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(on the cover): Emma Amos,
Let Me Off Uptown (2000),
oil on linen, laser transfers and
Kente collage, Adinkra cloth
borders, 80 1/2" x 78".
Private Collection.
Photo: Becket Logan.

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Suddenly there seems to be an interest in feminist art by mainstream media and institutions. The February issue of *Art News* devoted half its pages to feminism. Within several weeks in March, the *New York Times* reported on a daylong symposium about women artists; the exhibit "Wack, Art and the Feminist Revolution!" (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles) was reviewed favorably by Holland Cotter; Global Feminisms at the Brooklyn Museum was reviewed (not so favorably) by Roberta Smith; and Gail Levin's biography of Judy Chicago had a glowing review in the *Times Sunday Book Review*. What does it all mean? Are feminists in positions of power in the mainstream? The debate about what is feminist art seems to have been recycled. Although *WAF* is a feminist periodical, its contents were never purely feminist. Rather, we have sought to document women artists of achievement who have produced significant bodies of work despite gender restrictions.

The three contemporary artists featured in this issue have all had feminist readings, although none has been identified as a "feminist artist." Lisa Farrington takes a unique approach to examining the achievements of our cover artist Emma Amos, a dedicated teacher and African American artist/activist. She discusses the artist's "espousal of the theme of 'art as legacy' or the genealogical process." Besides gaining insights into how influential individuals marked Amos's unique journey, we are reminded that identity, gender, and race issues often find direct expression in women's art.

The dark-centered openings of Lee Bontecou's early wall sculptures unfailingly received feminist readings. Here Mona Hadler explores, through the dissonance of her personal imagery and her eclectic choice of materials and sources, how Bontecou's work "embodies the paradox of the space age in the pairing of the cosmic and the brutal."

A teenage Eva Hesse mused about her desire to be "a real artist," writes Kirsten Swenson, noting that this "was understood not as a neutral choice but in conflict with the 'role of wife' prescribed to girls coming of age in the 1950s." The "troubling incompatibility" she felt "between being a woman, in particular being a wife, and being an artist" gave rise to her abandonment of abstract expressionism as well as her troubled marriage. Following this article is Cindy Nemser's brief memoir about her legendary interviews with Hesse shortly before the artist's untimely death at age thirty-four.

Pamela Simpson introduces a resourceful artist whose unusual medium won her notoriety. In the 1870s Caroline Shawk Brooks, known as "the butter woman," packed her neoclassical style butter sculptures on ice and showed them around the country and as far away as Paris. Brooks also discovered that butter was ideal for casting her creations into plaster for reproduction in marble or bronze. "Brooks's choice of subject matter," including Lady Godiva, Queen Isabella, and Lucretia Mott, "indicates her own identification with strong women and contemporary feminists' causes," writes Simpson. An earlier American traveler, Martha Coffin Derby, sought to distinguish herself, not as an artist but as "a woman of great taste," writes Jessica Lanier. In 1803, when she sailed to Europe for her "Grand Tour," she was one of few women to do so. John Singleton Copley's portrait of Derby as Saint Cecilia suggests how Americans turned to such Grand Manner portraiture, including allegory and personification, to embody their relative sophistication.

Among the wave of art historians coming of age during the feminist passions of the 1970s and 1980s, few were more influential

than Alessandra Comini. Virginia Pitts Rembert reviews *In Passionate Pursuit*, her captivating and detailed account of "an interesting life that still has chapters to be written." Rembert explains how Comini, following her seemingly boundless interests, shares the spirit and intelligence that imbue her teaching, lectures, and writing.

The timeless fascination with Medusa, a "trait evidently shared by Ovid, Freud, and Gianni Versace," makes *The Medusa Reader* (edited by Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers) "useful, entertaining, and eclectic," writes reviewer Carolyn Springer. The collection includes references from literature, philosophy, psychology, advertising, and the arts (from Louis Marin on Caravaggio's Self Portrait as Medusa to Jo Springer quoting the Betty Crocker Home Library's *The Pleasures of Crevel*).

Few artists controlled their own image more successfully than Frida Kahlo. The Tate Modern's solo exhibition catalogue, edited by Emma Dexter and Tanya Barson, and Salomon Grimberg's *I will never forget you...Frida Kahlo to Nickolas Muray: Unpublished Photographs and Letters*, taken together, writes Lynda Hoffman-Jeep, "address what it means in terms of Kahlo to see and to be seen, as well as to write and to be read."

In *Painting the Difference, Sex and Spectator in Modern Art*, Charles Harrison revisits key works of Impressionism in terms of seeing and being seen. Harrison "argues that with the advent of modernity women represented in paintings began to gaze out of the picture plane to confront the viewer, thereby shifting the way the spectator interacted with the two-dimensional surface of the image," writes reviewer Britta Dwyer, adding that, "In fact, it is at the level of the picture plane...that key modern issues related to gender and sexuality are worked out."

Who were these women confronting the viewer with their gaze? Many were professional models, the subject of Susan Waller's *The Invention of the Model: Artists and Models in Paris, 1830-1870*, "reviewed here by Heather McPherson. In reality, the growing public role of women that gave rise to their modern (feminist?) gaze outward was barely tolerated. As Heidi Strobel notes in her review of Cindy McCreery's *The Satirical Gaze: Prints of Women in Late-Eighteenth Century England*, the spate of satirical prints that "capture[d] the ebbs and flows of public opinion," reflected harshly on the "contemporary debate and concern about women's unnatural presence in public places."

Even in patriarchal societies, women found areas in which to demonstrate their will and exert power, as Martha Dunkelman and Marice Rose reveal in their reviews of Andrea Pearson's *Envisioning Gender in Burgundian Devotional Art, 1350-1530*, and Ioli Kalavrezou's *Byzantine Women and Their World*, respectively. In other reviews, Julie L'Enfant looks at G.F. Mitrano's *Gertrude Stein: Woman without Qualities*, which explores Stein's links with modernity and how the artists she knew influenced her development. Reviewer Shana McGuire calls *Women and Experimental Filmmaking*, an anthology edited by Jean Petrolle and Virginia Wright Wexman, "essential reading" on the history of women's experimental cinema.

The variety of articles and reviews published in this issue reflect the diversity of our submissions. All are touched by the feminist thought and approaches that co-exist in our twenty-first-century global community.

Joan Marter and Margaret Barlow, co-editors

EMMA AMOS

Art as Legacy

By Lisa E. Farrington

Beyond the customary assessments of Emma Amos's (b. 1938) art as vivid, kinetic, and often acerbically witty figurative portrayals, lies a personal leitmotif that has not before been examined. A continual thread that runs throughout many of Amos's compositions relates to what is termed in psychoanalysis as "The Family Romance"—a phenomenon that links artists (from the ancient Egyptian innovator Imhotep to the modernist Picasso) with their pasts as well as their futures, and with a family legacy that can either be real or invented or a combination of both, as is the case with Amos. Before undertaking such an examination, however, it is necessary to review Amos's life and work, to provide a foundation on which to base a discussion of the artist's espousal of the theme of "art as legacy" or genealogical process.

Emma Amos once said: "For me, a black woman artist, to walk into the studio is a political act."¹ This frank and pithy observation aptly signifies what it means to be perennially at the mercy of race and gender bias in the art community—a state of affairs that persists, despite the fact that revisionist art history and curatorship, intended to address the invisibility of women and minorities in the canon, is now a half century old. Minority male artists continue to face racial obstacles; majority women artists are yet confronted with sexual bias; and women artists of color must regularly contend with both forms of chauvinism (which makes Amos's unrelenting resolve and longevity as an artist—not to mention her visionary creativity—so extraordinary²).

After a prodigious childhood of art study (taking classes in fine arts at Morris Brown College at the tender age of eleven), the Atlanta-born Amos enrolled in Ohio's Antioch College. There from 1953 to 1958 (B.F.A.), Amos studied fine arts and textile weaving under the art department chair and stained glass master Robert Metcalf. Although Amos never pursued the art of stained glass, the strong emphasis on linear contours and the often iridescent palette of her mature works suggest that she absorbed much from this discipline. Amos also spent a total of two years year abroad studying at the Central School of Art in London (receiving her diploma in 1959), where she learned etching techniques under Anthony Harrison and studied painting with the British abstractionist William Turnbull.³

By the early 1960s, Amos had relocated to New York to join two prestigious printmaking studios: Letterio (Leo) Calapai's

studio, which was part of Stanley William Hayter's Paris Atelier 17, and Robert (Bob) Blackburn's Printmaking Workshop. Making her first attempts to breach New York's mainstream art scene in the hope of securing a commercial dealer, she encountered that implacable wall of exclusion that so many young artists experience.⁴ She also discovered that artists of color were additionally handicapped, being, as she put it, "not in that East Hampton clique."⁵ In other words, since "who you knew" was as operative a concept in the art world as it was in the corporate world, African-Americans (who, at the time, rarely had access to elite collectors, dealers, curators, and the like) were perennially marooned just beyond the perimeter of New York's art inner circle.

Amos persevered, taking printmaking with Bob Blackburn, Riva Helfond, and Anthony Harrison (who was in New York teaching at Columbia University). She received her M.A. in 1965 from New York University, where she became reacquainted with a family friend who was a professor there, the famed WPA muralist and founder of the Atlanta University art department, Hale Woodruff. She also gained entrée into Spiral—the now-legendary Civil Rights art group co-founded by Woodruff, Romare Bearden and other prominent African-American artists.⁶ In May 1965, two years after Spiral's founding, the group mounted its first and only exhibit, "Black and White," in a rented gallery space at 147 Christopher Street. Works in the show were limited to a black and white palette in deference to the Civil Rights crusade. Amos was represented by an etching (now lost) entitled *Without Feather Boa*—a nude portrait bust of the artist staring indifferently at the viewer from behind a pair of dark sunglasses.⁷ The work's title—an allusion to an absence of feminine accoutrements—and its matter-of-fact nudity allude to the sitter as a "soldier" of the Civil Rights crusade and, in the artist's words, "as a woman without beauty but with confrontational power."⁸

Although the exhibit was successful, Spiral was plagued by internal philosophical conflicts. A number of members wanted to express their social engagement without losing their individual artistic identities; others advocated a centralized formal philosophy, following the example of the Impressionists. There also was disagreement over whether the group should be interracial. Members wrangled over everything from aesthetic standards to the dangers of

"ghettoization" that might result from all-black shows (Amos avoided black exhibits until it became apparent to her that these were sometimes the only venues for black artists⁹). Nevertheless, Amos thrived intellectually in the group and especially remembers conversations that revolved around Pan-Africanism and its French incarnation, *Negritude*, and the extent to which African-American artists might participate in this global initiative.¹⁰

From Bearden she learned about African-American artists she was unfamiliar with, such as the celebrated modernist Jacob Lawrence. She was exposed to the idea that one's status as a minority and one's role as an artist could (and perhaps should) be corollary facets of one's artist's persona, and to the notion that "black art"—art that made a political statement and served the Civil Rights agenda—had value and purpose. While somewhat resistant to the deliberate creation of "black" art, she came to accept that ethnicity could have a place in creative decision making, while not necessarily dominating that process. She believed, for example, that jazz was an ideal artistic exemplar of African-American cultural identity, and that Spiral might have survived longer, and perhaps had greater impact, if its members had been able to conceptualize a visual arts program that was in some way comparable to jazz—unique to the black community and yet expansive enough to encompass myriad individual tastes and styles.¹¹

A recent work, *Let Me Off Uptown* (2000; front cover), epitomizes her lasting engagement with this "jazz" credo. Dominated by a blue palette, similarly hued Kente cloth trim, and gold metallic glitter, *Let Me Off Uptown* is an exuberant celebration of the music, dance, and culture of jazz. Diminutive clothed, nude, and semi-nude couples tumble, leap, and whirl together in a quivering frenzy amidst disembodied pointing fingers that direct the viewers gaze. Most rousing in this eclectic mix of bodies is its diversity—of ages, complexions, poses, and costumes. For example, miniature dancers wear fifties bee-bop outfits, swimsuits, leotards, body stockings, tailored dress suits, and sixties thigh-high boots and mini skirts. A few dance nude with fully clothed partners; blacks cavort with whites; and youths are teamed with elders.

This glittering array of revelers surrounds the main attraction—a large-scale "swinging" couple swathed in a green circle that serves as a spotlight. Dressed in a well-cut black suit, bright yellow shirt, and slick brown dancing shoes, the middle-aged male figure holds aloft his straw hat, revealing a balding pate. He is partnered with an attractive younger woman who wears a sexy red dress, strappy high-heels, and whose tightly curled blond hair and gleaming café-au-lait complexion provide dazzling visual foils for her older, darker partner. Conspicuous in this painting, in addition to the age gap that is breached by the central couple, are the wide-ranging skin tones of all the dancing figures, from dark brown to peaches-and-cream; which brings us to the topic of color—one of the most salient characteristics of Amos's oeuvre.

If one were to attempt to codify Amos's aesthetic modus operandi, the apposite classification would have to be "colorist," in the tradition of Titian and Delacroix. Her incandescent palettes and use of multihued fabrics are veritable

monuments to the artist's prodigious sense of color. Yet, for Amos, color is imbued with an undeniable agitprop agenda:

Every time I think about color it's a political statement. It would be a luxury to be white and never to think about it.... We're always talking about color, but colors are also skin colors, and the term "colored" itself—it all means something else to me. You have to choose, as a black artist, what to make your figures....butterscotch, brown, or really black. White artists never have to choose....¹²

Amos's sensitivity to color was acquired in childhood when she and her playmates ruminated on their own differing complexions. When they asked their parents to explain this phenomenon, Amos remembers that they were told tales of miscegenation—disclosures that hinted at sexual assaults on enslaved and colonized women of color the world over—which made a significant impact on Amos, as her work bears out. As one historian put it, "Color has a very personal significance for all African-American people and this significance also underlies Amos's work."¹³ Indeed, Amos anticipates the arrival of a quixotic moment in our culture when the word "color" might refer only to the elements of the rainbow, or to her palette, and not to the politics of race.

Amos has, nevertheless, enjoyed being a painter of "color"—reveling in the ever-changing skin tones of her people. Before she could afford to hire models, she used herself for this purpose, altering her own fair complexion at will for each painting. As she once explained, "I can make myself look a lot blacker.... I'm always handy and I just look in the mirror. It's fun because I can do lots of variations on me.... Black is beautiful ... and that's something to remark upon and to make a record of."¹⁴ Her representation of many complexions in *Let Me Off Uptown* exemplifies this outlook. It also accurately characterizes the diverse devotees of jazz seen in Harlem, to which "Uptown" refers. Finally, the painting serves as a belated response to the dilemma that Amos and other Spiral members faced in their attempts to codify a visual program that would parallel jazz music.

Prior to Spiral's demise in 1965 (soon after the close of its exhibit, when escalating rents caused the group to lose its Greenwich Village gallery and meeting space¹⁵), as a member of what was otherwise an all-male confederacy, she was aware, even as a young artist, of the conspicuous absence of other women: "I thought it was fishy that the group had not asked Vivian Browne, Betty Blayton Taylor, Faith Ringgold, Norma Morgan, or any other woman of their acquaintance to join. I was probably less threatening to their egos, as I was not yet of much consequence."¹⁶ Amos quickly came to realize that the New York art scene was "a man's scene, black or white." Even her participation in Spiral was often limited to that of an observer, particularly when, as she put it, "the old boys settled into age-old fights with each other" (although she did feel that, when offered, her opinion was valued).¹⁷ Furthermore, Amos felt isolated from other African-American women artists, with whom, for the most part, she was unacquainted. Amos recalls that, within the context of Spiral discussions, even a

distinguished artist like Elizabeth Catlett (b. 1915), the internationally renowned sculptor and printmaker, was referred to as “the wife of Charles White,” an African-American artist to whom she was married briefly during the 1940s.¹⁸

During the 1970s Amos taught textile design at the Newark School of Fine and Industrial Arts, and weaving on her own looms (she owned eight) at Threadbare, a yarn and weaving shop on Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village. Amos prospered as a weaver, likely due to the nascent Feminist Art Movement and its attention to fabric art and artists. Even so, Amos knew better than to advertise herself as a weaver in fine arts circles, where conventional art hierarchies persisted: “Well, I certainly knew not to admit that I was a weaver because people held it against me. It was just a smart thing to keep your mouth shut and not to admit it.”¹⁹

Historically, as Amos was obviously aware, women artists who worked with fabric were rarely viewed as more than artisans, no matter how innovative their designs or intricate their techniques. However, in the late 1970s, when Amos became co-host of a WGBH Boston television series on crafts entitled “Show of Hands” (for which Amos herself wrote the pilot), she resolved her “weaving” dilemma. The series, which aired in thirteen episodes over a period of about eighteen months, featured local Boston woodworkers, ceramicists, weavers, and stained glass, quilt, and jewelry makers. The experience, though ephemeral, offered Amos a lasting solution to being a “closet” weaver—it inspired her to incorporate handcrafts into her paintings—an aesthetic decision that would mark all of her future work.²⁰ Over time, Amos’s ability to obfuscate the high/low art divide by consolidating the so-called “fine art” of painting with the “artistry” of textiles became nothing short of alchemy and the fulcrum of her signature style.

Through the years, Amos has traveled the globe in search of the fabrics that she integrates into her paintings and her multimedia prints, which include silk collagraphs and hand-cut stencil prints on plush fabrics. Indeed, Amos spent more than a decade, beginning in 1961, working in the studio of Dorothy Liebes (1897-1972), a renowned textile designer from the 1930s to the 1950s; and many of Amos’s designs were translated into unique carpets, produced by the prominent Bigelow Sanford Carpet Company. Although she redeployed her efforts after Liebes’s death, Amos’s *Harmony Rug* (2002; Pl. 1) is a noteworthy example of the artist’s ongoing affinity with this medium.

An intrepid retro design, *Harmony Rug* is shaped to resemble both the letter R (as in “rug”) and a grand piano, complete with keyboard. The rug brandishes Amos’s signature De Stijl palette of primary colors plus yellow, black, and white. It also displays a forthright chevron pattern that circumscribes an oval with a hand and outstretched fingers that suggest piano playing. The carpet’s wool threads are thick and plush, approaching a shag texture, though shorter in pile length. Finally, its title refers to musical harmony as well as the visual harmony of forms and colors that the design entails. Playful, inventive, and skillfully executed, *Harmony Rug* embodies those qualities of jazz which the artist has favored since her Spiral years. Amos’s technical and design expertise extends not only to carpets, but also to the conception of patterns for

upholstery, window treatments, and clothing fabrication—virtuosity that is evident in her meticulous selections of textiles with which to frame her paintings—textiles that are at once sumptuous, harmonizing, and vigorously graphic. She prefers Kente cloth (strip textiles woven by Asante men in West Africa) and Kanga cloth (brightly colored pieced fabric first made by Swahili women in the 1870s). She also utilizes *Bogolanfini* textiles (dye-impressed with protective symbols by the Bamana women of Mali), as well as wax-dyed batiks made in Holland and exported to Africa. Amos deftly manipulates these exotic fabrics to flank and complement her unstretched canvases and to enliven the surfaces of her prints.

The decade of the 1980s brought new changes and challenges for Amos. She became a professor at the Mason Gross School of the Arts of Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and she began to work in painting and print series. Following cycles focused on sports (football, basketball, and swimming), she began her as yet ongoing *Falling Series* in 1988. Featuring her now characteristic and self-assured figurative style, these works are predicated on the artist’s need to infuse her work with visual dynamism. In Amos’s words, “The metaphor of falling helped me to discover that I wanted to invent people in the air, because that was a way of having absolute movement. They are not standing on the ground, in doorways, or looking out of windows. There’s nothing that is stationary. [They are in] flux.”²¹

Amos finds inertia corrosive to her work and goes to great lengths to eliminate all that is static. She even employs energized brushstrokes to render concrete the very atmosphere that envelops her figures. Works from the *Falling Series* such as *Will You Forget Me?* (1991; Pl. 2) illustrate the extent to which Amos is able to effect impulsion by way of an assiduous attention to figural poses and to the deployment of paint and linear thrusts. Here the downward propulsion of the plummeting woman is realized by way of her posture—slightly oblique with hands above her head and legs apart—and by the buffeting of the figure’s skirt and hair, and the surging brushwork of the background, which reprises the figure’s directional momentum.

The rush of movement achieved in this work functions emblematically to express the hurtling passage of time within the artist’s own life. An autobiographical piece, *Will You Forget Me?* portrays Amos tumbling, and it pictures her mother, India, in the oversized photograph that the artist holds above her head. India, who died in Atlanta in 1979, was a twenty-year-old university student when the original photo was taken, and she stares out at the viewer as if into her own future, which in the artist’s present has become the past. In this deft assimilation of photography into painting (a distinguishing characteristic of Amos’s work), the artist disputes the anachronistic notion that “the camera never lies.” Instead she ascribes to the literary theorist Roland Barthe’s contention that a photograph, by virtue of its promise of veracity, is, in fact, more deceptive than a painting, which one naturally assumes to be artifice.

Amos recognizes implicitly that a photograph has the ability to alter time perceptions far more persuasively than a painted image. “I love the irony of photography,” Amos once

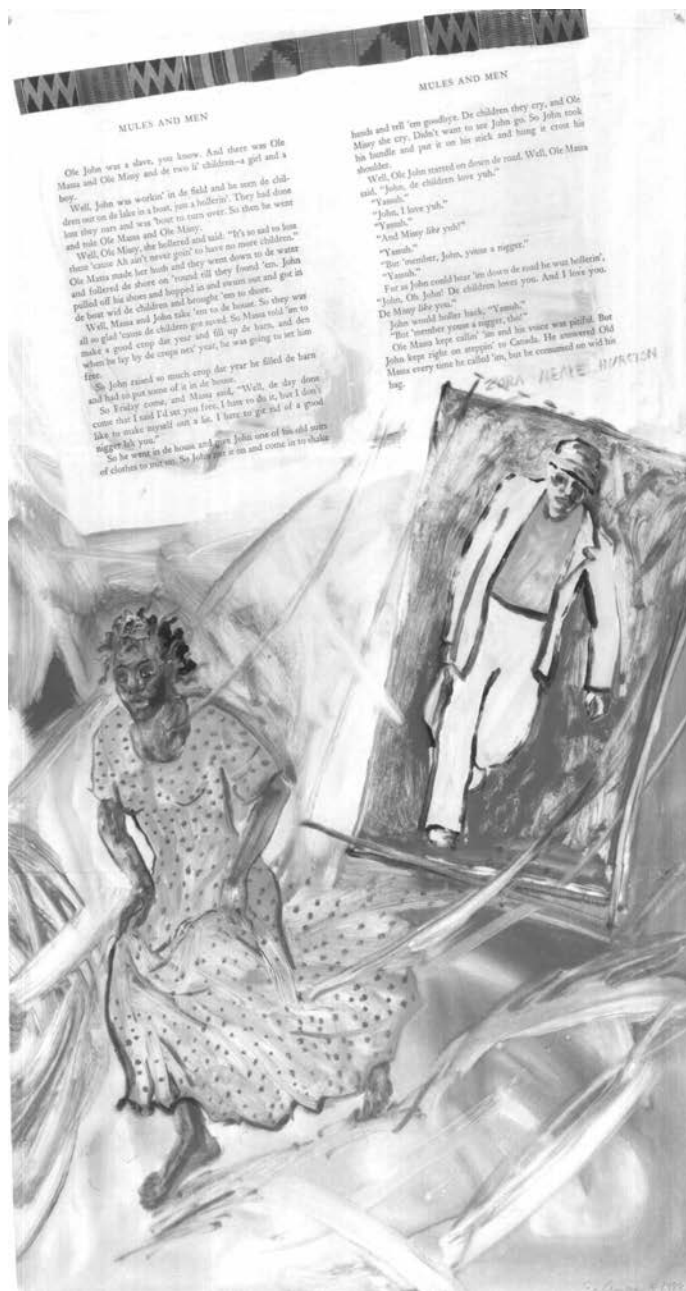


Fig. 1. Emma Amos, *Odyssey: Mules and Men* (1988), oil and acrylic with laser transfer photography on Sekishu rice paper, 72" x 40". Private Collection. Photo: Becket Logan.

remarked. "The two together [painting and photography] provide a way of manipulating memory."²² While Amos (who both shoots her own and collects antique family photos²³) acknowledges that a photograph can document a particular moment that might otherwise be forgotten, she also embraces the fact that one can rework a photo (either in orchestrating the scene or in the developing process) to act like a Freudian "screen memory"—one that is altered by subsequent experiences and permanently fixed in reification. The result is an artifact which, ironically, contradicts Barthe's theory even as it confirms it. Amos's transformative use of photography gives rise not so much to deception as to a deeper truth by transforming what is essentially a visual medium into one that is intensely conceptual.

