OLD MISTRESSES
WOMEN, ART AND IDEOLOGY
ROZSIKA PARKER AND GRISELDA POLLOCK

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When Virginia Woolf was asked to lecture on ‘Women and Fiction’ in 1928 she commented ironically:

A thousand questions at once suggested themselves. But one needed answers, not questions; and an answer was only to be had by consulting the learned and unprejudiced, who have removed themselves above the strife of tongue and confusion of body and issued the result of their reasoning and research in books which are to be found in the British Museum. If truth is not to be found in the British Museum, where, I asked myself, picking up a notebook and a pencil, is truth? (A Room of One’s Own (1928), 1974 edn, p. 27)

Hundreds of questions can equally be posed about women in the history of art. Have there been female artists? If so, what have they created? Why did they produce what they did? What factors conditioned their lives and works? What difficulties have women encountered and how did they overcome discrimination, denigration, devaluation, dismissal, in attempting to be an artist in a society which since the Book of Genesis has associated the divine right of creativity with men alone (figs 1 and 2)?

But what answers are to be found on the shelves of the British Museum, that repository of received knowledge? Virginia Woolf was surprised to discover the sheer number of books to consult about women, though written from the assured heights of masculine authority. ‘Are you aware that you are perhaps the most discussed animal in the universe?’, she asked her women readers drily. There is indeed a great wealth of information on women artists in the British Museum. But are the learned unprejudiced?

2. ‘It’s never occurred to you, I suppose, that they could have been created by a cave-woman?’ Cartoon by Leslie Starke, *New Yorker*, 23 July 1973

The cartoon is a mocking response to feminist art history, which has shown that there have been women artists. We are clearly not meant to take the idea very seriously since the cartoonist has drawn the woman who raises the issue in such a way as to alienate all sympathy or respect.
Even a cursory glance at the substantial literature of art history makes us distrust the objectivity with which the past is represented. Closer reading alerts us to the existence of powerful myths about the artist, and the frequent blindness to economic and social factors in the way art is produced, artists are taught, and works of art are received. In the literature of art from the sixteenth century to the present two striking things emerge. The existence of women artists was fully acknowledged until the nineteenth century, but it has only been virtually denied by modern writers. Related to this inconsistent pattern of recognition is the construction and constant reiteration of a fixed categorization—a ‘stereotype’—for all that women artists have done.

To discover the history of women and art is in part to account for the way art history is written. To expose its underlying values, its assumptions, its silences and its prejudices is also to understand that the way women artists are recorded and described is crucial to the definition of art and the artist in our society.

A brief survey of the literature of art up to the nineteenth century shows that the existence of women artists was consistently acknowledged. The sixteenth-century artist and critic Giorgio Vasari was one of the earliest writers of art history as we know it. His lengthy study of artists of the Renaissance was a forerunner of the most common genre of modern art history, the monograph, a study of the life and work of an individual artist. In this sixteenth-century text the women artists of the period are both documented and assessed. There is, for example, a chapter on the sculptor Properzia de’ Rossi (1490–1530) (fig. 3), detailed information about Sofonisba Anguissola (1532/5–1625) (fig. 4) and her five sisters, and a description of an ambitious fresco of The Last Supper in the Florentine church of Santa Maria Novella by Plautilla Nelli.

The trickle of references to women artists in the sixteenth century grows by the eighteenth century to become a flood in the nineteenth century. Lengthy surveys of women in art from Greece to the modern day were published throughout Europe. There was, for example, Ernst Guhl, Die Frauen in der Kunstgeschichte (1858), Elizabeth Ellet, Women Artists in All Ages and Countries (1859), Ellen Clayton, English Female Artists (1876), Marius Vachon, La Femme dans l’art (1893), Walter Sparrow, Women Painters of the World (1905) and the massive compilation of more than one thousand entries on women by Clara Clement in her encyclopedia, Women in the Fine Arts from the 7th Century BC to the 20th Century (1904).

