the guise of a lowly shepherd boy,⁵ has been a stock-in-trade of artistic mythology ever since Vasari immortalized the young Giotto, discovered by the great Cimabue while the lad was drawing sheep on a stone while guarding his flocks. Through mysterious coincidence, later artists like Domenico Beccafumi, Jacopo Sansovino, Andrea del Castagno, Andrea Mantegna, Francisco de Zurbarán and Goya were all discovered in similar pastoral circumstances. Even when the Great Artist was not fortunate enough to come equipped with a flock of sheep as a lad, his talent always seems to have manifested itself very early, independent of external encouragement: Filippo Lippi, Poussin, Courbet, and Monet are all reported to have drawn caricatures in their schoolbooks, instead of studying the required subjects. Michelangelo himself, according to his biographer and pupil, Vasari, did more drawing than studying as a child; Picasso passed all the examinations for entrance to the Barcelona Academy of Art in a single day when only fifteen. (One would like to find out, of course, what became of all the youthful scribblers and infant prodigies who then went on to achieve nothing but mediocrity—or less—as artists.)

Despite the actual basis in fact of some of these *wunderkind* stories, the tenor of such tales is itself misleading. Yet all too often, art historians, while pooh-poohing this sort of mythology about artistic achievement, nevertheless retain it as the unconscious basis of their scholarly assumptions, no matter how many crumbs they may throw to social influence, ideas of the time, etc. Art-historical monographs, in particular, accept the notion of the Great Artist as primary, and the social and institutional structures within which he lived and worked as mere secondary “influences” or “background.” This is still the golden-nugget theory of genius. On this basis, women’s lack of major achievement in art may be formulated as a syllogism: If women had the golden nugget of artistic genius, it would reveal itself. But it has never revealed itself. Q.E.D. Women do not have the golden nugget of artistic genius. (If Giotto, the obscure shepherd boy, and van Gogh with his fits could make it, why not women?)

Yet if one casts a dispassionate eye on the actual social and institutional situation in which important art has existed throughout history, one finds that the fruitful or relevant questions for the historian to ask

shape up rather differently. One would like to ask, for instance, from what social classes artists were most likely to come at different periods of art history—from what castes and subgroups? What proportion of major artists came from families in which their fathers or other close relatives were engaged in related professions? Nikolaus Pevsner points out in his discussion of the French Academy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries⁶ that the transmission of the profession from father to son was considered a matter of course (as in fact it was with the Coypels, the Coustous, the Van Loos, etc.). Despite the noteworthy and dramatically satisfying cases of the great father-rejecting *révoltés* of the nineteenth century, one might well be forced to admit that in the days when it was normal for sons to follow in their fathers' or even their grandfathers' footsteps, a large proportion of artists, great and not-so-great, had artist fathers. In the rank of major artists, the names of Holbein, Dürer, Raphael, and Bernini immediately spring to mind; even in more rebellious recent times, one can cite Picasso and Braque as sons of artists (or, in the latter case, a house painter) who were early enrolled in the paternal profession. . . .

When the right questions are finally asked about the conditions for producing art of which the production of great art is a subtopic, it will no doubt have to include some discussion of the situational concomitants of intelligence and talent generally, not merely of artistic genius. As Piaget and others have stressed, ability or intelligence is built up minutely, step by step, from infancy onward, and the patterns of adaptation-accommodation may be established so early that they may indeed *appear* to be innate to the unsophisticated observer. Such investigations imply that scholars will have to abandon the notion, consciously articulated or not, of individual genius as innate.⁷

The Question of the Nude

We can now approach our question from a more reasonable standpoint. Let us examine such a simple but critical issue as availability of the nude model to aspiring women artists, in the period extending from the Renaissance until near the end of the nineteenth century. During this period, careful and prolonged study of the nude model was essential to the production of any work with pretensions to grandeur, and to the very essence of History Painting, then generally accepted as the highest category of art. Central to the training programs of academies of art since their inception late in the sixteenth and early in the seventeenth centuries was life drawing from the nude, generally male, model. In addition, groups of artists and their pupils often met privately for life-drawing sessions

in their studios. It might be added that while individual artists and private academies employed female models extensively, the female nude was forbidden in almost all public art schools as late as 1850 and after—a state of affairs which Pevsner rightly designates as “hardly believable.”⁸