In *Will You Forget Me?*, the unease reflected on the face of the falling artist as she clings to her "precious" photograph signifies Amos's battle to maintain a connection across the divide that separates her corporeal world from the afterlife that has enveloped her mother, and from a past in which her mother lived and breathed.²⁴ Amos physically and psychologically struggles to maintain her grip on her mother, who threatens to become an ebbing memory rendered here by the artist, significantly, in sepia tones. The historian Robert Henkes has perceived Amos's facial expression in the painting as fearful. Indeed, Henkes sees fear as the sentiment most salient in this series, indicative of "a lack of security, having nothing to which to anchor oneself there is only limbo."²⁵

Henkes's choice of the word "limbo" is interesting and begs the question, with regard to *Will You Forget Me?*—who resides in this limbo? The artist? Her mother? Or do both linger there, as is implied by the nebulous blue and grey environment surrounding them? Henkes further argues that the fear expressed by Amos in this cycle embodies, "the loss of the past that no longer can serve the present or the future."²⁶ Anyone who has ever lost a parent will confirm that the emotions associated with such an event can be overwhelming; and although the pain of loss may diminish over time, as Henkes suggests, a reformed sense of vulnerability and irretrievable security often supplants mourning. Venerable parents such as Amos's mother act as anchors for their children. They are the roots that hold the family tree firm; they bond their children with the past and simultaneously propel them into the future. *Will You Forget Me?* actualizes the universal phenomenon of parental loss and all the thorny sentiments associated with it.

The vagaries of the human condition, so palpable in Amos's kinetic "falling" pictures, is a theme that presents itself with equal cogency in her more literary works centered on motifs of family and heritage. This substantive body of paintings and prints incorporates, as its cornerstone (rather than kinesis) a beguiling dynamic which, as mentioned earlier, Freudians term "The Family Romance." In essence, this idiom describes an Oedipal, and as such genealogical, phenomenon that occurs when children unconsciously elevate their parents to divine or royal status and, in doing so, make themselves heirs to a noble legacy. According to the distinguished art historian and psychoanalyst Laurie Adams, artists and their creative predecessors (who may or may not be their actual parents) relate in a similar Oedipal manner. Evidence of the particular forces at work within the context of the artistic Family Romance appears "not only in ideas and myths about art, but also in the behavior of artists and in the images they create."²⁷

Expanding upon the theories of eminent psychoanalysts Ernst Kris, Otto Kurz, and Phyllis Greenacre; and citing classic Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, Roman, Medieval, and Renaissance texts, Adams has argued convincingly that human history is inundated with instances wherein the dual attributes of paternal divinity (which is transposable with concepts of royalty) and creative genius are assigned to a long list of real and imagined personae (including Daedalus, Narcissus, Imhotep, the Christian God, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Raphael, and others). Adams has also analyzed

the psycho-subliminal relationships that exist between artists and their parents, mentors, muses, and creative forerunners, and she has situated the role of divinity (conceptually embodied in such terms as “divine inspiration” and “God the Father”) within this genealogical dynamic.²⁸

God (who ideologically represents every father and, by implication, every parent) is perceived in all manner of Biblical, mythological, historical, hieroglyphic, literary, and graphic works as the original divine “artist.” That is to say, he is the first “creator”—the first “architect” of the world; the first “sculptor” of man; and the first “parent” who created children—the consummate act of creativity. However, while genealogically, “gods precede artists as original creators,” the reverse can also occur when artists are elevated to divine status and become, in essence, gods themselves. Adams gives the example of Imhotep, the builder of the Zoser step pyramid in the third millennium B.C., who was elevated to the status of a god for his creative genius and worshipped at Heliopolis. Other instances occur with Rembrandt, whom Chaim Soutine called a “god”; Raphael, who was crowned the “god of painting” by Ingres; and of course, Michelangelo, who was known during his lifetime as *il divino* and whose lasting exaltation “reveals the fine line between human and godly creators in our minds.”²⁹

The profound and perplexing psychological correlations between divinity, royalty, paternity, and artistic creativity can be traced to one of the most universal and enduring childhood questions, “Where do I (babies) come from?”—a query that, as Adams notes, “has a parallel in the history of art.”³⁰ Artists and their chroniclers, from Pliny to Alberti to present-day theorists and critics, have endeavored relentlessly to answer their own version of this primal question: Where do artists come from? In the answers, artists are constantly being identified—and identify themselves—with the creative masters (i.e., parents and teachers) who preceded them. Indeed, the history of art itself has been written as a genealogy, with each school or period seeming to grow naturally (or with conscious antagonism—much like offspring) out of the preceding one. A passing look at any art history survey (even the revisionist texts) bears this out, with the tables of contents reading virtually the same from one to the next. Clearly, Family Romances within the context of art are constructed, either mindfully or subliminally, to parallel the biological human family. But that is precisely what makes the Family Romance so appealing as a stratagem for codifying art history or an



Fig. 2. Emma Amos, *Odyssey: Hunting* (1988), oil and acrylic with laser transfer photography on Sekishu rice paper, 72" x 40". Private Collection. Photo: Becket Logan.

individual artist's life and work, and so attractive to artists as a rubric from which to create their art and identity.

Such existentialist themes have a direct bearing upon Amos's oeuvre, particularly on those works that explore both the tangible and abstract genealogical ties between Amos and her own predecessors. Themes of this genre first became integral to the artist's iconography in the 1980s, when her art began to reveal a particular brand of the Family Romance that was at once multilateral and inspired. Included in Amos's *soi-disant* lineage are, above all, her biological parents, especially her mother, India, who is the subject of a number of works including *Will You Forget Me?* Other Amos forebears include artist elders, mentors and teachers, a variety of African-American literati and public figures, and master painters of the past whose works Amos willfully and cleverly has mined for form and content.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Amos created a number of images that disclosed the palimpsest framework of her conceptual family tree. *Will You Forget Me?*, for instance, directly addresses parental lineage by picturing Amos holding a photo of her mother above her head. With this gesture, Amos quite literally “elevates” India to an

exalted (if not overtly “royal” or “divine”) position. In another painting, *Katherine Dunham* (1988; Pl. 3) Amos invents a somewhat loftier Family Romance and links it first to India and then to herself. This piece, dedicated to one of the most celebrated dancers and choreographers of the twentieth century, features a portrait of the famed artiste in a yellow turban and white jacket. Amos chose to honor Dunham (1909–2006) in this work in response to the latter's unparalleled life.

More than a dancer, Dunham was an intellectual. She studied anthropology (as did India) and earned bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in the subject from the University of Chicago, as one of the first African-Americans to attend that institution. Dunham specialized in the evolution of African dance in the diaspora, particularly in Haiti and Brazil. Beginning in the 1930s, she founded and directed dance schools in New York and St. Louis; and she enjoyed a lifelong career as an international performer and as a professor of dance at Southern Illinois University. Dunham's devotion to black cultural studies and causes earned her numerous honors including the Presidential Medal of Arts and the French Legion of Honor.

Amos emblazons Dunham's name in a yellow cartouche (not unlike those seen on Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints), the colors of which are echoed by the vertical yellow striping that flanks the



Fig. 3. Emma Amos, *The Gift* (1990-1993), acrylic on paper, detail of 20 of 40 paintings, 26" x 20" each. Private Collection. Photo: Becket Logan.

portrait. Butter and beige make up the central color scheme, defining Dunham's complexion, turban, and the striped settee upon which she sits. Amos painted a lively Kongo Bakuba chevron pattern on the throw blanket against which Dunham rests and on the work's lateral fabric borders; she hand-wove the vivid textile trim above and below the portrait. Architectonic in its construction, *Katherine Dunham* is as intrepid and dazzling a painting as the woman it portrays. With reference to the Family Romance, Amos becomes the de facto daughter of the eminent dancer by choosing as her subject someone whose persona could readily be conflated with that of her real mother. Following this familial trajectory, Dunham's fame and status are transferred to India; and Amos, in turn, inherits that legacy.

In addition to these two paintings, Amos also completed several epic, multipartite works on lineage which prolifically demonstrate the consequential nature of the Family Romance within the context of her life and art. These include a series on heroes, and three major composite works entitled *A Reading at Bessie Smith's Grave* (1985; Pl. 4), *Odyssey* (1988), and *The Gift* (1990-93). *A Reading at Bessie Smith's Grave* is one of the most personally significant works in Amos's art and a classic example of the Family Romance. Painted and printed on rice paper, this five-part work features at its center a portrait of the artist's father, Miles Green Amos. To his left stands the prizefighter Joe Louis; and beyond him, encased in a golden panel is the famed Harlem Renaissance author and anthropologist (like Dunham and India) Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960).

On the right side of the composition, grouped together, are several distinguished members of the so-called "Talented Tenth"—the crème de la crème of the Jazz Age gene pool—the

writers Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen; the activist and scholar W.E.B. Du Bois; and the singer, athlete, lawyer, and activist Paul Robeson, as both a young Rutgers University football player and as an elder. Represented in absentia is Bessie Smith, symbolized by the songbook Robeson clutches and by the car and distant hospital building painted in the upper quadrant of the composition. The work is an homage to the singer who, according to persistent rumors (which ultimately proved to be false), bled to death following a Mississippi car accident because the nearest hospital would not admit a black patient.

Dedicated to the artist's father who, according to Amos, was personally acquainted with Hurston and others portrayed in *A Reading*, the piece exemplifies Amos's veneration of past African-American achievers as genealogical predecessors; and it situates the artist (this time by way of her father) within proximity of this intellectual and creative bloodline. Furthermore, *A Reading* was thematically motivated by Amos's early experience in New York, realizing that her southern accent categorized her to many northerners as "ignorant." "The assumption that you were unlearned ... was very painful," according to Amos, who bemoaned the fact that the paradigm of the southern "Old Negro" (in contrast to the northern "New Negro") stymied her early attempts to find employment in New York. When she applied for teaching positions at the Art Students League and Cooper Union and was told each time, "We're not hiring right now," Amos came to realize that, in addition to biases against her gender and race, she faced anti-southern bigotry as well.³¹ *A Reading at Bessie Smith's Grave* refutes these misconceptions and asserts, rather, that Amos is the metaphoric offspring of a long line of cultured and talented black elites.

Printed at Blackburn's studio, *Odyssey* (1988) is similarly epic in scope and an example of Amos's well-honed printmaking dexterity and artistry. Consisting of ten individual hand-painted prints, augmented with laser-transfer photographs of the artist's family and inked on Sekishu rice paper, *Odyssey*, like *A Reading*, is self-referential. Each of the ten mixed-media prints features expressive color and textures, painted scenery, photographed figures, and esoteric narratives. The compendium, created for the Atlanta Arts Festival, chronicles Amos's Atlanta family from 1867 to 1960, the year she left that city for New York. *Mules and Men* (1988; Fig. 1), the first work in the collection, whose title derives from Zora Neale Hurston's 1935 anthology about African-American folklore and Vodou practice, includes Hurston as an honorary Amos family member. A second panel, *Hunting* (1988; Fig. 2), honors Amos's grandfather, Moses, a hunter of wild game.

Also hailed in *Odyssey* are India and the artist's grandmother and namesake, Emma. Wishing especially to acknowledge the achievements of the women in her family, Amos does so in *Odyssey* with images that are fleshed out in a written text. The latter informs us that Emma Holmes Amos was an early graduate of the teachers preparatory college at Atlanta University; and that India received a degree in anthropology in 1930 from Fisk University in Nashville before becoming co-owner and manager (from 1935 to 1969) of the Amos drugstore. Indeed, the visual thesis of *Odyssey* and its comprehensive

storyline (written by the artist) recount the births, lives, genealogy, and personal achievements of various Amos family forerunners. Amos writes that grandfather Moses “became the first black pharmacist registered in the state.” Grandmother Emma was “elegant and cultured.” “My father ... was elected to the Atlanta City Executive Committee in 1953, making him one of the first black men to be elected to public office since Reconstruction.” “My brother Larry ... went on to receive MBA and Law Degrees from Indiana University.”³²

The *Odyssey* narrative also muses about the Native American blood that runs through the veins of the Amos family and of so many African-Americans, and the white blood that marks the violent history of miscegenation. “My father’s grandfather was white. An Irishman named Donnelly from Hogansville. He raised red-haired, blue-eyed Minnie, my other grandmother, as a servant to ... her white half-sisters.”³³ The account continues with the artist’s experiences with segregation, discrimination, and an alarming family confrontation with members of the Ku Klux Klan. The text finally chronicles the Amos family’s friendships with, and appreciation for, black literati, artists, and jazz musicians. In sum, *Odyssey* is a testimonial to the long line of “skilled and literate people” from whom the artist hails.³⁴ As such, it reifies the Family Romance articulated in *A Reading at Bessie Smith’s Grave* and reaffirms Amos’s intellectual and creative birthrights.

Begun in 1990, *The Gift* (Fig. 3) appropriates the familial refrain of *Odyssey* and expands it to encompass a more contemporary dynasty—the artist’s own. Amos, who married educator Robert Levine in the mid-1960s, bore two children—a son Nicholas in 1967 and a daughter, also named India, in 1970. As its title suggests, *The Gift* is precisely that—a bequest from Amos to her daughter on her twentieth birthday. The work consists of portraits of women artists, friends, and colleagues who exerted significant and positive influences on Amos. Featuring more than forty acrylic paintings on paper, *The Gift* portrays African-American artists including among many Camille Billops, Helen Ramsaran, Faith Ringgold, Howardena Pindell, Elizabeth Catlett, Clarisa Sleight, Lorna Simpson, Vivian Browne, Carol Byard, and Nanette Carter; Euro-American artists and critics such as Miriam Schapiro, Mira Schor, Joyce Kozloff, Lucy Lippard, and Moira Roth; and the Native American artist Kay WalkingStick.³⁵

Representative of the eclectic network of supportive women Amos has known and been inspired by, this cycle “confers” a comparable legacy upon her daughter; and since Amos realized that her “gift” would at some point leave her studio and reside with India, she chose to recycle a number of these portraits, which appear in other works such as the 1991 acrylic painting *Giza and Faith*, and in several prints from the circa 1992 Women’s Series, including *Camille Remember Me*, *Have Faith*, and *Elizabeth Catlett*, *Emma and India*. Amos summed up the objective of *The Gift* when she stated, “There’s something powerful and strong about women artists, about womanhood.”³⁶ The maternal and sisterly legacy that Amos passes on to her daughter completes the artist’s Family Romance by enclosing a new generation within the embracing arms of its precursors.

Fig. 4. Emma Amos, *Great Grandpa Jefferson* (1997), acrylic on linen canvas with African fabric borders, 59 x 22". Private Collection. Photo: Becket Logan.

Besides the monumental works Amos devoted to the concept of lineage, she also produced a cycle dedicated to “heroes.”³⁷ Indeed, her very use of the term “hero” to define the series connotes the elevated rank of the subjects. Intrepidly breaching the craft/high art divide, in *Great Grandpa Jefferson* (1997; Fig. 4) and *Muse Picasso* (1997; Fig. 5), Amos shaped her designs into clothing patterns for a woman’s skirt and top, and for a kitchen (or painter’s) apron, respectively. Both personae offer ideal subjects for commentary on the Family Romance—Jefferson for his attachment to Sally Hemings, who bore him a family of black children, and Picasso for his looming presence as one of the “fathers” of abstraction and for his fascination with African sculpture (which situates him tacitly within the same African heritage as Amos).

The title *Great Grandpa Jefferson* establishes Thomas Jefferson’s position not as a president but as a grandparent within the artist’s implied Family Romance, and within an African-American family to which he contributed numerous offspring. Amos’s portrait of Jefferson, set inside a circular pendant on the skirt of an African-inspired outfit, is encircled by a ribbon and rests upon a backdrop of heraldic banners. Insinuated by the placement of Jefferson’s face on a woman’s skirt is Sally Hemings, with whom he began a love affair after his wife Martha’s death. (Hemings was the daughter of Martha’s father, John Wayles, and his slave Elizabeth). Jefferson apparently remained faithful to Hemings for the remainder of his life, and together the couple had seven children, two of whom passed into white society after being freed by their father.³⁸

In *Muse Picasso* (a pun on Musée Picasso), Amos centers Picasso’s portrait on an apron, within a green oval stamped with his name. The canvas areas are overlaid with chevron patterns, not unlike those seen in Bakuba textiles, and the



Fig. 5. Emma Amos, *Muse Picasso* (1997), acrylic on linen canvas with African fabric borders, 60 x 32". Private Collection. Photo: Becket Logan.

outer edges are trimmed with Kente-style cloth. In five medallions that surround Picasso's likeness, Amos has rendered an image of African herdsmen (at the top), two African sculptures whose eyes have been altered so that they seem to stare at the Spanish "master," a masked face from the lower right portion of Picasso's 1907 *Les Femmes d'Alger* (which he based on a Pende sickness mask from the Kongo), and Amos herself, looking up at her "muse" from the hem of the apron.

The expression on Amos's face appears to be one of consternation, as if she is not certain of the inspiration that her supposed muse and artistic predecessor provides. Indeed, the word "inspiration"—which, within the context of the Family Romance, can be read as "divine inspiration"—is inscribed in blue just beneath Amos's self-portrait, as if to explicate why she stares up at Picasso. He, like the artist's mother in *Will You Forget Me?*, is elevated above Amos, thus preceding her in lineage and suggesting his implied "higher" (i.e., divine or royal) position. The word "master," too, is painted along the red border to the left of Amos's medallion, invoking such idioms as "father," "master painter," and "slave master," not to mention "master of the universe." The reference alludes to the male-centered lexicon of art historical discourse, as well as to the thorny kinship between Africans and Europeans, both politically and artistically. Given Picasso's unabashed appropriation of African statuary in *Les Femmes d'Alger*, one might be compelled to ask, who indeed is the progeny and who the progenitor, or, will the real muse stand up?

There is a further meaning to the term "muse" as Amos applies it in the work's title, the implications of which are imbedded in other words inscribed along the painting's red border. Included are names of Picasso's own muses as well as his biological offspring. Other words inscribed, such as "passion" and "desire," describe his feelings for them as well as for his art. Within the mainspring of the Family Romance, art and family (especially children) are one in the same; both are products of the artist's creativity.

More genealogically charged even than these terms is the word "seminal," which appears within the yellow band below the African herdsmen and their oxen. Amos has inscribed the word below a suggestively virile image of bulls (not coincidentally a favorite motif of Picasso). As a biological term, the word is ponderous with the weight of associations with male virility and dominance, and its use in art criticism implies that original genius or divine inspiration must be male-centered; it is not surprising that many feminist historians have found the term objectionable. Amos inserts it here as both a statement and a question. She allows the word to hover above Picasso's portrait, and above the images of the African masks he tapped for inspiration. Amos has also written along the painting's border the names of the African peoples whose sculpture provided the sources for Picasso's Afro-cubist idiom: Ibibio, Ibo, and Dan.

The words "master," "domination," and "fear," which share canvas space with the designation "seminal," urge viewers to contemplate the overwhelming presence of the alleged godfathers of modernism (such as Picasso, Cézanne, Matisse, Van Gogh, Dali, Pollock, and any number of others one might

name) within the genealogical history of art, and the effect of this constructed hierarchy upon women artists. Amos's *Muse Picasso* and *Great Grandpa Jefferson* belie assumptions that the icons of white male artistic supremacy are either legitimately seminal or genius. By questioning these long-standing convictions, Amos creates a fissure into which she can place herself and tout her own seminal (or perhaps, more appropriately, "ovarian") nature. With the "heroes" cycle, Amos seems to move discreetly beyond the precincts of the Family Romance, which calls for the veneration of others, and to suggest that her worthiest ideal might lie not in others but in herself. Her major paintings of the latter 1990s and beyond—some of her strongest—decisively supplant ancestor worship with an upsurge of self-analysis and self-reverence, and the results, such as *Studio Air* (2003; Pl. 5), are assuredly formidable. But, that is another "romance." •

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NOTES

1. Emma Amos, quoted in Sharon Patton, "Emma Amos," in *Art by African Americans in the Collection of the New Jersey State Museum* (Trenton: New Jersey State Museum, 1998), 12.
2. Thalia Gouma-Peterson, "Reclaiming Presence: The Art and Politics of Color in Emma Amos's Work," in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos Paintings and Prints, 1982-1992* (Wooster, Ohio: College of Wooster Art Museum, 1993), 6.
3. Amos, quoted in an interview conducted by Al Murray for the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art, October 3, 1968, transcript, 4-5. (This interview is referred to hereafter as SI-AAA)
4. *Ibid.*, 5.
5. *Ibid.*, 12.
6. Sharon Patton, *African-American Art*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 185, 306; Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 186, 200, 316, 400-02.
7. According to the artist, the print was acquired by the Museum of African-American Art in Washington, D.C., but seems to be no longer extant. Interview conducted by author with artist at her studio, New York, January 8, 2006.
8. Amos, letter to the author, dated June 21, 2001.
9. Gouma-Peterson, et al., "Biography and Chronology," in *Emma Amos Paintings and Prints*, 80.
10. The Pan Africanist Movement was launched with international conferences in London in 1900 and Paris in 1919, and continued in Amos's era with FESTAC—the Festival of Arts and Culture—held in Dakar, Senegal, in 1966, and again in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1977.
11. Amos, quoted in SI-AAA, transcript, 9, 11.
12. Amos, quoted in Betty Wilde, "Emma Amos," Leslie King-Hammond, et al., *Gumbo Ya Ya: Anthology of Contemporary African-American Women Artists* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1995), 1.
13. Gouma-Peterson, "Reclaiming Presence," in Gouma Peterson et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 5.
14. Amos, quoted in SI-AAA, transcript, 9, 11.