Curiously the works on women artists dwindle away precisely at the moment when women’s social emancipation and increasing education should, in theory, have prompted a greater awareness of women’s participation in all walks of life. With the twentieth century there has been a virtual silence on the subject of the artistic activities of women in the past, broken only by a few works which repeated the findings of the nineteenth century. A glance at the
Properzia de’ Rossi, *Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife*, c. 1520
Properzia de’ Rossi was born in Bologna, a city which has a consistent history of progressive attitudes and produced a significant number of women who participated as professionals in many branches of the arts and sciences during the Renaissance (see Laura Ragg, *Women Artists of Bologna*, 1907).

Sofonisba Anguissola, *Portrait of a Young Nobleman*, early 1560s
Anguissola was one of five daughters of a noble family of Cremona. With her second sister Elena she studied under Bernadino Campi and Bernadino Gatti and through her father’s agency was advised by Michelangelo (C. de Tolnay, ‘Sofonisba Anguissola and her Relations with Michelangelo’, *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery*, vol. V, 1941, pp. 15-18). In 1560 she was invited to Spain by Philip II as a court painter and lady-in-waiting to the Queen. During the twenty years she spent in Spain Anguissola also painted portraits commissioned by the Pope. In 1580 she moved with her new husband to Palermo where she died at an advanced age. In 1624, shortly before her death, she was visited by the Flemish painter, Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641), who drew a sketch of Anguissola and wrote in his notebook:

*Portrait of Signora Sophonisba*, painter. Copied from life in Palermo on 12th day of July of the year 1624, when she was 96 years of age, still a good memory, clear sense and kind. . . . While I painted her portrait, she gave me advice as to the light . . . and many more good speeches, as well as telling me parts of her life story, in which one could see that she was a wonderful painter after nature.

(Cited in Tufts (1974), p. 20)
Mary Beth Edelson, *Some Living American Women Artists*, 1972

*Dramatis personae* at this 'Last Supper' (l. to r.): Lynda Benglis, Helen Frankenthaler, June Wayne, Alma Thomas, Lee Krasner, Nancy Graves, Georgia O'Keeffe, Elaine DeKooning, Louise Nevelson, M. C. Richards, Louise Bourgeois, Lila Katzen, Yoko Ono; Guests: (clockwise) Agnes Martin, Joan Mitchell, Grace Hartigan, Yayoi Kusama, Marisol, Alice Neel, Jane Wilson, Judy Chicago, Gladys Nilsson, Betty Parsons, Miriam Schapiro, Lee Bontecou, Sylvia Stone, Chryssa, Suellen Rocca, Carolee Schneemann, Lisette Model, Audrey Flack, Buffie Johnson, Vera Simmons, Helen Pashgian, Susan Lewis Williams, Racelle Strick, Ann McCoy, J. L. Knight, Enid Sanford, Joan Balou, Marta Minujin, Rosemary Wright, Cynthia Bickley, Lawra Gregory, Agnes Denes, Mary Beth Edelson, Irene Siegel, Nancy Grossman, Hannah Wilke, Jennifer Bartlett, Mary Corse, Eleanor Antin, Jane Kaufman, Muriel Castanis, Susan Crile, Anne Ryan, Sue Ann Childress, Patricia Mainardi, Dindga McCannon, Alice Shaddle, Arden Scott, Faith Ringgold, Sharon Brant, Daria Dorsch, Nina Yankowitz, Rachel bas-Cohain, Loretta Dunkelman, Kay Brown, CeRser, Norma Copley, Martha Edelheit, Jackie Skyles, Barbara Zuber, Susan Williams, Judith Bernstein, Rosemary Mayer, Maud Boltz, Patsy Norvell, Joan Danziger, Minna Citron.

Judith Leyster, *Self Portrait*, 1635
index of any standard contemporary art history text book gives the fallacious impression that women have always been absent from the cultural scene.

Twentieth-century art historians have sources enough to show that women artists have always existed, yet they ignore them. The silence is absolute in such popular works surveying the history of western art as E. H. Gombrich’s *Story of Art* (1961) or H. W. Janson’s *History of Art* (1962). Neither mentions women artists at all. The organizers of a 1972 exhibition of the work of women painters, *Old Mistresses: Women Artists of the Past*, revealed the full implications of that silence:

The title of this exhibition alludes to the unspoken assumption in our language that art is created by men. The reverential term ‘Old Master’ has no meaningful equivalent; when cast in its feminine form, ‘Old Mistress’, the connotation is altogether different, to say the least. (A. Gabhart and E. Broun, *Walters Art Gallery Bulletin*, vol. 24, no. 7, 1972)