Far more believable, unfortunately, was the complete unavailability to aspiring women artists of *any* nude models at all. As late as 1893, “lady” students were not admitted to life drawing at the official academy in London, and even when they were, after that date, the model had to be “partially draped.”⁹

A brief survey of contemporary representations of life-drawing sessions reveals: an all-male clientele drawing from the female nude in Rembrandt’s studio; men working from the male nude in an eighteenth-century academy; from the female nude in the Hague Academy; modelling and painting from the male nude in the Vienna Academy—both of these latter from the mid-eighteenth century; men working from the seated male nude in Boilly’s charming painting of the interior of Houdon’s studio at the beginning of the nineteenth century; and Mathieu Cochereau’s scrupulously veristic *Interior of David’s Studio*, exhibited in the Salon of 1814, reveals a group of young men diligently working from the male nude model.

The very plethora of surviving “Academies”—detailed, painstaking studies from the nude studio model—in the youthful *oeuvre* of artists down through the time of Seurat and well into the twentieth century, attests to the importance of this branch of study in the development of the talented beginner. The formal academic program normally proceeded from copying from drawings and engravings, to drawing from casts of famous works of sculpture, to drawing from the living model. To be deprived of this ultimate state of training meant to be deprived of the possibility of creating major art—or simply, as with most of the few women aspiring to be painters, to be restricted to the “minor” and less highly regarded fields of portraiture, genre, landscape, or still-life.

There exist, to my knowledge, no representations of artists drawing from the nude which include women in any role but that of the model—an interesting commentary on rules of propriety: i.e., it is all right for a (“low,” of course) woman to reveal herself naked-as-an-object for a group of men, but forbidden that a woman participate in the active study and recording of naked-as-an-object men *or* women.

I have gone into the question of the availability of the nude model, a single aspect of the automatic, institutionally maintained discrimination against women, in such detail simply to demonstrate the universality of this discrimination and its consequences, as well as the institutional nature of but one major facet of the necessary preparation for achieving proficiency, much less greatness, in art at a certain time. One could

equally well have examined other dimensions of the situation, such as the apprenticeship system, the academic educational pattern which, in France especially, was almost the only key to success and which had a regular progression and set competitions, crowned by the Prix de Rome, which enabled the young winner to work in the French Academy in that city. This was unthinkable for women, of course, and women were unable to compete until the end of the nineteenth century, by which time the whole academic system had lost its importance anyway. It seems clear, to use France in the nineteenth century as an example (a country which probably had a larger proportion of women artists than any other—in terms of their percentage in the total number of artists exhibiting in the Salon) that “women were not accepted as professional painters.”¹⁰ In the middle of the century, there were a third as many women as men artists, but even this mildly encouraging statistic is deceptive when we discover that out of this relatively meager number, *none* had attended that major stepping stone to artistic success, the *École des Beaux-Arts*, only 7 percent had received a Salon medal, and *none* had ever received the Legion of Honor.¹¹ Deprived of encouragements, educational facilities, and rewards, it is almost incredible that even a small percentage of women actually sought a profession in the arts.

It also becomes apparent why women were able to compete on far more equal terms with men—and even become innovators—in literature. While art-making has traditionally demanded the learning of specific techniques and skills—in a certain sequence, in an institutional setting outside the home, as well as familiarity with a specific vocabulary of iconography and motifs—the same is by no means true for the poet or novelist. Anyone, even a woman, has to learn the language, can learn to read and write, and can commit personal experiences to paper in the home. Naturally, this oversimplifies, but it still gives a clue as to the possibility of the existence of an Emily Dickinson or a Virginia Woolf, and their lack of counterparts (at least until quite recently) in the visual arts.