15. Patton, *African-American Art*, 185, 306; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American*, 186, 200, 316, 400-02.
16. Amos, et al., "Contemporary Feminism: Art Practice, Theory, and Activism—An Intergenerational Perspective," *Art Journal* 58, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 9; Betty Wilde, "Emma Amos," 1, 24-26, 176-78; Robert Henkes, *The Art of Black American Women: Works of Twenty-Four Artists of the Twentieth Century* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1993), 50-74.
17. Amos, electronic letter to the author, dated May 12, 2006.
18. Amos, quoted in an interview with bell hooks, "Straighten Up and Fly Right: Making History Visible," in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 17-18, 21; Amos, et al., *A Contemporary Feminism*, "9.
19. Amos, quoted in interview with hooks, in "Straighten Up and Fly Right" and "Biography and Chronology," in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 22, 80; Patricia Mainardi, "Quilt: The Great American Art," *Feminist Art Journal* 2, no. 1 (Winter 1973): 1, 18-23.
20. Gouma-Peterson, et al., "Biography and Chronology," in *Emma Amos Paintings and Prints*, 80.
21. Amos, quoted in interview by hooks, "Straighten Up and Fly Right," in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 23.
22. Amos, quoted in "Measuring Content," in Jo Anna Isaak, *Looking Forward Looking Black* (Geneva, N.Y.: Hobart and William Smith Colleges Press, 1999), 38; and in Patton, "Emma Amos: Art Matters," 42.
23. One of Amos's most prized photographic collections is one she inherited from her godmother's husband, George Shivery, who documented indigent blacks in Mississippi and Tennessee in the 1920s and 1930s. Valerie J. Mercer, "Emma Amos: A Skillful and Imaginative Printmaker," in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 33-34.
24. Amos, electronic letter to the author, dated July 19, 2006.
25. Henkes, *The Art of Black American Women*, 127.
26. Ibid.
27. Laurie Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 73.
28. Ernst Kris and Otto Kurtz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 53; Phyllis Greenacre, "The Childhood of the Artist" and "The Family Romance of the Artist," *Emotional Growth* 2 vols. (Madison, Conn.: International University Press, 1960; reprinted 1971); Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis*, 73-83; Sigmund Freud, "On the Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" and "Family Romances," *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London 1953-1973), S.E. IX 235-41 and S.E. XIX 173-79; Homer, *The Iliad and The Odyssey*, each 2 vols., trans. A.T. Murray (Cambridge: Loeb Library Edition, 1978-86); Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. John R. Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966); Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. J. Wykwert and N. Leach. (1485; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988).
29. Ibid.; Avigdor W. Poseq, "Soutine's Paraphrases of Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox*," *Kunststhorik Tidskrift* LX, vol.3-4 (1991): 210-22; Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis*, 78.
30. Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis*, 75.
31. Amos, quoted in interview by hooks, "Straighten Up and Fly Right" and "Biography and Chronology," in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 17.
32. Amos, *Odyssey* ([New York]: Ratchethead Studios and Selco Graphics, 1993). Also printed in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 35-38, 44.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 35-38.
35. Portrayed in the detail reproduced of *The Gift* are, left to right (date painted is also indicated): Top row: India Amos, daughter, 6/1/90; Camille Billops, artist, archivist, 6/4/90; Martha Wilson, performance artist, director of Franklin Furnace, 6/9/90; Joyce Kozloff, painter, mosaic muralist, 6/14/90; Howardena Pindell, artist, 6/22/90; Row two: Sabra Moore, painter, 7/24/90; Renee Green, installation artist, 7/25/90; Faith Ringgold, painter, author, 8/1/90; Shirley King, photographer, chef, author, 8/6/90; Josely Carvalho, artist, 8/14/90; Row three: Judy Blum, painter, 9/20/90; Helen Ramsaran, sculptor, 9/25/90; Mira Schor, painter, writer, 9/26/90; Sharon Sutton, architect, printmaker, 10/7/90; Nancy St. Paul, photographer, 10/10/90; Row four: Marina Gutierrez, artist, 10/30/90; May Stevens, painter, 12/3/90; Miriam Schapiro, painter, 2/3/91; Lucy Lippard, author, critic, 1991; Kay WalkingStick, painter, 3/23/91. The 20 portraits not pictured include: Top row: Mary Anne Rose, painter, 6/24/90; Zarina, artist, 6/25/90; Brahma Yassky, painter, 7/3/90; Carol Sun, painter, 7/23/90; Petah Coyne, sculptor, 1990; Kathy Caraccio, printmaker, 8/14/90; Clarissa Sleigh, photographer, 8/16/90; Vivian Browne, painter, 9/12/90; Joan Semmel, painter, 9/13/90; Rose Viddiano, sculptor, 9/19/90; Row three: Toby McLennon, painter, performance artist, 10/12/90; Lorna Simpson, photographer, 10/19/90; Carol Byard, sculptor, painter, 10/20/90; Nanette Carter, painter, 10/29/90; Claire Khalil, painter, 10/29/90; Row four: Elizabeth Catlett, sculptor, 4/7/91; Susan Unterberg, photographer, 5/16/91; Moira Roth; art historian, author 6/17/91; Fern Logan, photographer, 1991; Linda Peer, sculptor, 1993.
36. Amos, quoted in interview by hooks, "Straighten Up and Fly Right," in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 27.
37. Amos, statement to author, New York, January 2006.
38. "Passing" was possible for them because their mother, Sally, was a so-called "quadroon" (someone with one-quarter African blood), and they themselves were "octoroons" (the French colonial term for persons with one-eighth African blood), and as such virtually indistinguishable in physical appearance from whites. For centuries the white descendants of Martha and Thomas Jefferson denied the legitimacy of their black relatives, until in 1999 DNA testing proved that members of both the black and white Jefferson clans were progeny of the same genealogical stock.

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Plastic Fish and Grinning Saw Blades

By Mona Hadler

When Lee Bontecou exhibited her plastic fish and flowers in 1971 (1969; Pls. 6, 7), she seemed to make a startling about-face in the midst of her meteoric career trajectory. What was new about these works was their frank illusionism and undisguised use of plastic. But were they really so divergent from her previous works? She had used plastic before: her 1959 sculptural gun, which she described as “playful” or “out of this world,”¹ for example, has plastic parts, while a major sixties relief incorporates a plastic turret from a World War II airplane. In addition, her engagement with the actual had formed a leitmotif in her work that can be traced from her earliest ceramic and bronze animals, to her sculptural gun (with bullets that triggered bombs carried by airplanes), to the thinly disguised horseshoe crabs and garment racks imbedded in her commanding welded pieces. Finally, the effect of the plastic sculpture strikes a deep chord as well. Often sinister or strange in appearance, her oversized translucent flowers with hanging tentacles or her predatory fish with prey inside recall the mood of her sixties works with their grinning saw blades and threatening war equipment. Now, in the wake of her comprehensive 2003 traveling retrospective, these works, completed in mid-career, can also be positioned against a late oeuvre that is dazzling in its beauty but populated as well by such menacing sculptures as *Untitled* (2001; Pl. 8), an almost four-foot-tall welded steel, wire, and porcelain creature with sharp teeth and a demonic grin. In this respect, the plastic fish and flowers of the seventies seem less an anomaly in Bontecou’s career than a powerful manifestation of the dissonance that has distinguished her work from the beginning, as it fuses the beautiful with the threatening, the everyday with the fantastic, the abstract with the real, the horrible with the humorous.

While heralded as a major shift in Bontecou’s style,² the plastic pieces of the seventies can best be understood in the context of her entire production, for, with all its sublime expressivity, there is always an underbelly to her art. The strange, the recognizable, and the popular have lurked in her work from the early pieces with leering saw blades, castoffs of a debris culture, to reliefs with innuendos of Buck Rogers spaceships, to the sci-fi mutated flowers and toothy creatures of her more recent sculpture. This gritty, popular, and at times, near kitschy sensibility confronts the modernist vision that gave Bontecou ascendancy and has also been at the base of

whatever negative criticism she has received. It contributes as well to the overall power of her production.

The plastic fish and flowers of the seventies were created from a homemade vacuum-forming machine and reveal the sections that have been bolted or epoxied together. While refusing trompe l’oeil illusionism and insisting on the identity of plastic, they maintain a powerful materiality common to Bontecou’s oeuvre. In this regard, they exhibit an honesty of materials reminiscent of thirties machine age industrial design in plastic or of the Constructivist sculpture in plastic that she admired.³ At the same time, they are insistently fish and flowers, with a strange realism that placed them in the mad scientist’s lab, as well as the lobby of an urban building. Indeed, Bontecou made these sculptures at a time when plastic Christmas trees and flowers first adorned the lobbies of apartment buildings and hotels. It was a material so associated with a kitsch aesthetic that a mention of it caused mass laughter in the 1968 film *The Graduate*, when Dustin Hoffman’s character was advised to pursue a future in plastics. Significantly, at the same time, plastic furniture was considered the pinnacle of inventive modern design, as featured in The Museum of Modern Art’s 1972 exhibition, “Italy: The New Domestic Landscape.” Bontecou’s challenging works in plastic straddle the line between kitsch and high art, and by understanding this ambivalent position, we can appreciate both their cool reception and their striking pertinence.

Bontecou never shied away from the plastics of her age. Born in 1931, she lived during a time when the use of plastic in industry and mass culture grew exponentially, with annual production exceeding six billion pounds by 1960. As Jeffrey L. Meikle has demonstrated in his cultural history of plastics in the United States, the public response to plastics changed radically over the decades.⁴ These shifting meanings shed light on Bontecou’s lifelong flirtation with the material. Although by 1970, with the first Whole Earth Day, plastic conjured visions of ecological destruction, in the twenties and thirties a utopian strain of thought had surrounded its production. Plastics were then seen as a miracle material transformed from black coal, the “scrap heap of the vegetable kingdom,” into the streamlined elegance of machine age design. An alchemical triumph, creating something from nothing, plastics signified the progressive social vision of producing beauty for the masses.⁵

During the war years of the forties—Bontecou’s formative

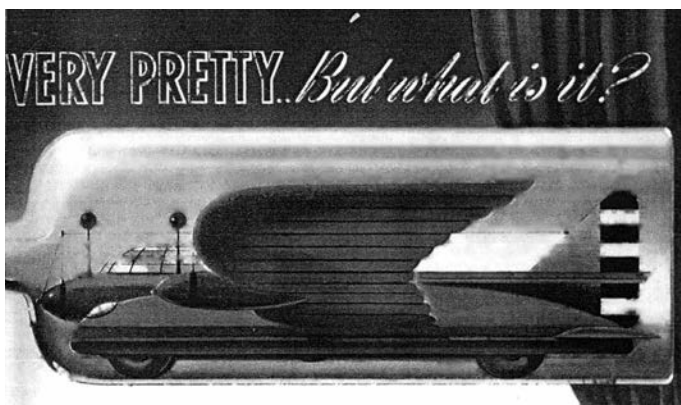


Fig. 1. Advertisement for Elmer E. Mills Corporation, Chicago, in *Modern Plastics* (March, 1945), p. 33.

years—plastic became associated with the military and its production nearly tripled, as millions of pounds went for uses such as aircraft cockpit covers and other war equipment. Wartime industrial designers vied to imagine the postwar use of these new materials and to reap the monetary rewards. A 1942 issue of *Modern Plastics*, for example, illustrated a futuristic shark-nosed bus with a “plastic turret” for the driver.⁶ Winged and ultra-streamlined vehicles abounded in plastic industry advertisements (Fig. 1) that hark back both to Norman Bel Geddes’s designs⁷ and to Flash Gordon cars of the thirties and strangely prefigure aspects of Bontecou’s later relief sculpture.

A complex signifier during the forties, plastic was seen as military and artificial all at once. Because it was being used to replace materials made scarce by wartime deprivations, plastic soon became associated with ersatz, proto-kitsch objects. Whereas many objects of the preceding decade sported the pared-down simplicity of a streamlined machine aesthetic,⁸ the resulting teardrop shape led to semantic play, which consumer culture embraced by producing over-the-top objects with military associations, such as spatulas with plastic bullet-shaped handles, made by Androck Corporation, Dazey Corporation’s torpedo/rocket-shaped ice crusher (Fig. 2), and bomb-shaped salt and pepper shakers or jukeboxes with acrylic domes shaped like bomber noses, such as Wurlitzer’s 1948 model.⁹ Postwar Populux product design continued this alliance, often with a kitsch aesthetic. As one historian put it, in a postnuclear, postwar society the objects of war, emptied of content, became mere insignia: “For consumer culture, the result was an avalanche of metonymy, of things that looked like things.”¹⁰ One thinks of Paul Boyer’s thesis on mass culture,¹¹ of how atomic cocktails and bikinis function as a way to cope with the terror endemic to the

post-Hiroshima age. The commercialized mass culture of the Cold War period celebrated victory and lauded American prosperity, but perhaps more profoundly detonated the fear by turning this war imagery into kitsch objects like jukeboxes with bomber noses.

It is in this framework that we must contextualize the mid-sixties critics who asked of Bontecou’s work, “Is it a pterodactyl? A Flash Gordon spaceship? An outsize artichoke or a monstrous whorl of giant flower corollas?”¹² or the reviewer who jabbed at Bontecou’s 1964 Lincoln Center relief (Fig. 3), “It’s art, but will it fly?”¹³ This sculpture stretches magisterially more than twenty feet across the expanse of the wall at the New York State Theater. Marked by powerful thrusts, it alternates deep recesses with dynamic winged struts that are as close to the Futurism of Umberto Boccioni as they are to the appendages of a Buck Rogers interplanetary aircraft (Fig. 4). Using an actual Plexiglas turret from a World War II bomber for the forms to the right and left of the central hole, albeit reworked with epoxy to an eggshell finish, they are nonetheless meaningful to Bontecou from their original context. In her work these remnants of fighter planes morph into swelling avian shapes that are as close to the bulging futuristic design of the late fifties automobile with its omnipresent tailfin as they are to the flying car in the plastics advertisement or its Buck Rogers antecedents. The slippage between aircrafts and fantastic vehicles had a long history in the



Fig. 2. Jean Reinecke, Ice Crusher (1939), Dazey Corporation.

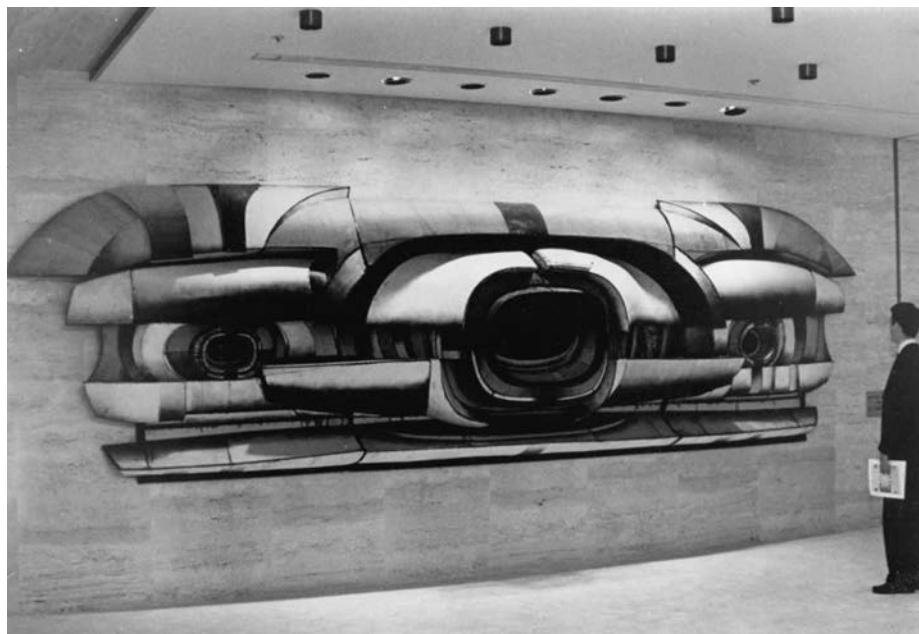


Fig. 3. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (1964), welded steel, canvas, epoxy, resin and Plexiglas, 21 1/2' x 5 1/2' x 2'. Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Inc. New York State Theater, a gift of Albert A. List Foundation, Inc. © Lee Bontecou / courtesy Knoedler & Company, New York.

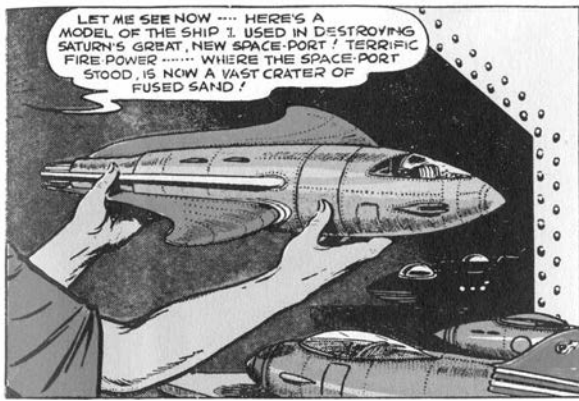


Fig. 4. Rick Yager, "The Battle on the Moon," 1948-49, © 1947 John F. Dille Co.



Fig. 5. Skipjack submarine model, 31 1/2". D&E miniatures, 2006.

pre- and postwar years. Pulp aviation artists often made models of actual planes before designing their amazing ones.¹⁴ Bontecou's art, although primarily marked by its own commanding and abstract language, captured as well the humor, threat, and familiarity of the mass visual culture. The critic who asked if her Lincoln Center piece could fly grew up with the mid-fifties Pontiac hood ornaments, where plastic chieftans morph into glistening metal airplanes that sit on automobile hoods, or with vehicles where the fantastic could become actual, as in the 1947 ConvAIRCAR, a plastic automobile surmounted by a detachable airplane fuselage and wing unit.

The elegant avian forms of the Lincoln Center sculpture suggest as well the deadly shapes of the postwar nuclear submarines that fascinated Bontecou, such as the Skipjack, which was built like a dolphin and launched in 1958 (Fig. 5). An example of W.B. Yeats's "terrible beauty" is how design historians have characterized its foreboding design.¹⁵ Atomic subs, new to the era, raised the bar on nuclear fear. Whereas Bontecou's soaring jet-age Lincoln Center relief captures the marvels of the space age, other works of the late fifties and early sixties express her darker moods and anger at war. Her canvas and steel works often incorporate Nazi helmets and gas masks while saw blades and garment racks grin menacingly out of interior recesses (as in, for example, *Untitled*, 1961; Fig. 6). She also created a series of small rectangular works in the early sixties with vertical bars and chilling teeth, which she called Prisons. Bontecou's work embodies the paradox of the space age in the pairing of the cosmic and the brutal.¹⁶ Her great talent was to create an art that both condemns and makes beauty of her time. This is what drew her to the design of the Skipjack. She found it both beautiful and threatening. It combined the sleek

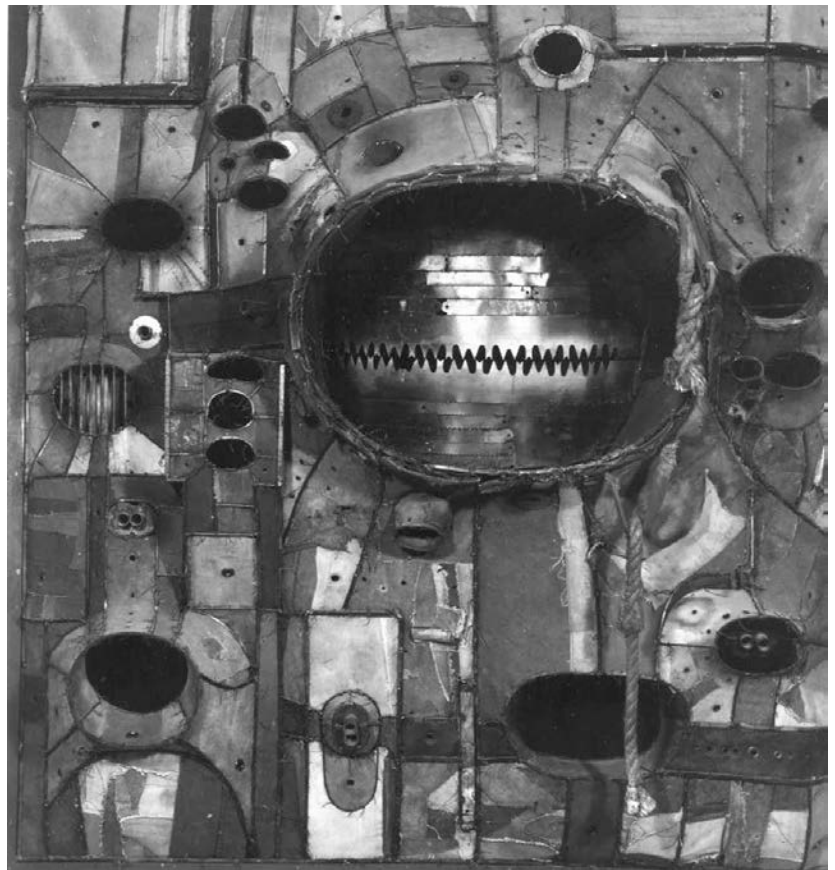


Fig. 6. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (1961), welded steel, canvas, wire, and rope. 72 5/8" x 66" x 25 7/16". Whitney Museum of American Art, New York purchase (61.41). © Lee Bontecou / courtesy Knoedler & Company, New York

elegance of a dolphin with the gleam of technology, all the while sporting an undercurrent of dread for the postwar era and indeed today.

She knew the submarine well, as she had made a painstakingly accurate plastic model of it. As a precursor to Bontecou's wholehearted embrace of plastic as her artistic medium, she engaged in its use by making plastic models as a hobby. When the first Revell plastic model kits hit the stores in 1951,¹⁷ with intricate realistic parts made of injection-molded thermoplastics, they were an instant success, comparable to the paint by numbers craze that gripped the nation. In the late fifties, when Bontecou wanted to relax, she went to the airport and watched the planes take off and land. She went back to her studio and assiduously made model airplanes, which Ugo Mulas captured in his well-known photographs of the artist's studio (Fig. 7). The facetious critic of her Lincoln Center piece noted the model planes in her studio and connected them with what he called Bontecou's "jet age" assemblages.¹⁸ Indeed, there is a parallel between the two productions, the small-scale models and the large constructions, in the assemblage of intricate pieces. Bontecou even used airplane glue to adhere fiberglass sections to her metal frames. In the 1964 Lincoln Center sculpture, Bontecou welded the frame but glued and epoxied other areas, including the centrally placed Plexiglas World War II bomber turret. It could be said that she made a massive model. Given this context, again it is not sur-

prising that critics often related her work to Flash Gordon or Buck Rogers spaceships, which were sold to children in toy or template form.¹⁹

One may ask why Bontecou made these time-consuming models, which was arguably a busman's holiday from her exceedingly labor-intensive artistic production. Although an interest in handcraft hobbies was widespread in the fifties, and has been linked to postwar conformity and newly acquired leisure time,²⁰ Bontecou's project was different. She aimed for veracity. The plastic model airplanes, submarines, and helicopters that she preferred were deeply embedded in the World War II, Cold War, and space age experience. They were not only were realistic re-creations of fighter planes and nuclear subs, but the actual military machines had in turn been enhanced by newly invented plastic parts, such as turrets, one of which she had incorporated in her sculpture.

Bontecou may have been drawn to the verism of the Revell models in a desire to play with war toys, but she engaged in an activity gendered male in her youth. Advertisements for military toys—aimed at boys—were ubiquitous. A September 1944 *Modern Plastics* ad, for example, pairs a boy with a model train and a soldier with a gun. In this arena, as in her welding activity, Bontecou breaks new ground for the woman artist. Her own brother had made balsa models in his youth, which formed the precedents for her hanging wood and silk sculptures of 1967, which she called “cocoon,” but she preferred the new plastic ones. A salient quality of these innovative plastic kits was their accuracy of detail, a trait in which the early designers took pride.²¹ On a deep level, Bontecou felt a need for veracity, for actuality, a characteristic to which she returns with a vengeance in the plastic fish and flowers.

Popular models in the fifties were military ones. The biggest seller in 1954 was the Battleship Missouri, the ship on which the Japanese had signed the surrender papers formally ending World War II. Bontecou herself tells an anecdote that illustrates how deeply imbedded the models were in the Cold War climate. The tale concerns the nuclear sub, her favorite, the SSN.585 Skipjack. Bontecou spent a long time painstakingly gluing a complicated model of this sub and relishing its accuracy. Accuracy and detail seem to have been the model's key characteristics. She enjoys telling the story of how this model, and others like it, were removed from store shelves by the government when they realized that the Soviets had allegedly learned military secrets from the accuracy of its details. In a *New York Times* article dated June 18, 1961, Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, the “Father of the Nuclear Navy,” said, “If I were a Russian, I would be most grateful to the

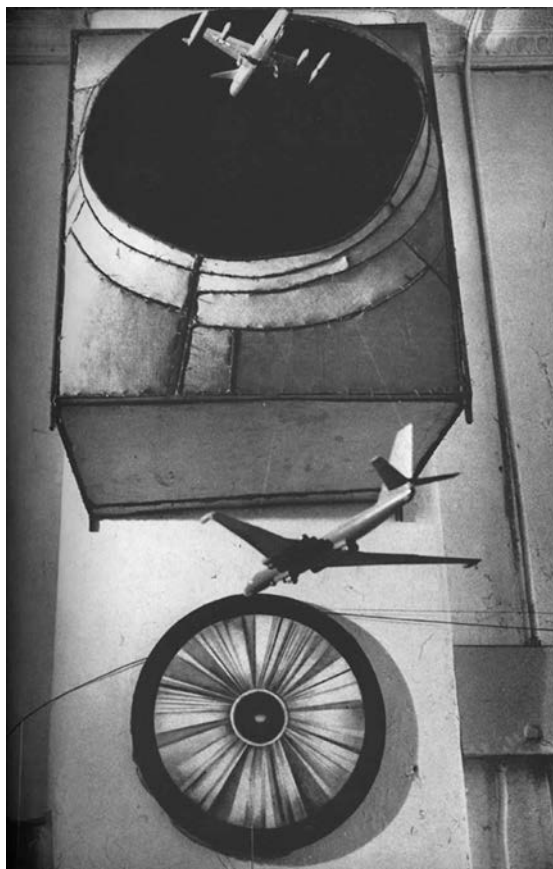


Fig. 7. Lee Bontecou, Wooster Street studio, 1963, Photo: Ugo Mulas, © Ugo Mulas estate.