Despite the enormous increase in numbers of women artists during the twentieth century (fig. 5), the assumption persists in our language that art is created by men, an attitude which is perpetuated in contemporary criticism.*

In the *Feminist Art Journal* (April, 1972), the Tamarind Lithography Workshop published the results of its survey of criticism of contemporary art in major American art magazines. From August 1970 to August 1971, 87.8 per cent of the reviews in *Art Forum*, a leading art journal, discussed men’s work; only 12.2 per cent reported women’s work; 92 per cent of *Art in America*’s reviews were devoted to men’s work, 8.0 per cent to women’s work, while men took 95 per cent of the lines allotted to writing on art and 93 per cent of the reproductions. Particular ideological assumptions about women’s relation to art sustain this silence. When one feminist art critic questioned a colleague about his attitude to a woman artist and asked why he had never visited her studio, ‘he said in perfect frankness that she was such a good looking girl that he thought that if he went to the studio it might not be because of her work.’ Another typical example comes from the chairman of an art department who said to a female student ‘You’ll never be an artist, you’ll just have babies’ (*The Rip Off File*, 1972).

At a lecture at the Slade School of Art in 1962, the sculptor Reg Butler proposed a similar identification of women with procreativity and men with cultural creativity:

I am quite sure that the vitality of many female students derives from

*For a massive dictionary of women artists, see *Female Artists Past and Present*, published by the Women’s History Research Center Inc., Berkeley, California, 1974.*
frustrated maternity, and most of these, on finding the opportunity to settle down and produce children, will no longer experience the passionate discontent sufficient to drive them constantly towards the labours of creation in other ways. Can a woman become a vital creative artist without ceasing to be a woman except for the purposes of a census? (Reg Butler (1962), reprinted in New Society, 31 August 1978, p. 443)

In reviewing an exhibition in 1978 at the Arts Council’s Hayward Gallery in London, organized by women and showing predominantly work by contemporary women artists, John McEwan employed another but related strategy. He identified women not with art, but domestic craft. Only one artist escaped his general censure, but for revealing reasons. She

at least exhibits none of the needle-threading eye and taste for detail that is so peculiarly the bug bear of women artists when left to their own devices; a preoccupation that invariably favours presentation at the expense of content. (John McEwan, ‘Beleaguered’, Spectator, 9 September 1978, our italics)

Such stereotypes and assumptions infect writing on art both past and present. But the denigration of women by historians is concealed behind a rigidly constructed view of art history. Some rationalize their dismissal of women by claiming that they are derivative and therefore insignificant. R. H. Wilenski, for instance, stated categorically, ‘Women painters as everyone knows always imitate the work of some men’ (Introduction to Dutch Art, 1929, p. 93).

But dependence on another is seen as a fault only if stylistic or formal innovation is the exclusive standard of evaluation in art. Lucy Lippard usefully challenges this notion which has so often been used to justify the exclusion of women from serious consideration:

Within the old, ‘progressive’, or ‘evolutionary’ contexts, much women’s art is ‘not innovative’, or ‘retrograde’ (or so I have been told by men since I started writing about women . . .). Some women artists are consciously reacting against avant-gardism and retrenching in aesthetic areas neglected or ignored in the past; others are unaffected by such rebellious motivations but continue to work in personal modes that outwardly resemble varied art styles of the recent past. One of the major questions facing feminist criticism has to be whether stylistic innovation is indeed the only innovation, or whether other aspects of originality have yet to be investigated: ‘Maybe the existing forms of art for the ideas men have had are inadequate for the ideas women have.’ Susana Torre suggests that
perhaps women, unable to identify with historical styles, are really more interested in art itself, in self expression and its collective history and communication, differing from the traditional notion of the avant-garde by opposing not styles and forms, but ideologies. (From the Centre: Feminist Essays on Women’s Art, 1976, p. 6)

Most consistent, however, is the pejorative attribution of a certain notion of femininity to all women artists. James Laver wrote on women artists of the seventeenth century:

Some women artists tried to emulate Frans Hals but the vigorous brush strokes of the master were beyond their capability, one has only to look at the works of a painter like Judith Leyster (1609–1661) to detect the weakness of the feminine hand. (‘Women Painters’, Saturday Book, 1964, p. 19)

But if the ‘weakness of femininity’ is so clear in contrast to the ‘masculine’ vigour of Frans Hals, why where so many works by Judith Leyster (fig. 6) attributed to Frans Hals in the past? (Leyster’s existence was rediscovered in 1892 when a painting thought to be by Hals was found to have Judith Leyster’s signature.*)

This ‘feminine’ stereotype is a ‘catch-all’ for a wide range of ideas, and it has a long history. As Mary Ellmann showed in her study of phallic criticism and sexual analogy in literary criticism, Thinking About Women (1968), the stereotype is a product of a patriarchal culture which constructs male dominance through the significance it attaches to sexual difference. Women and all their activities are characterized as the antithesis of cultural creativity, making the notion of a woman artist a contradiction in terms. A nineteenth-century writer stated it clearly: ‘So long as a woman refrains from unsexing herself by acquiring genius let her dabble in anything. The woman of genius does not exist but when she does she is a man’ (cited in Octave Uzanne, The Modern Parisienne, 1912, our italics). Often the only way critics can praise a woman artist is to say that ‘she paints like a man’, as Charles Baudelaire commented on Eugénie Gautier in 1846.

None the less, writers have been forced to confront the fact that women have consistently painted and sculpted, but their use of a feminine stereotype for all that women have done serves to separate women’s art from Art (male) and to

*For a full discussion of Leyster and the attribution of her work see Juliane Harms, ‘Judith Leyster, Ihr Leben und Ihr Werk’, Oud Holland, vol. XLIV (1927), and T. Hess, ‘Great Women Artists’, Art and Sexual Politics (1973), pp. 44–8, with many other examples of women’s work being attributed to male artists.
accommodate the internal contradiction between the reality of women's activities and the myths of male cultural creativity. One example of this is Vasari's chapter on Properzia de' Rossi (c. 1490–1530), who started as a carver of curios but turned professional sculptor, producing bas-relief carvings such as *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*, c. 1520 (fig. 3). Vasari tells us, in this order, that she was accomplished in household management, beautiful in body, a better singer than any woman in her city and, finally, a skilled carver. All he could see in her work was subtlety, smoothness and a delicate manner. *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife* is praised for being 'A lovely picture, sculptured with womanly grace and more than admirable.' His readers are reassured that Properzia de' Rossi conformed to the social expectations and duties of a noblewoman of the era.

Almost a hundred years later Count Berndorff reviewed the works of Angelica Kauffman (1741–1807), (fig. 50), a founder member of the Royal Academy, praising her for propriety and conformity to social norms:

> Her figures have the quiet dignity of Greek models. . . . Her women are most womanly and modest. She conveys with much art the proper relations between the sexes; the dependence of the weaker on the stronger which so much appeals to her male critics.

The hey-day of this special characterization of women's art as biologically determined or as an extension of their domestic and refining role in society, quintessentially feminine, graceful, delicate and decorative, is without doubt the nineteenth century. Bourgeois ideology attributed an important but ancillary role to women (see L. Davidoff, *The Best Circles*, 1973). They were the defenders of civilization, guardians of the home and social order. John Ruskin's book *Sesame and Lilies* (1867) is a clear statement of Victorian ideals and the rigid division of roles for men and women; men work in the outside world and women adorn the home, where they protect traditional, moral and spiritual values in a new industrial society. As his title of the section on women's roles, 'Of Queen's Gardens', implies, women are to fulfil themselves in a kind of aristocratic, untainted Garden of Eden, and he finally declares:

> Now their separate characters are these. The man's power is active, progressive and defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer. His intellect is for invention and speculation. But the woman's intellect is not for invention or creation but sweet ordering, arrangement and decision. Her great function is praise. (*Works of John Ruskin*, Library Edition, vol. XVIII, 1905, p. 122)

Not surprisingly, similar views are evident in nineteenth-century writers on
women artists. Women artists shared the great social responsibility the Victorians placed on their sex. The work of a group of expatriate American sculptors (figs 57, 58) in Rome in the 1850s and 1860s could be endorsed by critics because they viewed it entirely in the light of social ideology. In 1866 an anonymous reviewer wrote:

One or two lady artists in Rome of distinguished talent have made themselves a name yet [in addition] we have a fair constellation here of twelve stars of greater or lesser magnitude who shed their soft humanizing influence on a profession that has done so much for the refinement and civilization of man. (H. W., ‘Lady Artists in Rome’, *Art Journal*, vol. V, March 1866, p. 177)

But the most important feature of Victorian writing on women was that it attributed natural explanations to what were in fact the result of ideological attitudes. It prescribed social roles and social behaviour while pretending to describe natural characteristics. Thus John Jackson Jarves analysed the same group of sculptors in the following terms:

Few women as yet are predisposed to intellectual pursuits which demand wearisome years of preparation and deferred hopes. *Naturally* they turn to those fields of art which seem to yield the quickest returns for the least expenditure of mental capital. Having in general a nice feeling for form, quick perceptions and a mobile fancy with not infrequently a lively imagination it is not strange that modelling in clay is tempting to their fair fingers . . . . Women by *nature* are likewise prompted in the treatment of sculpture to motives of fancy and sentiment rather than realistic portraiture or absolute creative imagination. (‘Progress of American Sculpture in Europe’, *Art Journal*, vol. X, 1871, p. 7, our italics)

Such language endlessly reinforces the notion of the ‘fair’ femininity of women’s art and its supposed source in their gender, although we can locate the reasons for women’s concentration on certain subjects and their more limited achievements in the sphere of nude sculpture or public commissions of heroic portraits, in the social structure of education, training, public policy and Victorian propriety (fig. 7).

At least one Victorian writer, Elizabeth Ellet, fully recognized that social, not biological factors account for women’s choice of art forms:

The kind of painting in which the object is prominent has been most practised by female artists. Portraits, landscapes and flowers, and pictures
7 Harriet Hosmer on a Scaffold with the Statue of Senator Thomas Hart Benton, 1863 (anonymous photograph from Cornelia Carr, Harriet Hosmer: Letters and Memoir, 1912)
of animals are in favour among them. Historical or allegorical subjects they have comparatively neglected; and perhaps, a significant reason for this has been that they could not demand the years of study necessary for the attainment of eminence in these. More have been engaged in engraving on copper than in any other branch of art, and many have been miniature painters.

Such occupation might be pursued in the strict seclusion of the home to which custom and public sentiment consigned the fair student. Nor were they inharmonious with the ties of friendship and love, to which her tender nature clung. In most instances women have been led to the cultivation of art through the choice of parents or brothers. While nothing has been more common than to see young men embrace the profession against the wishes of their families and in the face of difficulties, the example of a woman thus deciding for herself is extremely rare. (Women Artists in All Ages and Countries, 1859, p. 3)

Victorian writers found a way of recognizing women’s art compatible with their bourgeois patriarchal ideology. They contained women’s activities, imposing their own limiting definitions and notions of a separate sphere. Yet it was actually these rigid prescriptions which insidiously prepared the ground for twentieth-century dismissal and devaluation of all women artists. It was the Victorians’ insistence on essentially different spheres for men and women that precipitated women artists into historical oblivion once Victorian chivalrous sentimentality gave way to a more disguised but potent sexism.

The contradictory character of Victorian attitudes to women’s art can best be illustrated by two quotations. The positive value they attributed to women as refined spirits is expressed in an article in the Art Journal of 1874, a review of an exhibition of the Society of Lady Painters* founded in 1857:

Nevertheless the refinement which characterises the painting of Lady Artists cannot be passed over without remark. We cannot say that English art does not stand in need of its influence and there is good reason to believe that Englishmen might take a lesson from Englishwomen in this. . . . There is scarcely a trace of vulgarity and we may even go so far as

*The Society of Lady Painters was first known as the Society of Female Artists, but later it acquired its more genteel title. It represents another aspect of the notion of separate spheres resulting from the structure of Victorian society. Since women were excluded from the most important institutions of art education, they founded their own schools and institutions, thus perpetuating one of the main forces in their exclusion from an accepted place in the official history of art. The history of women’s institutions is a further example of the structural factors in the neglect of women artists.
to say that the pictures here collected suggest a more cultured spirit than can be claimed for the average art product.