Of course, we have not even gone into the “fringe” requirements for major artists, which would have been, for the most part, both physically and socially closed to women. In the Renaissance and after, the Great Artist, aside from participating in the affairs of an academy, might be intimate and exchange ideas with members of humanist circles, establish suitable relationships with patrons, travel widely and freely, and perhaps become involved in politics and intrigue. Nor have we mentioned the sheer organizational acumen and ability involved in running a major atelier-factory, like that of Rubens. An enormous amount of self-confidence and worldly knowledge, as well as a natural sense of dominance and power, was needed by a great *chef d'école*, both in the running of the

production end of painting, and in the control and instruction of numerous students and assistants.

The Lady's Accomplishment

Against the single-mindedness and commitment demanded of a *chef d'école*, we might set the image of the "lady painter" established by nineteenth century etiquette books and reinforced by the literature of the times. The insistence upon a modest, proficient, self-demeaning level of amateurism—the looking upon art, like needlework or crocheting, as a suitable "accomplishment" for the well-brought-up young woman—militated, and today still militates, against any real accomplishment on the part of women. It is this emphasis which transforms serious commitments to frivolous self-indulgence, busy work or occupational therapy, and even today, in suburban bastions of the feminine mystique, tends to distort the whole notion of what art is and what kind of social role it plays. . . .

. . . Now, as in the nineteenth century, women's amateurism, lack of commitment, snobbery, and emphasis on chic in their artistic "hobbies," feed the contempt of the successful, professionally committed man who is engaged in "real" work and can (with a certain justice) point to his wife's lack of seriousness. For such men, the "real" work of women is only that which directly or indirectly serves them and their children. Any other commitment falls under the rubric of diversion, selfishness, ego-mania or, at the unspoken extreme, castration. The circle is a vicious one, in which philistinism and frivolity mutually reinforce each other, today as in the nineteenth century.

Successes

But what of the small band of heroic women who, throughout the ages, despite obstacles, have achieved preeminence? Are there any qualities that may be said to have characterized them, as a group and as individuals? While we cannot investigate the subject in detail, we can point to a few striking general facts: almost all women artists were either the daughters of artist fathers, or later, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, had a close personal connection with a strong or dominant male artist. This is, of course, not unusual for men artists either, as we have indicated in the case of artist fathers and sons: it is simply true almost *without exception* for their feminine counterparts, at least until quite recently. From the legendary sculptor, Sabina von Steinbach, in the fifteenth century, who, according to local tradition, was responsible for the portal groups on the Cathedral of Strasbourg, down to Rosa Bonheur, the

most renowned animal painter of the century—and including such eminent women artists as Marietta Robusti, daughter of Tintoretto, Lavinia Fontana, Artemisia Gentileschi, Elizabeth Chéron, Mme. Vigée-Lebrun, and Angelica Kauffmann—all were the daughters of artists. In the nineteenth century, Berthe Morisot was closely associated with Manet, later marrying his brother, and Mary Cassatt based a good deal of her work on the style of her close friend, Degas. In the second half of the nineteenth century, precisely the same breaking of traditional bonds and discarding of time-honored practices that permitted men artists to strike out in directions quite different from those of their fathers enabled women—with additional difficulties, to be sure—to strike out on their own as well. Many of our more recent women artists, like Suzanne Valadon, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Kaethe Kollwitz, or Louise Nevelson, have come from nonartistic backgrounds, although many contemporary and near-contemporary women artists have, of course, married artists.

It would be interesting to investigate the role of benign, if not outright encouraging, fathers: both Kaethe Kollwitz and Barbara Hepworth, for example, recall the influence of unusually sympathetic and supportive fathers on their artistic pursuits.