United States for its generosity in supplying such information for \$2.98.... A good ship designer could spend one hour on that model and tell he has millions of dollars worth of free information.” He cited the size of the reactor compartment and the number of crew members needed to operate the vessel as pertinent information. “‘I certainly would like to have similar information of their submarines,’ the Admiral said.”²² The U.S. government confiscated the models under the illusion, fed by Cold War fear, that they would, in fact, be used as assembly kits for future Soviet enemy vessels. The power of the burgeoning mass culture and advertising of the era was no secret. As early as 1942, the War Advertisement Council had begun to keep tabs on private industry by offering their expertise in public persuasion to help the war effort. While Bontecou's work graced the entry wall of the New York State Theater, the Skipjack model was removed from the market. Yet the allusions to the visual culture remain in her art, engage the audience, and help provide a mass audience for her political antiwar messages.

Addressing the role of model-making in Bontecou's production is not simply a case of discovering another iconographic source for her imagery, nor of reducing her complex artistic process to one influence or to a conscious political agenda. But, rather, it is one way of understanding her art's connection to the greater culture—how this challenging, innovative, abstract art related in a broad way to a mass audience. Rather than assuaging cultural anxiety,²³ her works engage the viewer in imaginative, monumental constructions that cry out against war or bask in the wonders of flight, while at the same time grounding the mass audience in a language that had elements that were deeply familiar.

By the late sixties, Bontecou turned in earnest to working in plastic. The resultant fish and flowers, with their strange verisimilitude, had a kindred relationship to the crop of synthetic flowers that “bloomed” in the sixties. Although they appear to be a startling shift in style, they, in fact, mark a courageous engagement in the actual, which, as we have seen, is a force in her earlier work. The sculptures' forthright illusionism and overt use of plastic, however, draws them even closer to the arena of mass culture flora, with its ubiquitous trinkets and sci-fi mutations.

On one level, the plastic sculptures are evidence of her deep love of nature. The wealth of natural forms in the visual world was and never is far from her formal imagination. Working in the garden one summer as an adult, she counted sixty varieties

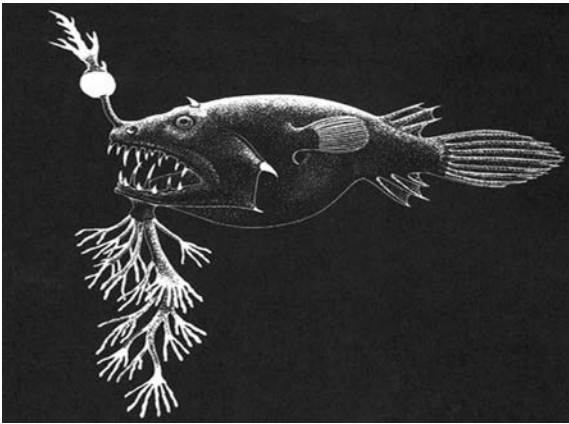


Fig. 8. Angler Fish, Richard Ellis/Photo Researchers, Inc.

of insect life. Her daughter, Valerie Giles, continues this family tradition as an artist and field biologist. A frequent visitor to the American Museum of Natural History, Bontecou was as fascinated with evolution and missing links in prehistoric life chains as with futuristic space imagery. The slippage with the real to the strange is seamless. As sci-fi artist Frank Paul phrased it, "One of the things I enjoy about the yarns I illustrated is the ingenious way they go from fact to frightfulness without a struggle...."²⁴ Bontecou's plastic fish (and the white charcoal on black paper drawings of them), too, look as close to the anglerfish that glow to attract their prey (Fig. 8), as to the art of a "strange naturalist" from a "mad doctor's laboratory."²⁵ In addition, the flowers, while startling in their verisimilitude, conjure as well the outsized flora of the post-apocalyptic landscape rife in the explosion of fifties science fiction films, which respond to nuclear anxiety.

They also attain the luminosity and transparency that Bontecou often craved. Admiring the glistening sheen of Brancusi's bronzes, she had always wanted to penetrate the surface of sculpture by incorporating shadings and multiple orifices. By 1966, she experimented with actual illumination, using an electric bulb to illuminate a work from behind. She advanced to the liberation of the sculpture from the wall with a series of hanging translucent sculptures redolent with imagery that had shifted from the mystery of the cosmos to the vastness of the ocean floor. These pieces (Pls. 6, 7) exploit plastic's potential for lightness, malleability, and accuracy of detail. One could argue that her use of materials, and honesty of construction, if not the subject matter, follow the modernist canon.

By fabricating the works with a homemade vacuum-forming machine,²⁶ Bontecou continued a do-it-yourself spirit of invention that had attended the use of plastics in the forties. She had inherited a comparable homegrown pioneering spirit: her father and uncle invented the aluminum canoe, and her Canadian mother wired submarines during World War II. Her work was made in a new era of plastic design, and her technique calls to mind the avant-garde design of the era with one-shot injection-molded thermoplastics leading the way. The structural flexibility of the material endeared it to some of the

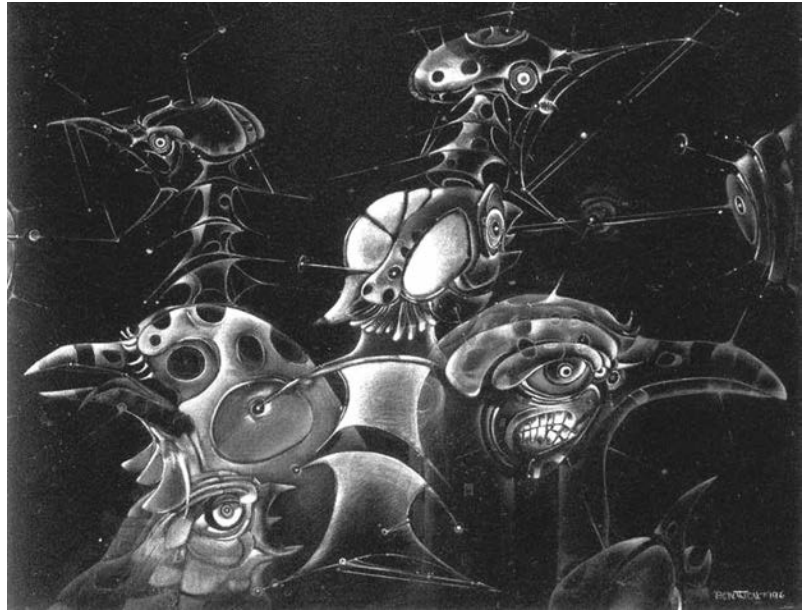


Fig. 9. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (1996), pastel and colored pencil on paper, 20" x 26".
© Lee Bontecou/courtesy Knoedler & Company, New York.

best designers of the time, including Eero Saarinen, who used a fiberglass-plastic shell for his 1956 tulip, or pedestal, chair. The trend continued into the sixties with the popularity of Italy's high-style plastic design, which exploited the virtues of plastic for its own sake. As a sculptural material, plastics were also widespread in the sixties. For example, they were used by such diverse artists as Bontecou's champion Donald Judd and her friend and soon-to-be colleague at Brooklyn College, the animal sculptor Anne Arnold.

By the late sixties, plastics had both positive and negative connotations. Being disposable and nonbiodegradable, they began to be seen by leftist authors such as Norman Mailer as a cancerous growth in society. Bontecou's unpretentious lifestyle and love of nature made her sympathetic to this attitude. Furthermore, the use of plastics was widespread in kitsch objects, such as plastic flowers and Christmas trees. (By the sixties, the annual synthetic crop had grown to \$120 million, which amounted to about a sixth of what the populace paid for real flowers.²⁷) Plastics were identified with high art and kitsch objects, and Bontecou's plastic fish and flowers tapped into the complex signification of its material. The weirdness of the creatures, with sinister fish eating smaller ones, suggests a critique of plastic, yet their frank representational quality weighs dangerously and wonderfully close to their kitschy siblings. She exploited the modernist, abstract aesthetic possibilities of the material, but also its possibilities for verism, producing a strange body of work that teetered the scales and colored its reception.

Bontecou's shift in style comes at roughly the same time as Philip Guston's controversial new work, first shown at Marlborough Gallery in 1970, which she admired then as now. She attended his retrospective when it traveled to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City in the fall of 2003 and felt "the tenderness and beauty of his early work, but loved his late work."²⁸ The parallel between the two artists'

productions extends beyond the historic confluence of their shift in style to their artistic process, universality, and echoing of the mass culture. Guston grew out of Abstract Expressionism, and Bontecou greatly admired this movement of her young adulthood. Her own art is marked by a strong sense of materiality and authenticity. Heir to the Abstract Expressionist commitment to the primacy of artistic engagement and sublime expressivity, she worked alone in her studio without assistants, and for decades in rural Pennsylvania far from the urban galleries, laboring to express her artistic vision. She would second Guston's assertion that, "Painting [is] the only thing left in our industrial society where an individual alone can make something."²⁹ More of a loner than Guston, she would second his belief as well in the role of the unconscious as the generative bed of imaginative creation. Bontecou's mass culture references were not conscious or strategic as in the manner of pop art, and even her aim for veracity in the fish and flower works grew out of a meditative, almost hallucinatory drawing process. For both artists, the process is a springboard to the unconscious. And for both, the art is deeply personal and universally communicative. While Guston is an allegorical poet of the absurd, he, like Bontecou, raged at the brutality and injustice in the world.³⁰ And for both artists, newly recognizable imagery with overtones of the mass culture (comics, in Guston's case) lends a degree of accessibility and resonance to their work.

Bontecou's startling late oeuvre of hanging work is the fruit of her meditative and deeply visionary artistic process. Created over the last twenty-five years in a secluded setting, they are three-dimensional suspended works constructed with a handmade welded frame and embellished with a myriad of small porcelain elements also made by hand. Extraordinarily labor intensive, these works have an expansive and, for some viewers, calming effect. Freed from the wall and other containing elements, such as the outer membranes of her plastic fish, they realize her cosmic vision: the worldsapes of her youth, glimpsed in the shadows of the dark recesses of her early work, now fill the room with dizzying beauty. Born of an artistic process close to that of the Abstract Expressionists, these works are the apex of a lifelong visionary search.

For all its gentle poetry and freshness, this period of her production, too, has an underbelly that emerges in the drawings and above all in a key late work, such as *Untitled* (Pl. 8), made shortly before her traveling retrospective in 2003. This large imposing creature with threatening, sharp teeth, was particularly satisfying to Bontecou. Like Max Ernst's predators that emerge from the haunted forests of his imagination, this strange work surfaces from the toothy visions of her black drawings such as one from 1996 (Fig. 9). Bontecou wanted her late cosmic work to be seen in tandem

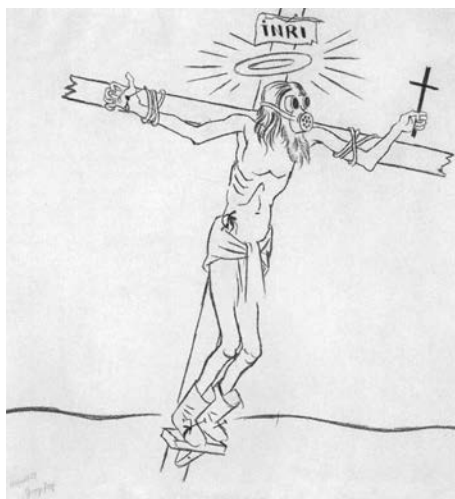


Fig. 10. George Grosz, *Christ on the Cross Wearing a Gas Mask* (1927), crayon, 17-3/8" x 21-5/8", Akademie der Kunst, Berlin.

with this piece and other similar earlier ones. Acclaim as a canonical modernist has never been her goal. She replies with a chuckle to criticism of the plastic fish, saying that it makes her want to do more of them. In a visit to the 2004 Carnegie International, which featured her work, she was thrilled to see again the work of Robert Crumb, an old favorite of hers. But she was particularly gratified that his entries had not been sanitized and that some of the more erotic and strange work had been included, a goal that she had for her own exhibitions.

The eerie smirk in the 2003 untitled piece brings us full circle to the saw blade grins of her ominous early works, including the small rectangular Prison pieces which sport strange smiles of inmates behind bars. It points as well to the "comic grotesque"³¹ works of George

Grosz, the left-wing German émigré and teacher at the Art Students League, whom she so admired in her youth. In one unfinished small relief related to the Prison series of the sixties,³² Bontecou includes a pig-snouted head wearing a monocle. This image derives from a sequence of her sketches inspired by the work of Grosz. She may have turned to the pig in a good-natured way (as a naturalist she was fond of the animal), but by linking the pig with Grosz, she taps into the very hot arena of World War I anti-war imagery, highlighted most subversively in the *Prussian Archangel*, a life-sized sculpture of a Prussian soldier wearing a pig's mask by John Heartfield and Rudolph Schlichter, which hung from the ceiling in the 1920 First International Dada Fair. She remembers being "shocked" by Grosz's depiction of *Christ on the Cross Wearing a Gas Mask* (1927; Fig. 10) when she saw it in the fifties. That she recalled this work decades after seeing it points to its lingering impact on her, for it is the melding of the horror and humor that is essential to the grotesque and to the strange, disruptive quality of her work where the actual and the imaginative commingle in a startling way. And it is this quality that marks as well the plastic fish and flowers.

Without detracting from the powerful materiality and abstraction of Bontecou's most commanding words, which impressed Donald Judd, it is important to look at her oeuvre in its entirety, to avoid sanitizing it to its detriment. What I have called a "gritty sensibility" coexists with kitsch and popular elements. Although they are not all the same thing, they contribute to the importance of the weird, recognizable, and popular in her work. If modernist abstraction has been faulted in some circles for its elitism, this subcurrent of Bontecou's challenging production grounds it in the present and in the populace with its ever-present and ever-recognizable debris to its flirtation with mass culture, model kits, spaceships, and plastic ornaments. The plastic fish and flowers, while a seeming aberration in her oeuvre, are the most startling manifestation of a major component of her entire production which adds to its dissonant power. ●

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NOTES

1. In July 1986, Lee Bontecou and I spent a weekend together at the Giles-Bontecou farm in Pennsylvania. Unless otherwise noted, all primary information concerning her work and thoughts comes from this interview and countless subsequent conversations. I delivered a large portion of this essay at the College Art Association meetings, February 17, 2005, in my introduction to the session I chaired called "Mass Culture Before Pop."
2. Two authors have been particularly supportive of Bontecou's plastic work. Elizabeth A. T. Smith, who first championed them in "Abstract Sinister," *Art in America* 81, no.9 (Sept.1993):86, sees these works as among Bontecou's most fascinating and compares them to process artists such as Lynda Benglis and Bruce Nauman. And Elizabeth Sussman, in an excellent review of the Bontecou retrospective organized by Smith, "Lee Bontecou, UCLA Hammer Museum," *Artforum* (Jan. 2004):148-49, calls the strange sculptures of the late sixties and early seventies a great body of work. She places them in a trajectory from Paul Thek to Robert Gober.
3. Bontecou admired Antoine Pevsner's exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 1958. See Mona Hadler, "Lee Bontecou—Heart of a Conquering Darkness," *Source: Notes in the History of Art*, 12 (Fall 1992): 42-43.
4. Jeffrey L. Meikle, *American Plastic: A Cultural History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1995), 2.
5. *Ibid.* 70.
6. *Modern Plastics* 19 (Aug. 1942): 53. See Meikle, 163.
7. *Modern Plastics* 22 (March 1945): 33; and *Modern Plastics* 22 (Sept. 1944): 57. Norman Bel Geddes, *Horizons* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co.,1932), 60.
8. See Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Design in the USA* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), 113-14 for a summary of the debates over function and whimsy in regard to streamlining.
9. Donald Albrecht, *World War II and the American Dream* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), xl. Military and domestic items had been associated with one another during the forties, when advertisements portrayed them both as instruments in a battle to achieve a higher standard of living. See, Cynthia Henthorn, "Commercial Fallout: The Image of Progress, the Culture of War and the Feminine Consumer, 1939-1959," PhD diss., CUNY Graduate Center, 1997, 242; and Brian S. Alexander, *Atomic Kitchen: Gadgets and Inventions for Yesterday's Cook* (Portland: Collector's Press, 2004).
10. Michael Sorkin, "War Is Swell," in *World War II and the American Dream*, 237.
11. Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Random House, 1985), 122-30. See also, Mona Hadler, "The Bomb in the Postwar Era: From the Sublime to Red Hot Candies," *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 21 (Fall 2001): 38-43.
12. "Cornucopia: Lee Bontecou," *Newsweek* 68 (Oct. 24, 1966), 77.
13. "Young Sculptor Brings Jet Age to Lincoln Center: It's Art—But Will It Fly?" *Life* 56, no. 15 (April 10, 1964): 43.
14. Robert Lesser, *Pulp Art, Original Cover Paintings for the Great American Pulp Magazines* (Edison, N.J.: Castle Books, 1997), 129.
15. John Heskett, *Industrial Design* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 193.
16. See my discussion in Mona Hadler, "Lee Bontecou's Worldscapes," in Elizabeth A.T. Smith et al. *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003), 200-11.
17. Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950's* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1994). 58. See also, Steven M. Gelber, *Hobbies, Leisure and the Culture of Work in America* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1999), 265-67, for a discussion of the kit craze.
18. "Young Sculptor Brings Jet Age to Lincoln Center: It's Art—But Will It Fly?" 43.
19. Robert C. Dille, ed., *The Collected Works of Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* (New York: Crown, 1969), np.
20. See "Millions for Models," *Modern Plastics* 32 (Nov., 1954): 89.
21. Thomas Graham, in *Remembering Revell Model Kits* (Atglen, Pa.: Schiffer Publishing, 2002), 15-35, describes the designers' efforts for accuracy.
22. "Rickover Asserts Toy Aided Soviet," *New York Times*, June 18, 1961. There was a controversy over the question of whether the U.S. Navy Bureau of Ships actually supplied the kit manufacturers with detailed drawings. The 1954 *Modern Plastics* article, "Millions for Models," p. 93, posits the connection, but Graham in *Remembering Revell Model Kits*, pp. 78-79, argues otherwise.
23. See, for example, Susan Sontag's critique of science fiction films in "Imagination of Disaster," *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Octagon Books, 1978), 225.
24. Frank R. Paul, quoted in Stewart Robinson, "Boogeyman," in *Family Circle* (August 26, 1938): 18. See also Lesser, *Pulp Art*, 28.
25. James R. Mellow, "Bontecou's Well-fed Fish and Malevolent Flowers," *New York Times*, June 6, 1971.
26. Elizabeth A. T. Smith, "All Freedom in Every Sense," in *Lee Bontecou, A Retrospective*, 177.
27. Meikle, *American Plastic*, 177, 255. See also Sussman, "Lee Bontecou," 148-49, who discusses Bontecou's relationship to the plastic production of her day, ranging from kitsch objects to works by contemporary artists.
28. Lee Bontecou, in conversation with the author, Fall 2003.
29. Philip Guston, public forum with Joseph Ablow at Boston Univ.; Transcript excerpted in Clifford Ross, ed., *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics, An Anthology* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1960), 66. This quote is discussed in Caroline A. Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996), 1. Elizabeth A.T. Smith compares Guston and Bontecou in "The Space of the Imagination: A Contemporary Perspective on Lee Bontecou," in 54th *International*, Laura Hoptman, curator (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 2004), 75.
30. See Bill Berkson, "Pyramid and Shoe: Philip Guston and the Funnies," in Michael Auping, *Philip Guston: Retrospective* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 72.
31. Robert Storr is the first to connect Bontecou with the grotesque. See his essay on Eva Hesse, "Do the Wrong Thing: Eva Hesse and the Abstract Grotesque," in *Eva Hesse: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New Haven, Yale Univ. Art Gallery, 1992), 96, and more recently in his essay on Bontecou, "Seek and Hide," in *Lee Bontecou, A Retrospective*, 191. For more on Grosz and the comic grotesque, see Hanne Bergius, "Dada Grotesque," in *Comic Grotesque: Wit and Mockery in German Art, 1870-1940*, ed. Pamela Kort (New York: Prestel, 2004), 155-61.
32. Mona Hadler, "Lee Bontecou's Warnings," *Art Journal* 53, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 56. See also, Hadler, "Lee Bontecou," in *Akron Art Museum: Art Since 1850: An Introduction to the Collection* (Akron: Akron Art Museum, 2001), 142.

PAINTING MARRIAGE

Eva Hesse's Abstract Expressionism

By Kirsten Swenson

Eva Hesse's (1936-70) wall-bound sculpture *Hang Up*, made late in 1965, is a landmark in her career (Fig. 1). The cloth-wrapped empty picture frame affixed with a stiff metal loop was, in her estimation, "the most important early statement I made. It was the first time where my absurdity or extreme feeling came through."¹ Hesse mildly detracts from her work prior to *Hang Up* with this claim, hinting that what came before fell short of artistic ideals of "absurdity" and "extreme feeling." Yet the painting, collage, and relief sculpture Hesse produced until mid-1965, dense with autobiographical references to gender, eroticism, and marriage, often appear far more expressive than the swaddled grey picture frame.

Hesse's description of *Hang Up* in her 1970 interview with Cindy Nemser suggests that it was conceived as a mockery of painting:

It is so absurd. This little piece of steel comes out of this structure and it comes out a lot. It's about ten or eleven feet out and it is ridiculous. It's the most ridiculous structure I have ever made and that is why it is really good. It is coming out of something and yet nothing...It is framing nothing. And the whole frame is gradated—oh more absurdity—very, very finely done. It really was an effort.²

The attention to detail ("very, very finely done"), the careful tonal gradation, and the frame itself that is flush with the wall as a canvas, all evoke the craft of painting while visibly sublimating painterly expression. The frame, simultaneously something and nothing, alludes to painting as both window and mirror but contains only a blank wall. The painted steel rod looping into the viewer's space parodies painting's spatial illusionism with its graduated tones that occupy real space.³

Hang Up inscribes Hesse's history as a painter, her primary identity as an artist through the spring of 1965. She studied painting at Cooper Union, and then under Josef Albers at Yale, where she graduated with a B.F.A. in 1959. Though Albers considered her a gifted colorist, he "couldn't stand my painting...I had the Abstract Expressionist student approach

that was not Albers's."⁴ Hesse recalled that "I loved most de Kooning and Gorky...I know that was for me personally—you know, for what I could take from them."⁵ *Hang Up* is a threshold between two stages of Hesse's oeuvre: her relatively obscure career as a painter who identified strongly with Abstract Expressionism, and her prominent, though shorter, career as a sculptor. The turning point represented by *Hang Up* was personal as well—it was the last work made in the context of her notoriously difficult marriage to the sculptor Tom Doyle before their separation in December 1965.

In Doyle's words, "Eva was an Abstract Expressionist painter, and I've always been an Abstract Expressionist sculptor."⁶ But Hesse's artistic efforts during her Abstract Expressionist phase were mostly ignored by associates who thought of her primarily as the wife of a successful artist—in the early 1960s, she was "Tom's wife," Lucy Lippard recalled.⁷ Despite her serious artistic training, people assumed that Hesse was a "woman artist"—not career-driven, but a hobbyist—a category that Lippard clarified when supporting Hesse's application for a residency at the Yaddo artists' community in 1967: "I feel I can say that Hesse is an artist, and a good one, in the truest sense of the word—not an artist representing a certain type of work, not a 'woman artist,' but for the last 2 years, a strong and original sculptor."⁸

Hang Up reads as a refusal of painting, pointing to Hesse's prior negotiations with painting and the masculinist culture of Abstract Expressionism. Throughout the final year of both her marriage and her painting career, Hesse contested the traditional gender roles that structured her relationship with Doyle and reinvented herself as a sculptor. She eliminated Abstract Expressionist influences by instituting antithetical craft-oriented processes for "German reliefs," foregrounding gender by performatively associating the reliefs with the female body.

