

Women Artists

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Women Artists: 1550-1950. Brooklyn Museum, 188 Eastern Parkway (to Nov. 27, closed Mon. & Tues.)

Can there now be any doubt that women artists have been discriminated against? Certainly not. Until recently women have been denied opportunities to be artists. They were scoffed at and ridiculed. If somehow they surmounted the obstacle of not being allowed a full education in art and managed to achieve something, sometimes even financial success, their works were systematically excluded from art history and the museums. It might have helped to be the daughter of a successful male artist, but even this was no guarantee since correct attribution has turned out to be spotty indeed. Therefore one has more than contemporary complaints as evidence.

The difficulties that Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin faced in hunting down and then borrowing the works that comprise "Women Artists: 1550-1950" are further proof. Sexist attitudes and behavior are still all too much with us. But as a result of the work of these two art historians, specific paintings as well as reputations have been rescued. As far as I

There has never before been an exhibition like this. It is an important event for women, whether or not they are artists. It is also an art world event. Why an exhibition of this caliber is not at the Metropolitan Museum is beyond me. The Metropolitan can make room for contemporary junk from the Soviet Union, as it did last year, but apparently has no interest in good art done by women. In any case, the Brooklyn Museum is to be congratulated. It is becoming a very lively museum. A large exhibition of contemporary landscape paintings, commissioned by the Department of the Interior, is forthcoming, as is a Stuart Davis retrospective early next year.

I attended the opening at the Brooklyn Museum last week, along with 4,999 other people. It was a great celebration. It was also an exception to the trend towards exclusive and therefore boring openings. The forthcoming Jasper Johns opening, for instance, excludes, among others, even the press. Most artists have given up on going to museum openings, even when they have not been cut from the lists. Too sedate, too boring, too elite. The Brooklyn opening, however, was alive with artists and all kinds of people.

I don't want to bore you with long descriptions of paintings I particularly liked, but paintings by Artemisia Gen-

am concerned, their catalog, published by the L.A. County Museum and Alfred H. Knopf, is essential. The history of Western art will never be the same again. That which was hidden has been exposed. Grace Glueck in her excellent *New York Times Magazine* cover story on the exhibition reminded us that H.W. Janson's *History of Art*, the standard college art history text — I've used it myself — does not in all of its 572 pages mention one woman artist. This is appalling. After the work of Harris and Nochlin this can never happen again, for their research has proved that there have been women artists of great accomplishment all along.

I predict the exhibition will have considerable impact. I believe that not one bit of information that can illuminate the past and therefore the present should be hidden away, abandoned, or, as in the case of so many works by women artists, allowed to rot in storage. Clearly there has been a male dictatorship in art, on the part of male artists and art historians. To control history is to control the present.

As in Los Angeles, where the exhibition originated at the L.A. County Museum a year ago, "Women Artists" is already proving to be an extremely popular attraction here. Some of this is because of publicity and perhaps sheer curiosity.

tileschi (1593-1652/3), Judith Leyster (1609-1660), Angelica Kauffman (1741-1807), and Anne Vallayer-Coster (1744-1818) did much more than hold my attention. "Sita and Sarita" by Cecilia Beaux, a 19th-century American, is just fine. In the 20th century, we have women cubists, women realists, women surrealists. Georgia O'Keeffe, who is of course included, is by no means the only important woman artist of the first half of the 20th century.

What is of even more interest to me is that so many women attribute special feelings, special content, to the paintings assembled for this show. They see the work as different from work done by men, within various genres and throughout a succession of historical styles.

Form is not always the only content of a painting; it may in fact be of small consequence. The meaning of an art work, which is usually what we mean by content, is as much a product of what the viewer brings to it as what the artist may have intended. Outside information cannot be avoided. The information that a particular art work was done by a woman is as much a part of the art work as its place in history, its style, and its current context. The fact that it has been so difficult for women artists adds a touch of the

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heroic to these paintings. Each art work in the exhibit now has a new meaning, a feminist meaning. Even the usual iconography takes on an added dimension. Projection is a human phenomenon and women do it as well as men. Because I am a man, I may be seeing the paintings quite differently from someone who is a woman. Although I may empathize, it cannot be quite the same.

There is also the question of whether or not there is something particularly womanly manifested in the art works. As a man, I think not. Women artists have conformed to the dominant styles of their particular time in history as much as male artists. I don't think paintings of women with children are necessarily exclusively womanly nor that the depiction of mythological scenes with women protagonists is, although women may indeed be able to bring to these subjects perceptions that I may not be in tune with or able to perceive.

My guess is that only now, when there is a particular audience for women's art, certain forms and symbols that are

particularly womanly may be developing. For this we have to go to a concurrent exhibition at the Brooklyn.

Contemporary Women: Consciousness and Content — Brooklyn Museum

In L.A., I am told, there were city-wide art exhibitions of work by contemporary women artists timed to coincide with the "Women Artists" blockbuster. Here we have a small show selected by Joan Semmel, an artist herself. It may be small, but it packs a wallop all its own and raises questions that are important and continue to be debated with intensity.

The tone of Semmel's statement is political and feminist:

"Has art made by women been excluded from the cultural mainstream simply because of discriminatory practices against women? Or has this occurred because it validates an experience from which the male world feels excluded? Is it not from this very validation that women's art derives its authenticity? The price for entrance into the cathedral of 'high art' has been conformity to male modes."

Semmel goes on to suggest women

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artists are now developing a unique iconography. I don't think a male artist would have punned with penises as Lynda Benglis does. Sylvia Sleigh's male nude has a vulnerability that most male artists would avoid or not be capable of capturing. Judith Bernstein's gigantic drawing of a screw would have a different meaning if done by a man. Joan Semmel's painting of her own body is definitely from a woman's point of view: hers, by way of a camera. But to me most of the work here — the selection is excellent — is womanly and/or feminist by context more than by content. The proof of the thesis that there can be art that is specifically and deeply woman's art, exclusively woman's art, is not yet in. Part of the problem is that we are still not

used to looking at and looking for content of a direct sort. It has been schooled out of us, in order to promote art with form as the major content, and because content is socially dangerous. Art that expresses content and sensibilities outside white, male, capitalist ones has a hard time of it; but new languages are developing. "Contemporary Women" is to some extent a foretaste.