This piece of criticism, coloured by Victorian attitudes, none the less attributes some significance to the specificity of women’s art. His comments are addressed to the state of English painting in 1874. However, a more extended essay on the place of women in art by a French critic, Léon Légrange, declaims universal absolutes, in themselves conditioned by nineteenth-century ideology, which concern both the quality of women’s art and the specializations, flower painting for example, or graphic art, within which women artists were confined by the social structure:

Male genius has nothing to fear from female taste. Let men of genius conceive of great architectural projects, monumental sculpture, and elevated forms of painting. In a word, let men busy themselves with all that has to do with great art. Let women occupy themselves with those types of art they have always preferred, such as pastels, portraits or miniatures. Or the painting of flowers, those prodigies of grace and freshness which alone can compete with the grace and freshness of women themselves. To women above all falls the practice of the graphic art, those painstaking arts which correspond so well to the role of abnegation and devotion which the honest woman happily fills here on earth, and which is her religion. (‘Du rang des femmes dans l’art’, Gazette des Beaux-Arts, 1860)

In a few brief lines Légrange illustrates all the destructive stereotyping we have discussed. Men are the true artists, they have genius; women have only taste. Men are busy with serious works of the imagination on a grand scale but women are occupied in minor, delicate, personal pastimes. The flower analogy places both women and their work in the sphere of nature. Woman’s socially appointed ‘duty’ becomes divinely ordained and her historical restriction to certain practices an inevitable result of Nature and God.

The legacy of the Victorians’ views on women and art has been the collapse of history into nature and sociology into biology. They prepared the way for current beliefs about women’s innate lack of talent and ‘natural’ predisposition for ‘feminine’ subjects. On the other hand, some late Victorian ‘compilers of short memoirs’ on women artists, for instance, Elizabeth Ellet, showed more historical sense. Clayton (1876), Clement (1904) and Sparrow (1905) record the consistent presence of women in the fine arts, recognizing difficulties they had as women to negotiate in the form of both institutional and social factors. Such texts enable us to see that women in art do have a history, but a different one from the accepted norm, because of their particular relation to official
structures and male-dominated modes of art production. For women artists have not acted outside cultural history, as many commentators seem to believe, but rather have been compelled to act within it from a place other than that occupied by men.

II

Names of women artists have been recorded since antiquity, for instance, Lala, Aristarte, Timarete, Olympia, Helen, Kalypso, Kora, Marcia, Eirene, Thamyris. Using the Roman historian Pliny as a source, the fourteenth-century Italian poet Boccaccio produced an inspirational text on Famous Women of Antiquity (De Claris Mulieribus, 1370), which included short accounts of three classical artists, Eirene, Marcia and Thamyris, who is shown on a page from a fifteenth-century French translation of Boccaccio’s treatise (fig. 8). Boccaccio’s essays on women artists contain contradictory messages. On the one hand, classical achievements are proposed as models for contemporary artists, and the presentation of women artists from the classical period served to validate and encourage women artists in the fourteenth century. Yet the poet’s commentary undercuts this by asserting that these women were exceptional, forswearing their womanly duties to pursue a masculine profession: ‘I thought these achievements worthy of some praise, for art is much alien to the mind of women, and these things cannot be accomplished without a great deal of talent, which in women is usually very scarce.’ The text and representations of women artists in treatises such as Boccaccio’s make us aware of the contradictions in the way women’s art practice has been presented to us. Boccaccio’s early Renaissance text is an example of the tendency to impose a rigid and anti-historical categorization on women’s art.

Research on women artists in the Middle Ages, when art production and theories of art were significantly different to those that emerged during and after the Renaissance, shows how necessary it is to pay close attention to the specific and differing conditions of women’s practice in art. Women’s participation in the varied forms of medieval art has to be related to particular historical factors, to the uneven development of religious and secular centres of art production, to amateur and professional work and to attitudes to women’s membership of professional bodies such as the guilds which varied from guild to guild and from country to country. Moreover women’s economic participation in such productive units as the household workshop has to be distinguished from the social and the sexual roles preached at them by Christian theology. In a published lecture, Anastaise and Her Sisters: Women Artists of the Middle Ages (Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, 1974), Dorothy