Hesse's Abstract Expressionist paintings could openly portray gender as a site of conflict, at times recalling the women painted by "my childhood idol Bill de Kooning."⁹ Not long before meeting Doyle in March of 1961, she painted a portrait of marriage (1960-61;

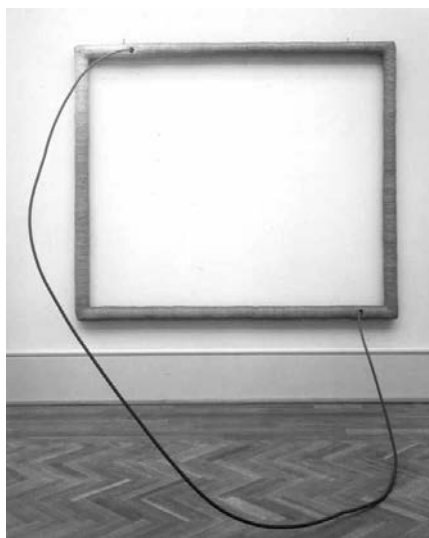


Fig. 1. Eva Hesse, *Hang Up* (1966), acrylic paint and cloth over wood; acrylic paint on cord over steel tube 72" x 84" x 78". The Art Institute of Chicago.

Pl. 9), showing a slight figure rendered in thick strokes of muddy green in the foreground and an expansive figure, depicting a bride, emerging from a taupe background. The foreground figure is difficult to read, with no distinct markers of identity: a sketchy, skull-like face with circles for eyes in an oversize head attached to a thin, genderless, child's body. In contrast, the bride's pendulous breasts and hourglass waist articulate femininity and she is availed of the accouterments of marriage: wedding gown, tulle veil, and pastel bouquet. Her featureless face and stiff, straight arms suggest a mannequin dressed in bridal attire rather than a portrait. If Hesse's pattern of recording and exploring her psychic life holds true here, her subjects are personal: herself, her sister (married in 1954), her mother who committed suicide when Hesse was ten years old, a friend, or even a double self-portrait. This is not to say that the identities are specific but rather to suggest that the painting was an attempt to give visual form to anxieties or dreams, as Hesse was encouraged to do at the time by her therapist Samuel Dunkell.¹⁰

Though ambiguous, the composition is nonetheless rendered with Abstract Expressionist bravura—the large scale, dripped paint and aggressive gestural brushwork of women painted by de Kooning.¹¹ Profuse rivulets of thinned oil paint run down the schematic bodies; the bride's dress is sullied by splattered paint, perverting the decorous, virginal white ceremony of marriage into what reads as a fraught psychological drama. Matrimony is portrayed in a deeply uncomfortable light with the bride conceived as a ghostlike mannequin.

Hesse's identity as a painter, including her decision to become a painter, was shaped in response to social expectations of femininity—even as a teenager, her goal to be “a real artist” was understood not as a neutral choice but in conflict with the “role of wife” prescribed to girls coming of age in the 1950s. The domains of marriage and art making are frequently linked in Hesse's writings—she perceived a troubling incompatibility between being a woman, in particular being a wife, and being an artist. At just sixteen years old Hesse announced in a letter to her father: “I am an artist. I guess I will always feel and want to be a little different from most people. That's why we're called artists. More sensitive and appreciative to nature.” This alternative existence, being “different,” “more sensitive,” was already understood as at odds with the expectations of “most people.” Being an artist was not a hobby; it involved real choices and commitment that included the rejection of conventional gender roles: “...if I want to be an artist a real artist I must give myself, my mind and heart to study, not a few hours a day but always. Living on Park Ave. a wife of a doctor or lawyer then one must play the part of the ‘Doctor's Wife.’” Near the end of the letter there is a plea: “Daddy I want to do more than just exist, to live happily and contented with a home, children, to do the same chores every day.”¹² As a teenage girl in the early 1950s, being a wife seemed a grim fate—playing the part of “Doctor's Wife,” slave to the dull routines of housework, children, and husband. Being an artist seemed the exact opposite of this conformity and absence of inner life—after all, this girl's idol was de Kooning.

Hesse married Doyle despite her worries that, as a woman, marriage and being a painter might be mutually exclusive. She chose as her husband a freewheeling, hard-living sculptor, a choice that must have seemed safely distant from her stifling vision of marriage to a doctor. The pair met in April of 1961, and Doyle's recent account of this meeting is shot through with the themes and tensions that characterized their famously difficult marriage. It also captures Doyle's hypermasculine persona that was apparently on display from the moment Hesse first laid eyes on him:

I had my first one man show at Allan Stone. And this friend of mine who bought a couple sculptures of mine, he had a big party for me. It was like all these people, old girlfriends, it was a big mob scene. And I got very drunk. And this girlfriend of mine was in the bedroom with another guy and I came close to having a real fight but I was drunk and I knew it...Eva was there. She had heard about my opening from a friend of mine who was her plumber. She was there and bathed my head, it was very nice, someone to take care of me! That's what I need! But it turns out, it was like de Kooning and Elaine! That one time, late at night, Bill said to Elaine, “What we need is a wife!” That's what Eva and I used to say, we'd laugh.¹³

Hesse fell hard for Doyle, but like Elaine de Kooning, she was unwilling to acquiesce to the role of wife or forgo her career. Just weeks after meeting Doyle, Hesse noted the “problem...which I discussed only with Rosie [Goldman]” of “woman's role—feminine [when] both artists.”¹⁴ Doyle also perceived an incompatibility; within a month of their meeting, she noted that “Tom is reluctant about my wanting to paint.”¹⁵ Marriage in the early 1960s still meant playing the part of wife, though Hesse chose artist's wife over doctor's wife.

In late 1961, around the time of her marriage, Hesse began painting large-scale canvases, some over six feet wide, that were ambitious entries into the discourse of Abstract Expressionism. In contrast to the untitled painting of marriage and other large-scale oil paintings of female subjects, after meeting Doyle, Hesse shifted to a less revealing abstraction that eliminated the human form. In 1963, marriage continued to seem incompatible with artistic realization: “It is as difficult as it is said to be an artist's wife and an artist also,” reads one of few journal entries from this year.¹⁶ By the time she and Doyle left for a fifteen-month residency in Germany in June of 1964, Hesse had become frustrated with painting and was having trouble producing work, in part because of pressures to “be something for everyone...Woman, beautiful, artist, wife, housekeeper, cook, saleslady....”¹⁷

Hesse's mounting frustration with painting peaked during her residency in a small town outside Düsseldorf with Doyle in 1964 and 1965. He was invited to be an artist-in-residence at the textiles factory of an industrialist and collector; in the words of Lucy Lippard, Hesse “was thrown in as lagniappe.”¹⁸ This was the last phase of their relationship, and also marked her last sustained efforts at painting. Hesse produced numerous works on paper that combined collage, watercolor,

gouache and drawing over the summer and early fall of 1964 (Pl. 10). These compositions document her struggle with painting: many are cobbled together from discarded drawings and paintings, as if Hesse had mined a trove of rejected work for discrete successful elements that were cut out, traced, and reassembled. The complexly layered surfaces are rife with cancellation and concealment of visual signs; forms are often unreadable—acrylic and gouache are used to “white-out” drawings and areas of color, traces of which remain visible underneath. Edges of drawings peek out from under pasted paper, and black ink bleeds through an overpainting of gouache. Presaging the conspicuous submersion of painting performed by *Hang Up*, these collages document an increasingly deliberate style of execution, a kind of skepticism toward Abstract Expressionist ideals, in which gesture and spontaneity are present but subjected to calculated overpainting and erasure.

As Hesse wrote to her friend Sol LeWitt, the collages contained “free, crazy forms” with “wild space, not constant, fluctuating,” and subsequent paintings based on the collages “were enlarged versions attempt at similar space.”¹⁹ Clearly, this freedom and craziness were treated with antithetical deliberation—the look of spontaneity carefully mapped out. A painting dated 1964–1965 (Pl. 11) recreates the arbitrary organization of a collage on a canvas measuring over six feet in height and almost five feet in width. This painting contains references to Gorky’s 1947 *Betrothal* series, one of which Hesse would have known from the collection of the Yale Art Gallery and another of which she likely knew from the Whitney Museum. In each of Gorky’s three paintings titled *The Betrothal*, a depiction of female breasts and nipples is located at the upper-left corner of the canvas. Gorky’s imagery is typically abstract, but in some cases, as in the Yale version, his allusion to sexual organs is brazenly specific. This telltale insignia of *The Betrothal* is humorously quoted as a pair of disembodied nipples in the same location on Hesse’s untitled canvas that also retains the gray washes of the Yale *Betrothal* and its ochre, green, and orange hues.

An assortment of forms that can be traced to Gorky’s paintings are scattered across Hesse’s untitled canvas; the compositional space is unbalanced, and there is no effort to visually integrate its parts, motifs, or styles that suggest both color field painting and automatism. The penises, palette-form, ova, spinal column, and sundry other shapes that defy description float disconnectedly and are not unified within a visual theme. Given its awkward pastiche of discordant styles and motifs, Hesse’s untitled 1964–1965 canvas seems more a peculiar parody than an attempt to viably enter into the dialogues referenced. It suggests mimicry, lacking the self-seriousness of the original, upending the weighty imageries of sex and death in canvases by Gorky and de Kooning.

What did it mean for Hesse to mimic modernist abstraction’s depictions of the female—and male—body, referencing visual vocabularies written by male artists and intended (primarily) for a male viewer (e.g., critic, collector)? In Hesse’s hands, these forms hardly obey Gorky’s resolve to paint “universal feelings for no other reason than the very

human desire to communicate his deepest thoughts to his fellow man.”²⁰ The erotic imagery of her untitled canvas of 1964–65 is easily decoded when read through the history of art, Gorky in particular, but its valence shifts in her hands: the referent is no longer so much symbolic as actual and specific. The breasts or nested ovular forms ostensibly borrowed from Gorky also signal the female identity of the artist. In this way, the fraught issue of the female painter and her legitimacy within the modernist tradition is brought to the surface. Indeed, this strategy of self-referential bodily representation in Hesse’s art became explicit in the case of her first sculptural series of “German reliefs” made in 1965.

This untitled canvas dated 1964–65 was one of Hesse’s final attempts at large format Abstract Expressionist style paintings; the fragmented, disembodied erotic forms would become isolated in her “German reliefs.” The first such relief, made in April 1965, was titled *Ringaround Arosie* (See Fig. 2, bottom center) in reference to a pregnant friend, Rosie Goldman. Pinnacles formed over red painted circles are constructed with papier-mâché and concentrically arranged cord. This confined mode of labor, a careful, controlled coiling of cord, was a departure from the apparent (if not actual) spontaneity of Hesse’s collages and paintings, and even the soaring lines of machine drawings made prior to the reliefs, discussed below. The base, a masonite panel layered with gauze and papier-mâché, rubbed with graphite and varnished, suggests the encaustic painted collage surfaces of reliefs by Jasper Johns, and the forms suggest his targets.

Hesse described *Ringaround Arosie* in a letter to LeWitt just as the relief came into being in March 1965:

So here I sit after 2 days of working on a dumb thing which is three dimensional supposed to be continuity with last drawing. All borders on pop at least to the European eye, that is anything not pure or abstract (expressionist) is pop like. The 3d one now actually looks like breast + penis—but that’s o.k. + I should go on with it maybe it or they would make it in another way but I don’t know where I belong + so I give up again. All the time it is like that.²¹

At its inception, *Ringaround Arosie* was recognized by Hesse as an idiosyncratic statement, in defiance of the conjured response of “they,” an imagined audience that would have her do things differently, specifically regarding the explicitness of the relief’s “breast + penis” form. The work’s explicitness seemed transgressive, too personal an expression that could no longer pass as modernist Gorkyesque eroticism now that the forms pushed conspicuously out into a third dimension. The frontal view of *Ringaround Arosie* does not reveal Hesse’s reason for calling it “a breast + penis,” but seen in profile, the pinnacle of the center circle becomes a lewd, phallic projectile, raised several inches from the surface of the board. In Hesse’s estimation, it was a break with Abstract Expressionism, a move in unexpected directions—Pop, breast and penis—a “dumb thing” that Hesse herself might disown.

Two months after her letter to LeWitt, Hesse posed for a

series of photographs with her German reliefs, publicity shots for her solo exhibition in August, 1965 at the Düsseldorf Kunsthalle (Fig. 2). Hesse's attitude had changed: the "dumb thing" is now front and center, and Hesse's pose with the relief explicitly activates its bodily associations. LeWitt had responded to Hesse's trepidations with an impassioned, bawdy exhortation that was in keeping with the lewdness and absurd eroticism of her description of *Ringaround Arosie*:

...Just stop thinking, worrying, looking over your shoulder, wondering, doubting, fearing, hurting, hoping for some easy way out, struggling, gasping, confusing, itching, scratching, mumbling, bumbling, grumbling, humbling, stumbling, rumbling, rambling, gambling, tumbling, scumbling, scrambling, hitching, hatching, bitching, moaning, groaning, honing, boning, horse-shitting, hair-splitting, nit-picking, piss-trickling, nose-sticking, ass-gouging, eyeball-poking, finger-pointing, alleyway-sneaking, long waiting, small stepping, evil-eyeing, back-scratching, searching, perching, besmirching, grinding grinding grinding away at yourself. Stop it and just DO...Do more. More nonsensical more crazy more machines, more breasts, penises, cunts, whatever—make them abound with nonsense.²²

The change of attitude detectable in the disparity between Hesse's skeptical letter and the flamboyant publicity shot for her Düsseldorf exhibition may have been precipitated, at least in part, by LeWitt's advice. As LeWitt recalled recently, "I wrote to her and urged her to try to get on track (she seemed to defer to Tom too much—and her mind was adrift)."²³

LeWitt's missive offered a liberating alternative to laboring under the feminine mystique of being "Tom's wife."²⁴ His directives responded to Hesse's self-doubt and stoppered self-expression, the tension between fulfilling the expectations of Doyle and "pure or abstract" modernism, and simply being herself. The letter reveals LeWitt's investment in Hesse and presages his significant role in fostering her "mature" sculpture when she returned to New York later in 1965. However, in a letter written to "Tom and Eva" just a few months later, LeWitt's tone was very different: "Advice to Eva—start smoking and stop worrying—and don't get fat. Advice to Tom—read up on Civil War because by the time you get back there will be another one and you can help man the barricades."²⁵ For Doyle's eyes at least, LeWitt reinforced the gendered narrative of Hesse's marriage between easygoing Civil War buff and his depressive, neurotic wife, reducing her insecurity, so richly interpreted in the earlier letter addressed to Hesse, to a petty female problem.

In the photographs for the Düsseldorf Kunsthalle, Hesse uses her own body to activate the biomorphic abstraction of her reliefs. *Ringaround Arosie* is held suggestively between her legs in a photograph selected for the cover of the exhibition brochure. This photograph and several others associate the reliefs with Hesse's body, and make manifest their symbolic



Fig. 2. Manfred Tischer, photograph of Eva Hesse (1965). Cover of brochure for Düsseldorf Kunsthalle.

narratives of gender and sexuality. Acknowledgement that the body of the artist was directly relevant to the social and erotic valences of her work is clearly distinct from the assumptions of Abstract Expressionism. While breasts and penises in Gorky's paintings remain glyphic—readable, but never affirmed by the artist as explicit body parts, least of all his own—in these photographs the reliefs exaggeratedly perform the sexuality of the artist. The reliefs are of the body or about the body: Hesse's body and the pregnant body of Rosie Goldman are specific referents, but I believe that, more broadly, these works in which genders are fictionalized and merged relate to Hesse's questioning of socially determined gender roles and the contemporary problem of female identity.

The problem of gender ran deeper than the reception of her art, structuring daily routine. Hesse's frustration with gender in the context of her marriage drew her to the feminist thought of Simone de Beauvoir in whom she "temporarily found a spokesman," as she wrote to her friend Ethelyn Honig, who had shared a studio with Hesse and Doyle before their departure for Germany. Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was, for the moment at least, an adequate expression of what Hesse called "the female struggle, not in generalities but our specific struggles."²⁶ The "specific struggles" recorded in her journals often involved the indignities of housework and the correlate

assumption that her labor was expendable toward trivial chores and her art and intellectual life were therefore less significant undertakings than those of her husband.

Housework in particular was symbolic and sinister. In the mid-1960s, housework was infused with a particular politics of domesticity after Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* isolated housework as the enemy of women's fulfillment. The equation Friedan set forth in 1964 was simple: "The longer it takes to wash dishes, the less time you have for anything else. It's not creative, doing the same thing over and over. Why should a woman feel guilty at getting rid of this repetitive work. There's no virtue in dishwashing, scrubbing the floors."²⁷ To escape housework, Friedan herself subversively "took the bedroom we were going to use for another baby...and turned it into a studio for myself." Painting was her escape from domestic routine. There was the occasional stolen night at the easel "working and working and suddenly it was 2A.M...I looked at the picture, and it was like finding myself."²⁸ Painting and the freedom to paint was, in Friedan's text, paradigmatic of women's liberation and the possibility of personal, creative fulfillment of which a housewife's existence was otherwise bereft.

While Hesse probably did not read *The Feminine Mystique*, the text nonetheless indexes popular discourse on gender inequity in 1965, particularly within the dynamic of marriage. *The Feminine Mystique's* broad appeal meant that friends, or at least Honig, pushed Friedan's polemic in letters to Hesse in Germany. The plaint of housework that recurs in Hesse's journals was surely real, but by 1965, to express outrage over washing dishes was to participate in the symbolic rhetoric of popular feminism as well. When Hesse noted that "Resentment enters, most precisely if I need to be cooking, washing or doing the dishes while he sits King of the Roost reading," she was reading her own marriage through the contemporary discourse of gender politics.²⁹

During her marriage to Doyle, Hesse was responsible for shopping and housework, and wrote letters from "the Doyles" to keep up social and familial contacts. (As Honig exhorted in a letter to Hesse, "Let the men write their own letters! I've been reading *The Feminine Mystique* [can you tell?]."³⁰) To juggle art making with the obligations of her marriage was actually and symbolically problematic. A schedule in her journals describes the typical partitioning of time in a day, and while Hesse was optimistic that she could "make it" on this routine, it demonstrates the pull of domesticity:

A day
8-9 dishes wash
9-10 shop
10-11 letters
11-1 studio
1-2 lunch
2-6 studio
6-8 dinner, etc.
8-12 reading, letters
(16 hrs)
for myself, 10 hours
I should make it on that! no?³¹

If we look to the model of Abstract Expressionism that defined the pursuit of art for the self-identified Abstract Expressionists Doyle and Hesse, the creative process was not a perfunctory affair (as LeWitt would later refer to minimalism). It was not treated "in an assembly-line manner" like Warhol's Pop Art that had seemed "threatening, to say the least" to Hesse and Doyle before they left for Germany.³² The Abstract Expressionist artist did not work in neatly confined windows of time, "2-6 studio."

Take, for example, the working habits of Doyle's mentor David Smith, likely the model of the Abstract Expressionist ethos closest at hand for Doyle. When Doyle discusses Smith these days, he distances himself from Smith's famously nihilistic behavior but still enjoys telling stories about Smith's lifestyle, their drinking liquor together after Smith left his wife, and other encounters with him in the 1950s. In contrast to Hesse's "a day," note how Smith described his working habits to Elaine de Kooning in 1951, to assist with her article "David Smith Makes a Sculpture":

I like my solitude, black coffee, and daydreams. I like the changes of nature; no two days or nights are the same...The work flow of energy demanded by sculpture wherein mental exhaustion is accompanied by physical exhaustion provides the only balance I've ever found, and as far as I know is the only way of life.

Of course I get rides on. When I'm working I get so wound up with work that sleep doesn't come and I work through 3-4-5 in the morning...All my life the work day has been any part of the 24, on oil tankers, driving hacks, going to school, all three shifts in factories. I once worked in a bank, but cannot stand the routine life.³³

Smith's version of time involves forgetfulness of time, spontaneity, a romantic ideal of total absorption in the creative process. It is an existence compatible with the undomesticated realms of factories, oil tankers, and the life of the mind, but one that withers in the confines of domesticated routine represented by the corporate environs of a bank. The demands of art making physically and mentally exhaust a man inured to the night shift. The obligations of caring for another person, fixing dinner, washing dishes, and the like, did not intrude when Smith made a sculpture, an endeavor described through a symbolic rhetoric of transcendence.

Doyle is still sensitive to Hesse's allegations in her journals because he believes that her historians, from Lippard to Anne Middleton Wagner, have been unfair to him. He compares his treatment to the vilification of Ted Hughes, the husband of Sylvia Plath. It is the matter of dishes that he brings up first, unprompted:

...she kept a diary and I didn't, so I hear things that I did that I forgot all about. And one of the things that really gets me is the quote, "Here I am doing the dishes while he sits over there reading, cock of the walk." Well, I built two or three houses for her...it wasn't like nowadays when you

hire a contractor. I was the contractor and I did all the work. I did the plumbing, I did everything...me or one of my friends. Because all the artists then knew how to *work*. We were all working class guys, and that's what we did, we didn't write, we worked.³⁴

In the Doyle/Hesse household, as with art making practice, there was a clear division of labor that Doyle abided by: he pulled his weight, but did not do the dishes. And there was a continuity between his art and the male responsibilities of building houses (or at least renovating interiors) and plumbing—"all the artists then knew how to work"—that was missing in the case of Hesse's obligation to do the dishes. Like Smith, for Doyle art is linked to a masculine realm conjured through analogy to a workingman's ethos of physical labor. It is precisely this masculine realm that was being contested in the early 1960s, evidenced by the wild success of *The Feminine Mystique*: women did not want to do the dishes. Some would prefer to work in factories, learn trades, or perhaps employ industrial materials and methods to make sculpture.

For Doyle and Smith, sculpture was conceptually contiguous with a man's facility in performing manual labor, whether manning a tanker, plumbing, or building a house. This attitude, expressed succinctly in Doyle's rebuttal to Hesse's historians, makes clear the masculine exclusivity of art in the 1960s, sculpture in particular. How could a woman be an artist when artistic authenticity meant that you were one of the "working class guys"? Hesse's journal writing alone meant dwelling in a feminine sphere that Doyle opposes to "work." As she must have known—and this was, I believe, behind her rejection of Abstract Expressionist painting—her art could never be naturalized as a legitimate contribution to Doyle's milieu.

Hesse's reliefs state her withdrawal from the terms of Abstract Expressionism. Their gestures are machine-like, rote, repetitive. The application of craft-oriented methods for her art specifically evoked women's arts like knitting and crocheting—both were Hesse's hobbies—and constituted a visible stance of nonassimilation. This move, in time for her solo exhibition at the Düsseldorf Kunsthalle, must have seemed conspicuous. "When one fails to adhere to an accepted code," Beauvoir warned, "one becomes an insurgent."³⁵ Although the reliefs were still painted, their deliberate, delicate gradations signaled a radical departure from modernist painting, whose terms she had been compelled to return to in prior work. By integrating these new activities related to craft and décor, Hesse staked her distance from Abstract Expressionism.

While Hesse made the German reliefs she was confronting the politics of gender through Beauvoir and, I believe, enacting these politics through her art. After reading *The Second Sex*, in February 1965, she wrote a letter to Honig describing "the female struggle."

I dwell on this all the time. My determination and will is strong but I am lacking so in self esteem that I never seem to overcome. Also competing all the time with a man with self confidence in his work and who is successful also... Are we worthy of this struggle and will we surmount the

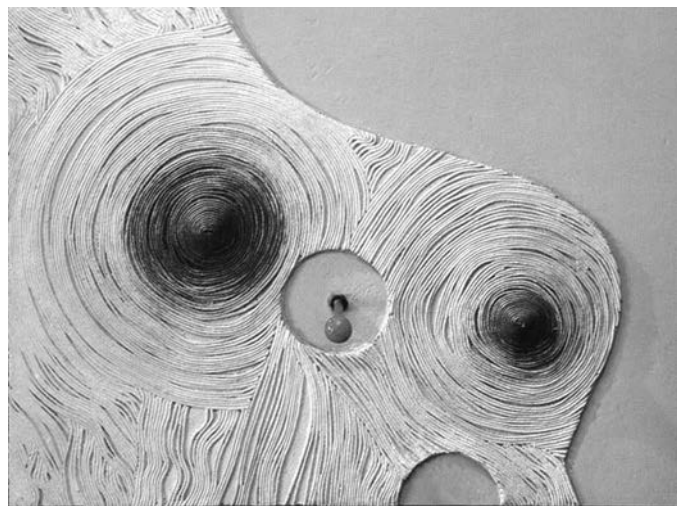


Fig. 3. Eva Hesse, *2 in 1* (1965), ink, tempera, enamel, cord, metal, particle board, wood, 21-1/4" x 27-1/8" x 9". Private Collection, New York. © The Estate of Eva Hesse. Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.

obstacles. We are more than dilettantes so we can't even have the satisfaction of accomplishment. The making of a "pretty dress," successful party—pretty picture does not satisfy us. We want to achieve something meaningful and to feel our involvements make of us valuable thinking persons.³⁶

The tone of this letter, written just weeks before Hesse made *Ringaround Arosie*, is uncharacteristically polemical, engaged with gender politics as a broader field than just the conditions of her marriage. But still, Doyle is a point of reference: his confidence and artistic success are opposed to perceived expectations that she is a mere woman artist—a dilettante whose pretty pictures are tantamount to hosting a successful party or making a pretty dress.