In the absence of any thoroughgoing investigation, one can only gather impressionistic data about the presence or absence of rebellion against parental authority in women artists, and whether there may be more or less rebellion on the part of women artists than is true in the case of men. One thing, however, is clear: for a woman to opt for a career at all, much less for a career in art, has required a certain unconventionality, both in the past and at present. And it is only by adopting, however covertly, the “masculine” attributes of single-mindedness, concentration, tenaciousness, and absorption in ideas and craftsmanship for their own sake, that women have succeeded, and continue to succeed, in the world of art. . . .

Conclusion

Hopefully, by stressing the *institutional*, or the public, rather than the *individual*, or private, preconditions for achievement in the arts, we have provided a paradigm for the investigation of other areas in the field. By examining in some detail a single instance of deprivation or disadvantage—the unavailability of nude models to women art students—we have suggested that it was indeed *institutionally* impossible for women to achieve excellence or success on the same footing as men, *no matter what* their talent, or genius. The existence of a tiny band of successful, if not great, women artists throughout history does nothing to gainsay this fact, any

more than does the existence of a few superstars or token achievers among the members of any minority groups.

What is important is that women face up to the reality of their history and of their present situation. Disadvantage may indeed be an excuse; it is not, however, an intellectual position. Rather, using their situation as underdogs and outsiders as a vantage point, women can reveal institutional and intellectual weaknesses in general, and, at the same time they destroy false consciousness, take part in the creation of institutions in which clear thought and true greatness are challenges open to anyone—man or woman—courageous enough to take the necessary risk, the leap into the unknown.

Notes

1. John Stuart Mill, "The Subjection of Women" (1869) in *Three Essays by John Stuart Mill*, World's Classics Series (London, 1966), p. 441.
2. "Women Artists," a review of *Die Frauen in die Kunstgeschichte* by Ernst Guhl in *The Westminster Review* (American Edition) 70 (July 1858): 91–104. I am grateful to Elaine Showalter for having brought this review to my attention.
3. See, for example, Peter S. Walch's excellent studies of Angelica Kauffmann or his doctoral dissertation, "Angelica Kauffmann," Princeton University, 1967. For Artemisia Gentileschi, see R. Ward Bissell, "Artemisia Gentileschi—A New Documented Chronology," *Art Bulletin* 50 (June 1968): 153–168.
4. For the relatively recent genesis of the emphasis on the artist as the nexus of esthetic experience, see M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953) and Maurice Z. Shroder, *Icarus: The Image of the Artist in French Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961).
5. A comparison with the parallel myth for women, the Cinderella story, is revealing: Cinderella gains higher status on the basis of a passive, "sex-object" attribute—small feet (shades of fetishism and Chinese foot-binding!)—whereas the Boy Wonder always proves himself through active accomplishment. For a thorough study of myths about artists, see Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Die Legende vom Künstler: Ein Geschichtlicher Versuch* (Vienna, 1934).
6. Nikolaus Pevsner, *Academies of Art, Past and Present* (Cambridge, England: The University Press, 1940; New York: Macmillan, 1940), p. 96f.
7. Contemporary directions in art itself—earthworks, conceptual art, art as information, etc.—certainly point away from emphasis on the individual genius and his salable products; in art history, Harrison C. White and Cynthia A. White, *Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World* (New York: Wiley, 1965) opens up a fruitful new direction of investigation, as does Nikolaus Pevsner's pioneering *Academies of Art* (see Note 6); Ernst Gombrich and Pierre Francastel, in their very different ways, have always tended to view art and the artist as part of a total situation, rather than in lofty isolation.
8. Female models were introduced in the life class in Berlin in 1875, in Stockholm in 1839, in Naples in 1870, at the Royal College of Art in London, after 1875. Pevsner, *op. cit.*, p. 231. Female models at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts wore

masks to hide their identity as late as about 1866—as attested to in a charcoal drawing by Thomas Eakins—if not later.

9. Pevsner, *op. cit.*, p. 231.
10. White and White, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
11. *Ibid.*, Table 5.