The reliefs seem to perform and embody this stereotype of femininity and feminine art making. Their textile surfaces and delicately graduated pastels suggest clothing and makeup, the external markers of gender. These extravagant surfaces—for instance, hundreds of precisely lain pieces of cord create the image/object of "breasts" for *2 in 1* (1965; Fig. 3)—have the exquisite, jewel-like quality of brocade or embroidery, rendered through the effect of precise, repetitive labor. The labor of painting is replaced by its opposite. This nonspontaneous performance of rote actions concentrates a much different logic, the superficiality of "feminine roles": cleaning house, looking "pretty and young," painting a "pretty picture," and making a "pretty dress." As Beauvoir understood this logic of feminine labor, "women confined to the feminine sphere have grossly magnified its importance: they have made dressing and housekeeping difficult arts."³⁷

Hesse's decision to depart from Abstract Expressionist-style canvases and, with her German reliefs, to embrace techniques and materials that would be perceived as minor or craft-oriented, might be read as a refusal to assimilate. This was a decision that she surely knew would elicit gender-based value

judgments. The painstakingly elaborate surfaces of the reliefs emerged in tandem with Hesse's heightened consciousness of gendered divisions of labor; these surfaces exaggerate the activities of wife and "woman artist," and are even commandeered as costumes in the Düsseldorf publicity photographs. Looking at those photographs in light of Hesse's private "feminism" (I mean to distinguish this from the activist sense of the word), they suggest a strategic kind of posing in which the artist performs a deadpan fulfillment of projections that equate the art object with the female body, and that insist on identifying the work of a female artist with her gender.

Doyle recalls having built the frame and attached the rod of *Hang Up* shortly before their separation in late 1965, a few months after returning from Germany. Lippard, on the other hand, reports that *Hang Up* was made from a stretcher found by Hesse in her studio. These conflicting accounts lend a Janus-like quality to the object. The conceptual distinction between Doyle's involvement and a found object is not neutral, but opens up onto distinct artistic attitudes and art world constructs. One storyline addresses the context of Hesse's marriage; the other is detached, impersonal, independent, and suggests the ironic distance of a readymade. The latter narrative has often been preferred by Hesse's historians for whom *Hang Up* conveniently brackets off her "mature" career, one rooted in modernism and not subject to the particularities of gender. However, with its visible contradiction—painting and not painting, coolly withdrawn and inflected with "extreme feeling"—*Hang Up* opens the door to another history, that of Hesse's contentious relationship to Abstract Expressionism, a history informed by gender and marriage. •

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NOTES

1. Eva Hesse, interview with Cindy Nemser. Transcript in the Eva Hesse Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Reel 1475. Hereafter, AAA, SI.
2. Cindy Nemser, *ArtTalk* (New York: Scribners, 1975), 208. Wherever possible I quote from the original transcript of Hesse's interview with Nemser. In this case, the original transcript is very fragmented and Nemser's transcription is faithful to the ideas Hesse was expressing.
3. Robert Smithson's *Pointless Vanishing Point* (1966) is a correlate example, as a three-dimensional sculpture that mocks painterly illusionism. Many artists among Hesse's late-1960s milieu, including Smithson and Sol LeWitt, negotiated the legacy of the tradition of painting, especially Abstract Expressionism, through their work.
4. Eva Hesse, interview with Cindy Nemser, AAA, SI.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 23.
8. Yaddo Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library.
9. Journal entry from 1961, after Hesse and Doyle met. Eva Hesse Papers, AAA, SI.
10. Dr. Samuel Dunkell was interviewed by the author at Dunkell's New York office, November 18, 2002. Renate Petzinger suggests that painting might allude to the wedding of Victor Moscoso in the fall of 1960, "a good friend at the Cooper Union and Yale," but this normalizing account ignores the canvas's troubling imagery. Petzinger, "Thoughts on Hesse's Early Work," in Elisabeth Sussman, ed. *Eva Hesse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 44.
11. Gorky is referenced as well: both the palette of ochre, taupe, and green-browns, and the compositional arrangement of two figures that, in turns, blend into the background field and are emphatically separated from this plane and each other in silhouette above the shoulder, suggest that in addition to de Kooning's women, Hesse had in mind Gorky's double-portrait, *The Artist and His Mother*. As with Gorky's dead mother, Hesse's bride is specterlike, present but absent.
12. Eva Hesse Papers, AAA, SI.
13. Tom Doyle, conversation with the author at the artist's home in Roxbury, Connecticut, August 4, 2005.
14. Eva Hesse Papers, AAA, SI.
15. Ibid.
16. Hesse quoted in Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, 22.
17. Ibid., 24.
18. Ibid.
19. Hesse wrote this letter to LeWitt in her journal in March 1965, then copied it and sent it to him. Eva Hesse Papers, AAA, SI.
20. Arshile Gorky, letter to sister Vartoosh, 1946. Quoted in Michael Auping, ed. *Arshile Gorky: The Breakthrough Years* (Fort Worth: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 1995), 87.
21. Eva Hesse Papers, AAA, SI.
22. LeWitt's letter to Hesse is dated April 14, 1965. Excerpt printed in Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, 35.
23. Sol LeWitt, letter to the author, dated December 28, 2004.
24. Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, 23.
25. Sol LeWitt, letter to Hesse and Doyle, dated July 20, 1965. Eva Hesse Papers, AAA, SI.
26. Eva Hesse, letter to Ethelyn Honig. Lucy Lippard Papers, AAA, SI.
27. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963), 340.
28. Ibid.
29. Eva Hesse Papers, AAA, dated November 21, 1965.
30. Eva Hesse, letter to Ethelyn Honig. Lucy Lippard Papers, AAA, SI.
31. This journal page from the spring of 1965 is reproduced in Wagner, *Three Women (Three Artists)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 234.
32. Ethelyn Honig, letter to Lucy Lippard, dated 1964. Lucy Lippard Papers, AAA, SI.
33. Garnett McCoy, ed. *David Smith* (New York: Praeger, 1973) 76. Elaine De Kooning published these notes in *Art News* in 1969, four years after Smith's death, suggesting that his persona and lore remained compelling.
34. Tom Doyle, conversation with the author at the artist's home in Roxbury, Connecticut, August 4, 2005.
35. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 683.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.

MY MEMORIES OF EVA HESSE*

By Cindy Nemser

After my article "Forum: Women Artists" was complete, I cast about for a new subject to interview for *Artforum*. I asked the dealer Abe Sachs if he could recommend an up-and-coming artist. He mentioned the name of Eva Hesse who did soft sculpture. I was intrigued. I had met the artist briefly in 1968 at her one woman show at the Fischbach Gallery, which though not a venue at the top of the art world matrix, was still considered a good place to find budding art stars. Eva Hesse was a pixyish, vivacious young woman in her early thirties. She had a yielding soft face, a melting smile, and bright dark eyes that could be mischievous one moment and heart wrenchingly sad the next. Her work was made up of both pieces hanging from the walls and of freestanding cylinder shapes made of fiberglass, latex rubber, cord, and other materials. The sculptures were completely abstract, but they had an emotional quality, an aspect of reaching out for attention and love that drew me in.

I didn't decide to write about her immediately, but I did meet her several times after her exhibit—once at a warehouse where her work appeared in a group exhibition, "Nine at Leo Castelli," a show sponsored by the Castelli Gallery and curated by the ubiquitous Robert Morris. We spoke a while and probably not realizing it, she showed me her steely ambitious side when she gave me her shrewd assessment of the art scene. "There are only a handful of galleries worth visiting or to be shown at." I hadn't thought about it before. When I began reviewing I had been impressed with so many galleries, but now more cognizant of the pecking order, I quickly counted the top ones in my mind. I immediately realized she was right, and I also guessed she meant to show in one of those galleries.

The next time I saw Eva was at a museum opening at the Whitney Museum. She had a bandage covering the whole top part of her head, as if she had just come out of surgery, and looked bloated and ghostly pale. I spoke to her, and she told me that she had had a brain tumor that was malignant, but it had been operated on and she would be all right. She smiled wanly as she said it, but there was a look of determination in her luminous dark eyes. I decided I would come and see her work at her studio.

When I got to the small, spare loft at 134 Bowery where she lived and worked, she welcomed me eagerly with her best honey smiles. She began to show me her current works, and I was touched by their beauty and uniqueness. Her forms were abstract; however they were not cold and pristine. Rather they

were tender and yearning like a woman longing for her lover. Some hung from the wall with cords plunging out of them, others used the wall as a support. The works were also sensuous and the rounded shapes that jutted off the wall suggested small moons or breasts, while the boxes with tubes growing out of the bottom and the sides evoked images of vegetation or hairy vaginas. However, all the sculptures only hinted of a sexuality seeking to be expressed; none of them were literal depictions. There was nothing graphic.

I greatly admired the gouache and ink drawings that were hung on her walls. Many of them were either of round shapes or rectangles. They were all in black drawn with a light delicate touch and the subtle shading of the forms was exquisite. I wanted to buy one of the small drawings that were composed of two dainty meticulously delineated circles. She told me it would cost one hundred dollars, but she was loath to sell it. "Let me think about it," she said, grinning in an almost coquettish way as if she were flirting with me. I let it go, much to my regret, since it spoke to something in my psyche.

It wasn't until January 1970 that I decided that Eva Hesse would be the next interviewee that I would suggest to *Artforum*. Phil Leider, the acerbic editor, gave me the go ahead. I called Eva at her the loft, but there was no answer. Someone suggested that I call Richard Serra who might know where she was. His response to my question after I told him I would be interviewing her for *Artforum* was, "She's got another brain tumor—she's dying. You're like a vulture." I was stunned by his response, but I was also insulted, since I had had no idea of how bad her physical condition was, and only thought that getting attention from a top art magazine would please her. But I persisted, so Serra told me she was staying at the loft of the painter Al Held and his wife the sculptor Sylvia Stone.

I set up a date to meet Eva at her friends' loft. When I told her I wanted to tape her on cassettes, she sounded hesitant since she had never before been recorded, but she agreed to do it.

It was on a bright wintry day with an intense blue sky and a few downy white clouds sailing on high that I met with Eva. The air was biting but fresh. It was a good day to be alive. The building where she was staying had two different entrances and we kept missing each other, but we laughed about it as we finally entered the large beautiful loft. The white walled rooms were spacious, the living floors were a burnished light brown wood; the tile floored kitchen was state of the art, and the furniture was modern but comfortable. The walls displayed Al

* Excerpted from Cindy Nemser's forthcoming book *Firebrand: the Autobiography of a Feminist Art Critic*.

Held's geometric paintings and simple pedestals showed off Sylvia Stone's abstract sculptures.

Eva settled me onto a roomy couch with a coffee table in front of me where I could place the tape recorder. She was wearing a loose black shirt, informal black leggings, and with her bare feet tucked under her, she cuddled up in a large cushioned armchair. I looked at her closely and I ached for her. Her shining aura of dark hair was almost gone and her exposed scalp, with its covering of fuzz, gave her the look of a newly born baby bird. The large doses of cortisone she was being given had caused her to swell and her lovely gamin face resembled that of an overly large moon faced young child. But, her large deep brown eyes were as arresting as ever and, as we began to talk they sparkled when she laughed. She told me she had just come home from the hospital after having had more chemotherapy. I asked her if she was up to doing the interview. She said, "I'm very nervous about speaking into a tape. Maybe you could hide it so I won't see it."

Then she asked, "Could I talk about myself and my background before we start talking about the work?"

I put the recorder out of sight and she began to outline her incredible history as a German Jewish refugee from a troubled background who escaped from the Nazis in December 1939—just in time. She and her sister Helen had been put on a Jewish children's train and sent to Holland where they were put in a Catholic children's home. They must have been put in different rooms as Eva told me she and her sister were separated. They were reunited in June with her beloved father and terrifying suicidal mother in the United States. Eventually parents divorced and her father remarried a woman also called Eva who she despised, but who also had a brain tumor. She tells me "nothing in my life had ever been normal and the only time I ever felt secure was when I was doing my art." It is a moving story.

Next she spoke of her adolescence and her adoration of her father. Continuing her history, she told she had gone to Cooper Union Art School and then to Yale Art School where she had not been happy with the teachers or their teaching methods. Afterward that she arrived in New York and became friends with Minimalists Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd, Al Held and Sylvia Stone. Later on she also developed relationships with Richard Serra, Keith Sonnier, and Jackie Winsor, the Post Minimalists who were flouting Minimalist dogma. She longed to be accepted and taken seriously by leaders of this group who were fast getting art world attention.

Eva had been married to Tom Doyle, a sculptor, who had gotten recognition while she went unnoticed. In those days being married to a male artist meant being looked upon as a helpmate there to help propel the husband's career upward. Even Lucy Lippard, who, though married to the painter Robert Ryman, was an independent and respected art critic, ignored Hesse until the late 1960s, and focused on Doyle. Women's art, for the most part, was looked upon as trivial. The marriage was not a happy one as the sculptor was a notorious womanizer and Eva was prone to depression and self-depreciation. They divorced in 1966.

After Eva finished giving me her personal history, she became much more relaxed. We took a break and began to chat

about other aspects of her life. She told me that all the patients at Sloan Kettering were so optimistic. They all believed they were going to get well. Giggling, her eyes twinkling, she shyly told me she had a crush on a gorgeous black orderly. I marveled that even with the apparition of death bearing down on her, she still could extract joy from her existence. She asked me about my background. I gave her a brief sketch, and then I told her about how I had become a feminist and how I thought every woman should be one. Eva was skeptical even when I informed her how much women faced sexual discrimination in the art world. When I asked her if she had experienced sexism, she was ambivalent.

"Maybe but I don't know. Maybe I just wasn't good enough. Maybe I'm not as smart as the men—not intellectual enough. But maybe emotion is just as good as intellect. There ought to be a place for it. Richard Serra came to me. I think he took some of my ideas. But I'm so insecure; yet I know I can make great art. All my life I've been either the cockroach or the queen."

I asked Eva if she thought there were sexual elements in her art, allusions to female or male genitalia. With a wave of her small, delicate but determined hand, she denied it, and the statement that she gave me for my Forum: Women Artists article also disappointed me. She wrote "Excellence has no sex" and "The way to beat discrimination is by art." Eva was sitting on the fence, afraid of antagonizing the male powers-that-be just when they were about to bestow their gifts on her.

We decided to continue the interview on another day because she was getting tired. So I came back to see her two other times. She was more confident about speaking on tape for the rest of the interview and was extremely articulate and knowledgeable about her work. She agreed that there was an obsessive quality to her sculpture, in her need to repeat some forms over and over to exaggerate. She found her creations to be absurd saying they reflected the absurdity of her life. She had made insightful comments about other artists from Goddard to Andy Warhol.

It was a wonderful interview. I knew I had recorded material that was really valuable. I also felt that Eva and I had become friends. She was easy to like since she was charming and open and had a wry sense of humor. We talked about the difficulties women artists had being included in serious male artists' conversations at artists' hangouts. "If you go to an artists' bar, you're supposed to sit quietly in awe of the male speaker like a good little groupie," I said. Eva nodded her head. Then we decided that we would go together to St. Adrian's, the current artist's hot spot, and enjoy each other's conversation, ignoring the men.

St. Adrian's was on lower Broadway. It was a dark nondescript working class style bar with photo realist John Clem Clarke's murals on the wall behind the bar. When we walked in a few heads turned, but no one spoke to us. Neither of us knew anyone. I think Eva was a little let down, as she told me she loved to flirt, but we still had fun being together. I felt we were friends, not just business acquaintances.

After the interview, I didn't see Eva again until I had the tape transcribed, and I called her to let her know that it was done. She asked me to come over with it, as she wanted to read

it. I brought a copy I had Xeroxed to her at her own studio. The place was in disarray, and I found her in bed under the covers looking small and vulnerable as an ailing little animal. "I'm not feeling well at all. I can hardly get out of bed. My sister is taking care of me," she told me in a low voice. I studied her pasty, puffed-out face and lusterless eyes and I knew she was very sick. "I brought the transcript for you to read. It's marvelous." I spoke in as cheery tone as I could muster. She took it from me, and looked at it in a lackadaisical fashion as if it were a pile of junk mail. Before she had finished the first page, she put it down, and said,

"I can't read it now. Please let me keep it and I look at it as soon as I can."

I wanted to do anything that would give Eva some pleasure. She was so helpless, so beaten down by her illness that I did not have the heart to deny her any request.

When the interview came out in early May, 1970,¹ Eva was back at Sloan Kettering after having a third operation. I went to see her there and found her in bed under a chalk white sheet looking pallid and fragile with a white bandage again encasing her head. It struck me that her last great sculpture "Untitled," consisted of freestanding forms that looked like they had been bandaged. When she saw me she managed to give me a smile and her eyes brightened a little. Phil Leider had given her the cover of *Artforum*, and the magazine was on the table next to her bed. She sat up a bit and boasted in barely discernible voice, "I've got the cover. I'm so happy." Then she pointed to a beautiful bouquet of spring flowers next to the magazine, and said, "Do you see these? They're from a big collector. I finally made it, didn't I?" I took her small hand, and I was glad for her. I knew then and there that Richard Serra had been wrong. I wasn't an exploiter. Not even setting out to do so, I had helped to bring a

dying woman some of the acclaim that she so desperately wanted and deserved. The world had affirmed her importance as an artist; a goal had been reached. She had been validated.

Plucking at her covers absentmindedly, Eva chatted with me for a while about her gorgeous black, orderly, who had welcomed her back, and how she would be doing new pieces when she got back to her loft. She was amazing, and I even half believed she would be home creating again.

Two weeks later, I called the hospital and was told she had lapsed into a coma. I decided to go see her anyway. As soon as I saw Eva, I knew this was the end. She was lying stone still on the narrow bed, in that sterile, detergent smelling room, totally unaware that I had come in, and there was a deep silence all around her. Small and expressionless under the blanched white bedding she was only a shell of her true vivacious self. I took her hand in mine and squeezed it and said my good-byes. As I walked out into a warm sunny spring day, and felt a lovely gentle breeze brush my cheeks, I experienced a terrible sadness. Eva Hesse was only 33.

I went to her funeral and met several women artists I knew, among them Nancy Grossman, who told me that though she didn't know Eva personally, she felt as if she was at one with her. Nancy said, "She speaks for all of us." •

Cindy Nemser, an art historian, critic, and feminist art pioneer, was editor and publisher of *The Feminist Art Journal* (1972-77) and the author of *Art Talk: Conversations with 12 Women Artists* (1975). She is currently writing a memoir.

NOTE

1. Cindy Nemser, "An Interview with Eva Hesse," *Artforum* (May 1970): 59-63.

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CAROLINE SHAWK BROOKS

The “Centennial Butter Sculptress”

By Pamela H. Simpson

One of the sensations at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia was a bas-relief portrait of *Dreaming Iolanthe* (Fig. 1). The head-and-shoulders rendering of the heroine of a popular nineteenth-century lyric drama was unique, not because of its style or subject but because of its medium—butter. The sculptor, Caroline Shawk Brooks (1840-1913), a farmwoman from Helena, Arkansas, was the first artist to exhibit butter sculpture at an international exposition.¹

While this fact has been widely recorded, historians have treated *Dreaming Iolanthe* as a campy form of folk art and usually dismissed it as an example of Victorian sentimentality coupled with strangely innovative, ephemeral material. Akin to buildings made of apples and maps made out of grains (both of which were also at the Centennial Exposition), the butter bas-relief has often been seen as a novel form of agricultural display, but not exactly “Art.”²

Caroline Brooks, however, had larger intentions for her butter sculpture. She may have begun as a farmer’s wife trying to sell her dairy products, but by the time of the Centennial, she was already aiming for something more. Her ambition would lead her to study in Europe, to exhibit widely, and to pursue other media, in particular, marble. But she never abandoned butter as an art form, and remained the “butter woman” to the end of her days. While the Centennial *Iolanthe* is often reproduced and commented upon, the story of what happened to Caroline Brooks afterwards is a tale that has only recently been reconstructed. What emerges is a surprising history of a feminist pioneer.

The meager information available on Brooks comes largely from period newspapers and a collection of miscellaneous materials at the Chicago Historical Society.³ The files there include an 1893 article on Brooks written by her contemporary, a journalist named Clio Harper. Based on personal interviews, it is the most reliable and complete account available of Brooks’s early career.⁴ This article, the newspaper stories, and a few other references such as a genealogical study from Helena, give us enough to establish the broad outlines of her life and career and provide a context in which to speculate about her achievements and motivations.

Caroline Shawk Brooks was born in Cincinnati in 1840. Her father, Abel Shawk, a “distinguished machinist,” invented the first successful steam-powered fire engine.⁵ Caroline was educated at the St. Louis Normal School, graduated in 1862, and soon thereafter married Samuel H. Brooks.⁶ He was not quite as



Fig. 1. Caroline Shawk Brooks, *Dreaming Iolanthe* (1873), butter. Photo: Author's collection.

well educated, having left home and school at the age of fourteen. The couple’s first home was in Memphis, where he worked for the railroad, but in 1863 he enlisted in the Union’s 2nd Tennessee Regiment to fight in the Civil War. He was released from duty a year later and the Brookses briefly moved to Mississippi. By 1866 they had settled on a farm in Phillips County, Arkansas, near Helena.⁷ There they had their only child, a daughter Mildred.

In an 1876 article in *The New Century for Women*, the official newspaper for the Centennial Exposition’s Women’s Pavilion, Caroline Brooks said that like most farm wives, she did the sort of work “that you never get through with from year’s end to year’s end.” As was common for nineteenth-century farm life, she was in charge of the butter making. She said she did her first butter sculpture in 1867, “the year the cotton crop failed.”⁸ Eager to supplement the family income, she modeled a roll of butter into a shell; then she tried some animals, and finally some faces. Her friends and customers greatly

admired—and readily bought—them. Farmwomen and dairymaids often molded butter into decorative shapes—the many butter molds that survive from the period are evidence of that—but Brooks did not mold her images, she sculpted them. She later said that after about eighteen months of making butter sculpture, she put it aside for several years.⁹ In 1873 she began to experiment again and modeled an ideal portrait in butter as a contribution for a church fair. Her proud husband carried the bas-relief seven miles on horseback to get it safely to the fair, where it brought enough to fix the church roof.¹⁰ One individual who saw it there, Col. H. A. Littleton of Memphis, asked her to do one for him. They agreed on Mary, Queen of Scots as a subject, and in August the Memphis newspapers gave accounts of the extraordinary phenomenon of the butter portrait on display at Littleton's offices. One reported: "Great numbers of people visited to see the wonderful work of the sculptor's art wrought in frozen butter."¹¹ Another suggested that "the talented lady should drop the butter paddle and take up the mallet and chisel."¹²

Brooks's interest in butter art was further stimulated later that year when a friend loaned her a copy of the Henrik Hertz lyric drama, *King Rene's Daughter*.¹³ She said that she had a choice that day: read the book or make the butter. She chose the book and was moved by the story of the blind princess, Iolanthe, whose royal parents hide her handicap from her, but who discovers the truth accidentally on her sixteenth birthday when she meets the man with whom she would fall in love. Brooks chose to depict that last moment of innocence before Iolanthe awakes to a new life. Pleased with the results, she took the *Dreaming Iolanthe* to Cincinnati with her when she went to visit family and friends. They were so impressed that they arranged for it to be exhibited in late February and early March 1874 at Wiswell's Art Hall. News accounts reported that over a two-week period some two thousand people paid 25 cents each to view it.¹⁴ It earned considerable attention and praise. Even the *New York Times* printed an article on it proclaiming that the "translucence [of the butter] gives to the complexion a richness beyond alabaster and a softness and smoothness that are very striking." The reporter added, "It is safe to assert that no other American sculptress has made a face of such angelic gentleness as that of Iolanthe."¹⁵ Brooks returned to Cincinnati in October with two more butter pieces, an ideal head she named "Geranium," and another literary subject, "Little Nell," to exhibit at the Homeopathic Fair.¹⁶

The most obvious questions for the modern reader are how she preserved such a fragile material as butter in her travels between Arkansas and Ohio, and how she kept the pieces for such long periods of time. The answer is ice. Brooks modeled the bas-relief images in flat metal milk pans where the circular edge formed a frame. She then set the pan in a larger pan that was kept filled with ice. This allowed her to preserve the pieces for months, as long as she kept adding ice. She later reported that after keeping the original *Dreaming Iolanthe* for about six months in cold storage, she decided to find a better way of preserving it and attempted to make a plaster cast of it.¹⁷ She had no idea how to do that, but working at her kitchen table, she mixed the plaster and poured it over the butter and

found that it "set at once." Turning the milk pan over, she cut out a hole in the bottom and set it over a pot of boiling water. The butter "boiled all over the mould," ran out the hole, and when she cut out the rest of the pan bottom, she found the plaster negative "already greased." She poured more plaster over that to make the positive. Because she had not "known enough" to color the cast, she confessed she had to work hard at cutting it away without damaging it, but in the end she was successful. In fact, she was so impressed with the results that she patented the process, claiming that butter was a much more sensitive material than clay for modeling and casting.¹⁸

Brooks easily could have used the plaster cast to make more butter replicas from the mold, but apparently she did not. Instead, she modeled the *Dreaming Iolanthe* anew whenever she exhibited it in butter. There were at least three versions of it, all slightly different judging from the photographs that survive in the Chicago Historical Society collection. The 1876 Centennial model is the best known and most often reproduced. No less a personage than Lucy Webb Hayes, an old friend from Cincinnati and the wife of the Governor of Ohio and the soon-to-be-elected President of the United States, arranged for Brooks's piece to go into the Women's Pavilion.¹⁹ Brooks arranged for the finished bust, draped in gauze and flowers, to be photographed as a *carte de visite* and she sold copies along with a descriptive pamphlet to help defray her expenses. Her hometown newspaper reported on July 22, 1876, that Samuel Brooks had received a postcard from his wife in which she said that her butter model "is the sensation of the great exhibit." The paper also complained that she "does not, as she should, directly represent Phillips County at the Centennial. Cincinnati stepped in and shared the honor in her accomplishments," indicating that her exhibit was officially from Ohio.²⁰ Helena had little to complain about, however, since nearly every newspaper account mentioned the sculptor's Arkansas home.

The *Dreaming Iolanthe* drew so much attention at the Centennial that the officials invited her to demonstrate her butter sculpting technique in the main exhibit building. Moving from the women's space to the main space was a compliment indeed, but inherent in the invitation was a challenge to see if she really could do it from scratch. Women artists often were accused of not doing their own work, and that suspicion may have motivated the invitation.²¹ Brooks rose to the occasion with a demonstration that began with kneading the raw butter in a bowl and proceeded with the creation of another version of the butter relief. Reporters particularly noted that she used the traditional tools of the butter maker and not those of a sculptor.²²

Most of the articles written about Brooks during the time of the Centennial Exposition emphasized her humble background and her amateur standing. They praised her as a "native talent," a lady with "no regular instruction in art."²³ But how much of an amateur was she? The newspapers of the time portrayed her as a naïve farm wife. A writer for a Boston paper, for example, reported, "I was introduced to the artist, a bright little American woman." He asked her, "Did you have no model?" and she answered, "Oh no, I was reading from

Iolanthe and I worked only from the conception in my mind. I have never seen but a few works of art and have never seen any foreign art. I am glad too because folks might say that I copied it from something I have seen, so you see it is thoroughly American."²⁴ Yet, in the 1893 article by Clio Harper, Brooks said that she remembers drawing and painting from her earliest days and that she made her first attempt at sculpture when as a child she tried to model a head of Dante from the blue clay of a nearby creek. She used the cover illustration from one of her father's books as a guide. According to Harper, she studied painting with a local artist when she was eighteen. It would also have been common practice for the curriculum of her Normal School to include some classes in drawing. The Iolanthe bas-relief was described by reporters as "pure Grecian" and it certainly has a classical appearance with its broad forehead and straight nose, making one wonder at her claim never to have seen any foreign art.²⁵ She may have meant that she had never been abroad to see it firsthand, but she surely would have known it from reproductions, and she probably had seen painting and sculpture in Cincinnati. The city was a western center for culture and proudly boasted of its art institutions and native artists such as Hiram Powers and Lilly Martin Spencer.²⁶ Brooks seems to have grown up in sophisticated circumstances with friends like Lucy Webb and a father who had books on Dante—hardly the background of a naïf. Yet Brooks herself was adamant even late in life that she had no official training in art, and she herself referred to the *Dreaming Iolanthe* as being the work of a "country milkmaid."²⁷ If it was a constructed identity that belied her background, it was clearly one she helped create.

Writing for a Boston paper, *The New Age*, in 1876, Carolyn Wells Dall praised the charm of *Dreaming Iolanthe* and wondered that a farmwoman untrained in sculpture could create such a piece. But why, she asked, if Mrs. Brooks were capable of such art, did she choose to "continue to work in butter?" Dall's implication was that Brooks was denying her own talent by insisting on amateur status and an unconventional, perishable medium.²⁸

Caroline Brooks may have been asking herself the same question. After the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial triumph, she did not go home to Arkansas. She embarked on a lecture demonstration tour that took her to New York, Boston, Washington, D. C., Chicago, and other cities. In Des Moines, in November 1877, she gave a demonstration before some two thousand spectators. On an auditorium stage, she balanced her milk pan on a draped easel so it was propped up for the audience's view as she proceeded to model a "heroic bas relief" portrait in butter. A brass band sharing the stage played a musical accompaniment to her work. As they played *The Marseilles*, the profile became Napoleon's, and when they followed up with the *Anvil Chorus*, she transformed the features to those of George Washington. Brooks, however, was



Fig. 2. Caroline Shawk Brooks, *Dreaming Iolanthe* (1873), butter.
Photo: Library of Congress.

not used to having the vibrations of a full band shaking her easel, and at one point the crowd gasped as the butter gave way and a shoulder started to fall; they then burst into applause as Brooks deftly caught the falling piece, quickly put it back into the frame, and finished the image.²⁹

In Boston Brooks gave daily butter demonstrations at the Armory Hall for several weeks, charging 25 cents admission.³⁰ A note in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* said that she was doing the butter modeling demonstrations in order to raise funds for a European journey.³¹ Her success enabled her to make plans to exhibit her butter work and plaster casts at the 1878 Paris Exposition. But first, in preparation, she opened a studio in Washington, D. C., where she modeled a full-length butter version of *Dreaming Iolanthe* (Fig. 2), and put it on public display in March of that year.³² Although no records reveal the state of Mrs. Brooks's relationship with her husband at this point, it seems that they had separated. He remained in Arkansas, where in 1882, he was elected to the state legislature.³³

In late July 1878, Caroline Brooks sailed from New York to France. Her departure had been delayed until she found a ship with enough ice to keep the full-length butter statue well preserved. (When she landed in Le Havre, she then had to find a railroad car bound for Paris with enough ice.) She was amused the customs officials listed it as "110 lbs. of butter" and not as artwork.³⁴ For all her trouble, she arrived at the International Exposition only to be told she was too late. Though she had paid for the exhibition space and it was empty and available, the head of the exhibition committee would not accept any late entries. So, she was forced to find space outside the exposition grounds. Brooks stayed in Paris for nearly a year, returning to the United States in March of 1879, but this time she traveled in steerage, since she had nearly run out of funds. The newspapers reporting her arrival referred to the struggles this poor woman had made "from Arkansas farm to studio."³⁵



Fig. 3. Caroline Shawk Brooks, *La Rosa* (1883-91), marble. Photo: University of California, Riverside/California Museum for Photography.

Brooks settled in Washington, D. C., and farmwoman or not, she appeared regularly in newspaper society pages during the 1880s. Not only was she well connected in Republican circles, she also had a charming and engaging personality—something reporters frequently commented upon. She made relief portraits of such prominent figures as the noted journalist and political leader Thurlow Weed, the novelist George Eliot, the reformer Thomas Carlyle, and Presidents Ulysses S. Grant, James Garfield, and William McKinley. She claimed personal acquaintance with all three of the presidents as well as with their wives. A few of these pieces were commissions, but most she did on her own. Along with popular politicians, she also made several studies of fictional characters from Dickens.³⁶ She always modeled her sculpture in butter, preferring it to clay, but while she sometimes exhibited the butter models, she cast them into plaster to preserve them and then had them put into marble or cast in bronze when she could afford it.

Brooks also spent time in New York and there made the acquaintance of other wealthy society people including the W. Jennings Demorest family and Alicia Vanderbilt LaBau, daughter of the Commodore. Both the Demorests and LaBau commissioned work from her.

La Rosa (Fig. 3), the family group portrait she began for LaBau in 1883, was the most ambitious and complicated piece she had ever undertaken. It featured Alicia sitting on a rose-covered balcony, surrounded by her four children, and with a Bible on a table beside her. The idea of the mother as teacher and nurturer, the one who is responsible for her children's moral character, seems central to the piece. To one viewer, the theme seemed clear: "The hand that rocks the cradle, is the hand that

rules the world."³⁷ The title, *La Rosa*, came not only from the roses on the balcony, but also was meant to suggest that Alicia was the center of the family and her children around her were the buds or petals. Alicia herself didn't much like the title and preferred simply "Family Group," but the name stuck.³⁸

It took Brooks almost eight years to complete *La Rosa*, three on the modeling (in butter) and five on the marble cutting. In the 1893 Harper interview Brooks cited this piece as an example of why butter was so good for casting, pointing out that she was able to complete the process in one day. Once the plaster was set, the butter was dug out and then boiling water finished the removal. If she had modeled it in clay, something as complicated as this might have needed several hundred section molds to make a cast.

As was the custom for nineteenth-century sculpture, Brooks created the model but professional artisans did the marble cutting. Using a pointing machine, they worked from the plaster cast to make a replica. The best marble was in Italy, and that is where she went in 1886 to supervise the cutting. She spent six productive years in Florence accumulating a body of work with subjects ranging from the *Resurrection* to *Lady Godiva*. Her daughter was now married to Walter C. Green, and they accompanied Brooks to Italy, where Green was one of the few Americans to learn Italian carving methods. A trained stonecutter, he did the marble cutting for most of Brooks's sculpture.³⁹ The family, including Brooks's five-year-old grandson, returned to the United States in 1893 and were reported to be living in Flushing, Long Island.⁴⁰

Brooks returned mainly because she had been invited to exhibit at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. That meant her work could have official transport to the fair. She exhibited her best marbles in Chicago, proud to have a showcase for the work she had done in Italy. *La Rosa* was there along with a marble version of her *Iolanthe*. There were also two marble versions of *Lady Godiva*: one, a free standing figure of her setting out, and the other a bas relief of her returning; an ideal portrait of Queen Victoria as a child, called *Victoria Regia*; and a design for a fountain, called *Love's Dream*, featuring Cupid and a maiden rising from a lily-laden shell, supported by a dolphin base. She also exhibited a bust called *Norma* and portraits of George Eliot and Lucretia Mott. Her marbles were housed in the Arkansas and Missouri buildings as well as in the Fine Arts Building. In the Florida building, Brooks set up a demonstration area in July and proceeded to model an *alto relievo* portrait of *The Reverie of Queen Isabella* in butter. It took her five days. Then she proceeded to do a *Columbus* (Fig. 4) and other figures, including *Americus Vesputius*. These figures were intended to be part of a proposed Columbus monument that would commemorate the fair. The monument never materialized, but the butter demonstrations drew much attention. As a placard proclaimed, here was the famous "Centennial Butter Sculptress," back again and this time with the success and fame of a professional sculptor—at least according to the journalists who interviewed her.⁴¹

Brooks's work also attracted controversy. Professionally trained sculptors dismissed it and even mocked her as the "butter woman." Indeed, to modern eyes it does seem amateurish

compared to the better-known sculptors such as Harriet Hosmer who were working at the fair. Like Hosmer, Brooks worked in a neoclassical style with smooth surfaces that translated well into marble rather than the more dynamic modeling style meant for bronze that Augustus Saint Gaudens had introduced from Paris. Brooks knew her work was not what she called “conventional” and took pride in never having had professional training: “If you put an artist under a master, he loses,” she said. “When I do portrait work, I work until I suit those for whom I am working. When I work for myself I work until I suit myself.”⁴² She suited many. The list of people who bought her work and supported her efforts included some of the nation’s elite: the Demorests, Mrs. LaBau, Helen Gould (daughter of the financier Jay Gould), and Governor and Mrs. William McKinley. All of them visited her at the fair. The portrait of Lucretia Mott seemed to “suit” the many friends of the suffragist who saw it.⁴³ She also seemed to “suit” a popular audience. So many people came to see her butter modeling demonstration, she had to hire a guard to keep order, and in August she moved to a larger studio in an annex to the Arkansas building.

Despite her success and the reception of her work, Caroline Brooks struggled to make a living at her art. The fact that she often resorted to charging admission to see her work is one indication of this. Today we might think of this as performance art, and certainly her audiences enjoyed her demonstrations as a novelty; but it was far from the dignified exhibits in professional shows, galleries, and museums that her better-known colleagues enjoyed. The year after the Columbian Exposition, in 1894, Brooks was at the Mid Winter Exposition in San Francisco. She rented a concession booth on the Midway and charged ten cents for people to see her model in butter and to view her marble pieces. *La Rosa* was there, along with the two Godivas and her *Iolanthe*. When the exposition ended, she shipped the *Iolanthe* and *La Rosa* back to Chicago, but she could not afford to send the others, so they remained in a friend’s studio, where they were destroyed in the 1906 earthquake.⁴⁴ *La Rosa* disappeared in transit and sat in a Chicago warehouse for eighteen years until it was finally rediscovered in 1911, when Brooks arranged for its exhibit and prepared a pamphlet telling its story (Fig. 5).⁴⁵

Brooks suffered other terrible mishaps in the shipping of her pieces. One bust that she had hoped to exhibit at the 1893 Chicago Fair was a tribute to Ulysses S. Grant. A memorial portrait mounted on a pedestal with Grant’s dates (1822-1885) and the slogan “Let Us Have Peace” carved into its dark grey marble, it had been requested for the Ohio building by Governor McKinley. The bust went astray in transit, turning up in 1896, three years too late for the Fair. Brooks was delighted to find it



Fig. 4. Caroline Shawk Brooks demonstrating her butter modeling technique with a bust of Columbus, Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893. Photo: Chicago Historical Society.



Fig. 5. Caroline Shawk Brooks, *La Rosa* on exhibit at the Congressional Hotel in Chicago in 1911. Brooks stands next to the piece. Photo: Chicago Historical Society.

again and arranged to have it placed on the stage at the Republican Convention in St. Louis that year. She had recently moved to St. Louis, so it was a double pleasure to have the recognition.⁴⁶ That year she also did a bust of Li Hung-chang, the Chinese diplomat who had been a friend of Grant’s.⁴⁷

After moving to St. Louis, Brooks continued to exhibit her butter work. In 1898, it was the highlight of the dairy building at the Trans-Mississippi Exposition in Omaha. The organizers reported that Brooks had “one of the most interesting exhibits” with butter portraits of Abraham Lincoln, President McKinley and Admiral Dewey that “attracted universal attention” and the “admiration of the thousands who beheld” it.⁴⁸

She remained active during the early years of the twentieth century. Newspapers reported in 1902 that she competed (unsuccessfully) for the McClellan and Grant statue commissions, and the Corcoran Gallery exhibited all the entries, including her models. But aside from such notices, we know little of her final years. The 1910 census listed her as living in St. Louis, gave her occupation as “sculptor,” and reported a studio in her home. She died in 1913.

In 1945, Mrs. Irene Dixon, possibly her great granddaughter, left a collection of photographic prints and memorabilia about Brooks’s career along with seven works of art (one bronze, one drawing and five plaster casts) to the Chicago Historical Society.⁴⁹

What is the significance of all of this? Brooks claimed she was just like any other sculptor, the only difference being that she worked in butter, and she did that because she found it better than clay. Clay would crack, it needed to be kept wet and wrapped, and it was less sensitive to the sculptor’s touch and harder to cast. Butter had to be kept cold, but she successfully did that with ice. Her early career benefited from the novelty of butter, but later she thought of it simply as a means to an end and cast her pieces in plaster as soon as they were completed.

All the same, butter was important. It had opened the possibilities of art for her. In the 1870s she had been a farmer’s

wife, limited in her opportunities and shut out from the world of art. Butter sculpture helped her realize her potential. Working within the strictures that her society presented her, she exploited the novelty of butter to gain attention. She was successful, at least in part, because butter was a material associated with women. Women were the ones in charge of butter making during this period, and butter itself seemed to have “female” characteristics of domesticity and delicacy. Reviewers of the Centennial *Dreaming Iolanthe* often commented on how the fragility of the medium suited the nature of both the maker and her subject. One commentator, for example, wrote about “the difficulty attached to the employment of such a material,” and praised Brooks for “talent, fine ideal feeling” and “exceeding delicacy and brilliance of manipulation.”⁵⁰ Another compared Mrs. Brooks to Harriet Beecher Stowe, who had written *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* at her kitchen table, where she often had to pause to check on dinner.⁵¹ In an 1893 interview, acknowledging how important butter had been for her, Brooks expressed the idea that it could be a liberating force for other women as well. Inspired by her story, many women had sent her photographs of their own butter work. Her message to them was that women could make art even from the humble things around them.⁵²

Chicago was proof that at least some women took her advice. Contemporary references give us the names of Laura Worley, who had four butter portraits of Exposition officials in the Indiana exhibit; Ruth Woodruff, who created a garden of butter flowers complete with a fence for the Illinois dairy display; and Mrs. G. H. McDowell of Minneapolis, who supplied “some very pretty ornamental work,” modeling flowers, vines, a small bas-relief cow, and a box churn for the Minnesota dairy section.⁵³ At least one commentator made the connection between these exhibits and Brooks’s Centennial work: “It was only a few years ago that some progressive individual made a bas relief of butter modeled in a flat pan, which was called ‘Iolanthe’.... From that pan of butter evolved the bouquets of butter, wreaths of butter and little houses of butter to be seen through glass doors in ice boxes in the dairy building.”⁵⁴ The difference between what these women were doing and what Brooks had done was that their butter art was clearly being used to promote their state’s dairy interests and was part of the official exhibits in the dairy building. As I have shown more fully elsewhere, butter art would go on to become a major feature of the turn-of-the-century international expositions and a regular part of state fairs.⁵⁵ Nearly always sponsored by state dairy associations or commercial creameries, it became a commercial art used to promote the industry. With the one exception of Brooks’s display at the 1898 Trans-Mississippi Exposition, that was not the route she took. She persisted in presenting her work as art for art’s sake, not as art in the service of commerce.

Nevertheless, her assertion that women could make art out of the humble products available to them has a particularly feminist ring to the modern ear, and it apparently did so to the women of 1893 as well. Brooks was a role model. “Her story is worthy of a special tablet in the monument to the indomitable perseverance of woman,” declared Mrs. S. Isadore Miner in a

paper on the “Vocations of Women” she read at the Women’s Congress in Dallas that year. She placed Brooks alongside Rosa Bonheur, Harriet Hosmer and Elizabeth Ney as pioneers in the arts.⁵⁶ In 1903, Mary Edith Day began an article on “Women Sculptors” with the example of Brooks, saying she had helped open the way for other women artists.⁵⁷

Brooks’s choice of subject matter indicates her own identification with strong women and contemporary feminists’ causes. Lady Godiva was a feminist heroine who defied her cruel husband and rode naked through the streets to relieve the suffering of her people.⁵⁸ Norma, the Druid priestess in the popular Bellini opera, sacrificed her own life for a higher ideal of honesty and faithfulness. George Eliot was, of course, Mary Anne Evans, the famed Victorian novelist who felt it necessary to use a masculine pen name to ensure that her works would be taken seriously. Queen Isabella was another feminist icon of the time. A group of women calling themselves the Isabella Association had organized in anticipation of the 1893 Columbian Exposition and commissioned a statue of the Queen from Harriet Hosmer. Rather than allow the fair to focus exclusively on Columbus, they hoped to direct equal attention to the woman who gave him the resources to accomplish his journey of discovery.⁵⁹ The fact that Brooks made Isabella the center of her proposed monument indicates she probably shared this view. Finally, Brooks’s display of a portrait of Lucretia Mott, one of the great advocates of women’s rights, is surely an indication of her sympathies. Brooks left us no commentary as to her feelings about the women’s rights movement, but her work and her life speak of a woman who fought for professional recognition, who supported other women in their efforts to find creative expression, and who used her art to celebrate the accomplishments of women.

Even her *Dreaming Iolanthe* can be read as having a feminist theme of new awakening. The story is not simply a “Sleeping Beauty” fairy tale where the prince kisses the maiden and they live happily ever after. Hertz’s story is more subtle. Iolanthe has been so protected by her loving parents that she has no idea she is blind. When Tristan makes her aware of her handicap, she is devastated. She goes through a period of anguish and is finally helped by a doctor who says he can help her regain her sight, but to do so, she has to want it. In the end she does because she wants to begin a new life. There is a parallel to those nineteenth-century women who were so content in their protected situations that they did not think they were missing anything in not having full civil rights. Like Iolanthe, these women were awakening to the sometimes painful realization of their own legal and social limitations. And like Iolanthe, in the end, they had to want their rights to finally gain them. Iolanthe’s last sleep is poignant because we know what lies ahead. It is the close of one life but the opening to another. Caroline Brooks, choosing to read the book rather than do the butter making that fateful day in 1873, was embarking on a similar journey. It was one that would take her from the farm to the great cities of the United States and Europe. Her single-mindedness in realizing her art would bring trials, setbacks, hard work, and little remuneration, but it

was a life she did not regret. She recounted the difficulties she had encountered in an 1896 interview, but told the reporter she had no complaints because while arduous, her life nevertheless had been a happy one.⁶⁰

The story of Caroline Shawk Brooks, the “Centennial Butter Sculptress,” offers us a lesson about how amateurism, folk art, popular performance and high art ideals can sometimes intersect into an unexpected mix. That she cannot be easily placed in or limited to any of these categories is part of the lesson. She did not achieve conventional art fame. Her work is in few public collections and seldom on view. She exists in most art histories or artist dictionaries only as the Centennial butter sculptor. Yet Brooks’s story is one of a feminist pioneer and it deserves our attention. •

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NOTES

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1. J. S. Ingram, *The Centennial Exposition* (Philadelphia: Hubbard Bros., 1876), 705.
2. Karal Ann Marling, “The Origins of Minnesota Butter Sculpture,” *Minnesota History* 50 (Summer, 1987): 219-28, emphasizes the connection to other crop art forms at the exhibition. But even she does not seem to consider Brooks’s sculpture as serious art. For more information on crop art displays, see Pamela H. Simpson, “Cereal Architecture: Late Nineteenth Century Corn Palaces,” in *Building Environments, Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, vol. 10, eds. Kenneth A. Briesch and Alison K. Hoagland (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 269-82; and Simpson, “Turn-of-the-Century Midwestern Corn Festivals: Kiosks and Crop Art as American Icons,” *ARRIS*, the journal of the Southeast Society of Architectural Historians, 14 (2003): 1-15.
3. Caroline Shawk Brooks Photographic Collection, Call No. 1949.0354 PPL, and Curator’s File, Chicago Historical Society Research Center, hereafter CSB PC-CHS or CSB CF-CHS.
4. Clio Harper, *Caroline Shawk Brooks, The Story of the Remarkable Sculptor and Her Work*, reprint for Press Publications, Nov. 1, 1893. No place of publication is given, and the booklet contains an appendix with notes from 1896 newspaper articles and a 1900 Appleton’s *Cyclopedia* article, indicating that the material was bound after 1900. Harper’s 1893 essay is apparently a reprint, but I have not been able to locate the original source.
5. *The New Century for Women* 11 (July 1876): 84-85. This was an interview she gave to the official Centennial newspaper for the Women’s Building. Typical of the period, the article points out Brooks’s male connections, naming the occupations of both her husband and her father. I am indebted to Ashley Morano for drawing my attention to this article.
6. Some sources give the date of the marriage as 1862, some as 1863.
7. Dale P. Kirkman, “Caroline Shawk Brooks: Sculptress in Butter,” *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 5 (March 1967): 8-9. Kirkman does not indicate why Brooks only served a year in the army.
8. *The New Century for Women*, 84.
9. Harper, *Caroline Shawk Brooks*, 2. Some details in Harper differ from those in *The New Century for Women*. For example, *The New Century* article says she did her first *Dreaming Iolanthe* in 1868, but Harper says it was 1873. Newspaper accounts of the time support the later date. Three photographs of versions of the *Dreaming Iolanthe* in CSB PC-CHS are dated 1873, 1876, and 1893. They vary considerably.
10. “Buttered Faces,” *Cincinnati Newspaper clipping*, c. 1874. CSB CF-CHS.
11. *Memphis Appeal*, Aug. 2, 1873, n. p. CSB CF-CHS.
12. *Public Ledger* (Memphis), Aug. 1, 1873, n. p. CSB CF-CHS.
13. Danish poet Henrik Hertz (1798-1870) published the lyric drama in Denmark in 1845. Edgar Phipps’s 1854 English translation into blank verse was so popular that he often was credited as the author. Theodore Martin’s translation, published in the U.S. in 1850, was later reviewed in 1867, and it was this translation that Brooks said she read. By 1869 the play was being performed in New York. The book version went through many editions. Tchaikovsky’s 1892 opera *Iolanta* was based on a Russian translation of the play that he saw in 1888. Complete bibliographic material is available through a WorldCat search.
14. *Daily Star* (Cincinnati), March 25, 1874, n.p.; *Herald and Register* (Cincinnati), March 4, 1874, n.p. and March 11, 1874, n.p. Clippings in CSB CF-CHS.
15. *New York Times*, February 27, 1876, 3. The article reprints a story first carried in the *Cincinnati Commercial*, Feb. 25, 1874.
16. *Citizen and Gazette* (Urbana, Champaign County, Ohio), Oct. 18, 1874, n. p.; “Buttered Faces,” n.p. CSB CF-CHS. Brooks later said she chose the name “Geranium” because when she made the ideal head, her little daughter picked a geranium leaf and put it in the figure’s hair. *The Advertiser* (Boston) Aug. 12, 1876, n.p., newspaper clipping in CSB CF-CHS. She secured a copyright for the head from the Library of Congress in 1874. The notice is in CSB CF-CHS.
17. *The New Century for Women*, 84-85.
18. *Ibid.* For information on her patent, see “Female Inventors,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 18, 1887, 4.
19. Lucy was “Lemonade Lucy,” the wife of Rutherford B. Hayes. He was still governor in 1876 but ran for president that year and took office in 1877. The note about her patronage of Brooks comes from Harper, *Caroline Shawk Brooks*, 4.
20. Newspaper clipping, CSB CF-CHS.
21. There are many examples of women artists being accused of not doing their own work. For a contemporary reference, see “Harriet Hosmer and John Gibson: Letter to the Editor of the *Art Journal* (1864),” in Susan Waller, *Women Artists in the Modern Era, A Documentary History* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1991), 130-33.
22. Ingram, *The Centennial Exposition*, 705-06.
23. James D. McCabe, *Illustrated History of the Centennial Exhibition* (Philadelphia: J. R. Jones, 1876), 219.
24. *The Advertiser* (Boston), Aug. 12, 1876, n.p., CSB CF-CHS.
25. *New York Times*, February 27, 1876, 3.
26. See Wendy Katz, *Regionalism and Reform, Art and Class Formation in Ante Bellum Cincinnati* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002) for a full discussion of Cincinnati’s art scene in the period up to the Civil War.
27. Harper, *Caroline Shawk Brooks*, 5.

28. Carolyn Wells Dall, "Women's Work," in *Letters from Mrs. Dall, Centennials*, v. 2, n. 39 (Sept. to Oct. 1876): n. p. This is a two volume scrapbook of clippings of Mrs. Dall's letters to the editor published in *The New Age* (Boston, 1876). Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, Delaware.
29. A photograph in Chicago Historical Society collection shows Brooks at work on the stage and describes the event on the back. Harper also includes the story in her account. The *Anvil Chorus* has no obvious connection to Washington other than it was a popular piece and had been played at the Centennial.
30. *Boston Daily Globe*, April 4, 1877, 5, and April 20, 1877, 6. "Butter Head," *Boston Daily Globe*, May 15, 1877, 8, is an advertisement for the demonstrations.
31. *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Nov. 28, 1877, 4.
32. *The Washington Post*, Mar. 1, 1878, 4, and March 11, 1878, 4. The studio was at 317 Four-and-a-half Street.
33. Kirkman, *Caroline Shawk Brooks: Sculptress in Butter*, 9. Samuel had served as the county treasurer from 1868 to 1871. There is a report on Caroline in *The Phrenology Journal* in June 1874 that says Samuel had died the previous year, but several of the items in the story are inaccurate and we have the report in his hometown newspaper in 1876 of Samuel receiving a postcard from his wife, and we know of his later election to the state legislature. Later stories about Caroline make no mention of Samuel; neither do they ever call her a widow. He was apparently still living in Phillips County in 1890 according to Kirkman. K. L. Nichols, "Women Sculptors at the 1893 Fair," a website, mentions Caroline Brooks's participation in both the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition and the Mid-Winter Fair in San Francisco in 1894 and refers to Samuel as a San Francisco painter, but there seems no support for that assertion. <http://members.cox.net/academia/cassatt4.html>, accessed Aug. 2, 2006.
34. Harper, *Caroline Shawk Brooks*, 9.
35. "Mrs. Caroline Brooks's Return from Paris," *The Daily Constitution* (Atlanta), March 21, 1879, 1; and "Personal," *Washington Post*, Nov. 7, 1878, 2. "American Art Galleries," *New York Times*, Dec. 2, 1886, 4, has a sneering reference to the "American lady who went to Europe to introduce butter sculpture to the effete dynasties there prevailing—went and returned a wiser but more woeful lady."
36. "Original and Otherwise," *The Washington Post*, Dec., 25, 1884, 2, notes Brooks has done the "Marchioness" and "Jenny Wren" from Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*.
37. *La Rosa*, undated pamphlet, CSB CF-CHS. Small, folded pamphlets such as this were made for several of Brooks's exhibitions. This one may have been made for the exhibition at the Congressional Hotel in Chicago that Brooks arranged when the sculptural group was rediscovered in 1911.
38. Letter from Alicia V. LaBau to Caroline Shawk Brooks, 1892, in CSB CF-CHS. Her full name was Mary Alicia Vanderbilt LaBau (1834-1902).
39. Harper, *Caroline Shawk Brooks*, 19.
40. "A Goddess in Butter," *The New York Times*, Feb. 18, 1893, 2.
41. Mary L. Sherman, "The World's Fair, The 'Butter Woman' and Her Exhibit," *The Los Angeles Times*, July 29, 1893, 9.
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.* for reference to Mott; Harper, *Caroline Shawk Brooks*, 11-12, for reference to others who visited her at the fair.
44. *The San Francisco Examiner*, Midwinter Fair Supplement, Jan 28, 1894, 2; and *La Rosa* pamphlet, CSB CF-CHS. See also Mae Silver, *1894 California Midwinter Fair Women Artists: An Appreciation* (publisher unknown, 1994), 3-4.
45. *La Rosa*, pamphlet, CSB CF-CHS, and "Mystery in Unclaimed Stone," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Nov. 21, 1911, 3; and "Clew to Statue's Owner," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Nov. 22, 1911, 5.
46. *Chicago Record*, June 11, 1896, n. p., and *Daily Inter Ocean*, June 6, 1896, n. p., Newspaper articles reprinted in Harper, *Caroline Shawk Brooks*, appendix.
47. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July, 1896, n. p. CSB PC-CHS. Hearing that Li was visiting the country, she used a photograph of him to model a bas-relief portrait. She then made one of Grant and mounted them both on a single plaque united by a knot of friendship. As usual, she worked in butter and then cast it in plaster. The Hon. John W. Foster presented it to the diplomat.
48. S. C. Bassett, "Dairy and Dairy Products," in John Wakefield, *A History of the Trans Mississippi and International Exposition*, May 1903, manuscript, Omaha Public Library. Accessed on line, Sept. 8, 2005, <http://www.omaha.lib.ne.us/transmiss/secretary/dairy.html>.
49. The bronze is Queen Isabella. The plaster reliefs include Iolanthe, Eugene Field, Abraham Lincoln, an unidentified gentleman, and an equestrian military figure. There is also a drawing identified as "Mansion on Rice Plantation." Most of the plasters are listed as being in poor condition.
50. Frank H. Norton, *Illustrated Historical Register of the Centennial Exhibition, Philadelphia, 1876, and the Exposition Universelle, Paris, 1878* (New York: The American News Company, 1879), 156.
51. *New York Times*, February 27, 1876, 3.
52. Sherman, "The World's Fair," *The Los Angeles Times*, July 29, 1893, 9.
53. "World's Fair Notes," *The Woman's Journal* 23 (Dec. 10, 1892): 398 for Worley; Diary of Catherine Ferry Haviland at the Columbian Exposition, Book Five, Sept. 7, 1893, for Woodruff reference, members.bellatlantic.net/~vzezscqk/bs.html, accessed Dec. 23, 2005; and "Minnesota's Dairy Exhibit," *The Northwest Illustrated Monthly Magazine* (October 1893): 15-16, for McDowell. See also Karal Ann Marling, "The Origins of Minnesota Butter Sculpture," *Minnesota History* 50 (Summer, 1987): 225-26, 227; Marling, *Blue Ribbon, A Social and Pictorial History of the Minnesota State Fair* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1990), 49.
54. "Chicago Letter," *The Newark Daily Advocate*, August 4, 1893, 4.
55. Pamela H. Simpson, "Butter Cows and Butter Buildings: The History of an Unconventional Medium," *Winterthur Portfolio* (forthcoming).
56. "The Vocations of Women," *Dallas Morning News*, Nov. 26, 1893, 5.
57. Mary Edith Day, "Women Sculptors," *Portsmouth Herald* (New Hampshire), June 12, 1903, 7.
58. Tennyson's retelling of the story was particularly popular. Harper, *Caroline Shawk Brooks*, 15.
59. *The Woman's Journal* (Boston), edited by Lucy Stone, H. B. Blackwell and Alice Stone Blackwell, was devoted to the "interests of women" and especially the right of suffrage. During 1892 and 1893 it carried stories on the World's Fair, many celebrating Queen Isabella. When Hosmer sent the plaster statue to San Francisco in 1894 for the Mid Winter Fair, it ran into trouble because the local Jewish community objected to having a statue of the queen who drove the Jews from Spain. *San Francisco Examiner*, Jan. 25, 1894, 4.
60. *Daily Inter Ocean*, June 6, 1896, reprinted in Harper, *Caroline Shawk Brooks*, appendix.

MARTHA COFFIN DERBY'S GRAND TOUR

“It’s Impossible to Travel Without Improvement”

By Jessica Lanier

On August 27, 1801, Martha Coffin Derby (1783-1832) of Portland, Maine, embarked on what she expected would be a transformative experience: a European Grand Tour. Although such an extended excursion had long been the capstone of an English gentleman’s education, few Americans engaged in leisure travel before the 1830s.¹ A small number of American women, usually the wives of government officials, had lived abroad, but Martha Coffin Derby was unique in that she planned her European trip as an aesthetic experience. Her letters and diaries document her two-year journey through England, Switzerland, France, and Italy, and attest to her acquired passions for richly appointed rooms, stately arch-itecture, and fine art.²

Before returning to America, Derby sat for the eminent portraitist John Singleton Copley. The Boston-born Copley was, after a long residence in England, well-versed in European Grand Manner portraiture.³ *Mrs. Richard Derby as St. Cecilia* (1803; Fig. 1), which depicts the subject as the patron saint of music, abounds with specifically European elements that emphasize Martha Derby’s metamorphosis into a woman of culture and refinement. Seated on a saber-legged tabouret in a flowing white neoclassical gown, playing a harp, she is set against sumptuous drapery with two chubby putti watching over her. By commissioning such a portrait, Derby not only sought to create a painting that would embody her own good taste but one that would exemplify a woman’s active role in promoting culture and the arts, a task she intended to take up on her return home.

Almost a year before her departure, in September of 1800, Martha Coffin had married Richard Crowninshield Derby (1777-1854) of Salem, Massachusetts, the youngest son of Elias Hasket Derby, purportedly the wealthiest man in the state.⁴ The newlyweds made an extensive tour of the United States, and in the spring of 1801, while in Charleston, South Carolina, they formed their plan to undertake a traditional Grand Tour. In Charleston, the Derbys met artists Edward Greene Malbone and Washington Allston and learned of their European travel plans. Malbone probably completed his miniature portrait of the young bride (c. 1801; Fig. 2) during their stay. They also became acquainted with the Manigault family. Martha Derby was flattered by the attentions of the French-educated Margaret Izard Manigault, whose brother-in-law, Joseph Allen Smith, was midway through an

extended Grand Tour.⁵ He had purchased paintings attributed to Guido Reni and Salvator Rosa, and commissioned casts of some of Italy’s most famous statues, including the Apollo Belvedere, with the intention of bringing an art collection to America.⁶

Martha Derby fully expected that European travel would result in the development and refinement of her “taste.” As she predicted, “It is impossible to travel without improvement even though you should not seek it. Every object serves to improve



Fig. 1. John Singleton Copley, *Mrs. Richard C. Derby as St. Cecilia* (1803), oil on canvas, 92 1/2" x 57 1/4". Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Henry C. Landon III. Photo: University of Virginia Art Museum.



Fig. 2. Edward Greene Malbone, *Miniature of Martha Coffin Derby* (c. 1801), watercolor on ivory, 3 3/8" x 2 5/8". Private Collection (formerly Metropolitan Museum of Art). Photo: Elle Shushan.

the taste and mind."⁷ Her journal charts her continuing progress in this area. For example, shortly after arriving

in Italy in October 1802, she wrote that she was "not capable of judging... the intrinsic merit" of Italy's most "esteemed" artworks but could only offer the "opinion of others." Nevertheless, she promised friends and family "an account of what pleases me though the connoisseur might pass it by with contempt."⁸ Only weeks later, her confidence bolstered by days spent at the Uffizi collections in Florence, she related with pride, "I am now call'd a woman of great taste & have had a thousand complements on my discernment."⁹ By the time she reached Rome in mid-December, Derby boasted: "I begin to find great fault when a room is not fitted up to my taste... such columns of alabaster should have been placed differently—that marbles not rich enough for the rest of the ornaments,—these paintings are not equal to the sculpture."¹⁰ She advised her family, "You must all come to Europe and learn to be wise like your sage sister."¹¹

Martha Derby's aesthetic responses to the art and landscape of Europe were scripted in part by Grand Tour literature, which provided checklists of important sights and artworks. They also reveal how her education, reading, and upbringing in the young United States informed the existing Grand Tour formulas. According to a contemporary, Derby had "received a good education" in Portland "and probably closed it with a metropolitan finish."¹² She likely attended one of the newly founded academies for young ladies, which usually offered instruction in geography, history, reading, writing, and arithmetic but did not teach natural philosophy, the sciences, or the classics (except in translation, as few women were taught Greek or Latin), cornerstones of higher education for men. Upper-class academies for women also focused on "accomplishments" and provided instruction in fancy needlework, foreign languages, drawing, and music.¹³

Derby had received some lessons in art history, and Francesco Bartolozzi's engravings after Angelica Kaufmann were among the most popular sources for the fancy needlework (Fig. 3) taught at these academies.¹⁴ When Derby later visited Kaufmann in Rome, she noted with some amazement to her mother, "How little did I suppose, when Mr. Pieronnet wrote her name among the other celebrated painters in my common-place book that I should ever know her."¹⁵ While Derby cited Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses on Art* and the antiquarian Scipione Maffei's book *Verona Illustrata* (1732)¹⁶ in

her journals, generally speaking, popular novels and travelogues by women, that is, applied writing on aesthetic topics, played a more critical role in how Martha Derby framed and discussed the visual world of Europe.

Although Italy was the ultimate destination of any proper Grand Tour, in her journal Derby often responded to its classical antiquities generically. At the Verona amphitheater in October 1802, she noted simply, "Superb Ruin!"¹⁷ Two months later, after touring Rome, she wrote more expansively to her mother on her delight in viewing such "wonders":

To describe to you any sensations on first seeing the Dome of St. Peter's—to dilate upon the Porta del Popolo by which we entered—the magnificent square with the Egyptian obelisk in the middle and the two superb churches in front, with three of the principal streets of the city in full view, would be impossible. But the wonders I have since seen, the Coliseum, the Pantheon, Triumphal Arches, Ruined Temples, Remains of Aqueducts, Baths, Egyptian Obelisk, Columns of granite and porphyry and alabaster, magnificent churches and Palaces filled with the finest Statues and pictures—all of these things have so astonished and delighted me that I scarcely know where I am.¹⁸

By contrast, men's travelogues in this period are filled with Latin quotations, as their schooling informed their appreciation of Italy's antiquities.¹⁹ Women, deprived of such education, had little authority to engage in extended commentary. Well aware of these deficiencies, Gertrude Meredith of Philadelphia wrote in 1804, "Do you imagine, from your knowledge of the young men in this city, that ladies are valued according to their mental acquirements? I can assure you that they are not.... [Would they] not titter. . at her expense, if a woman made a Latin quotation, or spoke with enthusiasm of Classical learning?"²⁰ Derby later recommended John Chetwode Eustace's *A Classical Tour through Italy* (1813) to Margaret Manigault as "a correct & delightful description of Italy" but complained that it was "too full of learned quotations" which she found "vexacious."²¹ Martha chose to remain in Naples rather than accompany Richard to Paestum, perhaps having had enough of classical antiquities. Regardless, she put her Italian experience to good use, holding her own a few months later as the sole woman at a Parisian dinner party, where she discussed Italy and the Apollo Belvedere.²²

What strategies might Derby have employed in such conversations? To some extent she probably relied on what Grand Tour scholar Chloe Chard has called the "hyperbole of unrepresentability," which "insists that a particular object of commentary eludes any attempt to appropriate and contain it within visual conventions of depiction, or descriptive language."²³ Derby falls back on this device repeatedly in Italy. She dares not describe the wonders of Rome, and writes that her attempt to describe the antique statuary in the Uffizi is in vain, recommending, "[I]magine every thing that is sublime, beautiful, lovely, & enchanting & you will even then fall short of the originals."²⁴ Another preference was to employ the language of sensibility. At the Uffizi, Derby spent "a whole



Fig. 3. Frances Mecia Campbell, *Telemachus and Mentor in the Island of Calipso* (1807), silk embroidery and watercolor on silk, 18" x 20 1/2" (based on a print by Francesco Bartolozzi after Angelica Kaufmann). The Baltimore Museum of Art: Purchase with exchange funds from Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James R. Herbert Boone; Gift of Maria Lovell Eaton and Mrs. Charles R. Weld; Gift of J. Gilman D'Arcy Paul; Bequest of John Henry Scarff; Gift of Florence Hendler Trupp; and Gift of the Women's Eastern Shore Society, BMA 1989.352.

hour contemplating the beautiful figure of Niobe," but her commentary focused on the emotional aspects of Niobe's story and made no reference to the debate, referred to in most contemporary guide books, about the composition, authenticity, or display of the group (Fig. 4).²⁵

Derby was far more comfortable responding to classical sites as scenery. She employed the aesthetic discourse of picturesque travel in which appreciation of the natural world and artistic practice merged. In Italy, Derby often described the landscape in painterly terms. Visiting Hadrian's villa at Tivoli, she adopted the perspective of the *veduta* painter who, she wrote, "would never want for subjects if he worked these magnificent & picturesque remains... the enchanting Country—the numerous & varied Cascades & the exclusive prospect, the fine view of Rome... the majestic Dome of St. Peters rising superiour to every thing else."²⁶

Derby admired the work of artists Claude Lorraine and Salvator Rosa, who provided important pictorial models for the new sphere of landscape appreciation.²⁷ John Constable, Derby's exact contemporary, dryly observed that Rosa was "a great favorite with novel writers, particularly the ladies."²⁸ Derby's own version of the sublime was one popularized by the Gothic novelist Ann Radcliffe, whose chaste heroines existed in a world infused with equal measures of the sensible and the sublime. Creating a scene borrowed straight from the novelist, Derby wrote of crossing the Alps into Italy:

The pale light of the moon with the impetuous torrent at our feet and the inaccessible mountains which enclos'd us, recalled to my mind the fine description which Mrs. Radcliff gives of this part of the Alps and it did not require the force of Imagination to discern a desolate & half ruin'd castle on the summit of the highest rocks. Often did I picture one of those beautiful heroines, led by ruffian hands round these wild and dangerous precipices & at length arriving at the old mouldering tower, which seem'd only the resort of banditti and robbers. To escape would be impossible...²⁹

Swiss artists had made a specialty of capturing the sublime mountain landscapes celebrated by travel writers and novelists such as Radcliffe who promoted the Alps as a new aesthetic destination. In Basel the Derbys visited Peter Birmann, and at Interlaken they called on Franz Nicklaus König, both artists who specialized in *vedute* for the tourist market. In Berne they accompanied an American friend Joel Roberts Poinsett "to see 2 or 3 Painters & their views of Switzerland," and in Geneva the Derbys purchased "several views" and prints of Switzerland.³⁰

In Italy, Martha Derby followed conventional taste in admiring the works of seventeenth-century masters but chose her favorites on the basis of subject matter and sensibility more than formal qualities. She was fond of moral exemplars—female heroines, stoic heroes, mothers and children in the sentimental mode—and favored works by Guido Reni, particularly a *Mary Magdalene* and a *Lucretia*.³¹ As scholars have noted, Americans readily adopted the ideals of art treatises that postulated that the purpose of art was moral and spiritual uplift.³² Without this higher purpose, art was potentially "a symptom of aristocratic luxury and corruption," destructive to "the moral fabric of the republic."³³ Lucretia particularly appealed to Americans, not only as a symbol of chastity, but also because of the political significance of her rape and subsequent suicide, which sparked the revolt that ushered in the first Roman Republic.³⁴

As an American, Derby was attracted to both sentimentality and stoic Republican virtue, themes united in the romantic cult of death. She admired Luca Giordano's *Death of Seneca* (c. 1660) and Poussin's *Death of Germanicus* (1627). The latter, in the Barberini Palace, inspired an extended commentary on the narrative and emotions depicted in this touching family scene,



Fig. 4. *Niobe and her Daughter*, Roman (c. 1st c. AD) after Greek original c. 400-250 BC, marble, 90" h. Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Photo: Albumen print by Alinari Fratelli (c. 1870-1890), Alinari/Art Resource, NY.



Fig. 5. William Dickinson (1746-1823), mezzotint engraving after Joshua Reynolds's *Mrs. Sheridan as Saint Cecilia* (1776). Courtesy of Nicholas M. Butler.

a picture Derby concluded "almost makes one weep."³⁵

Making the pilgrimage to Hindelbank to see the much-celebrated Tomb of Madame Langhans (1723-1751) who had died in childbirth on Easter eve, Derby found it "particularly interesting by the circumstances of her death and the great simplicity & beauty of the design."³⁶ Favored early seventeenth-century works such as Reni's *Virgin and Child* (1627), Ludovico Carracci's *Birth of St. John* (1603), and Francesco Albani's *Dance of the Cupids*, as well as the classical Niobe group at the Uffizi, and an unidentified sleeping cupid that so delighted her she kissed it, may also be indicative of Derby's own preoccupations as she entered the second and third year of what would turn out to be a childless marriage.

As proof that she was becoming "a woman of great taste," Derby described an encounter at the Uffizi in Florence:

I must not forget to tell you I am become an amateur. You shall judge from the circumstance I am going to relate, I have some right to the title. The other morn'g I am strolling about the gallery alone—I entered one of the side Cabinets & on looking round perceived the bust of a man which struck me so forcibly that I could look at nothing else—the more I regarded, the more nobleness, the more dignity, the more firmness I saw in the countenance—at length I determined it must be some great hero & I approached half afraid & half longing to know to whom such a face belonged—imagine my

exultation on reading below the pedestal "Brutus"... I am now call'd a woman of great taste & have had a thousand complements on my discernment.³⁷

What better confirmation that she was both a bona fide American and a woman of taste than her ability to discern the legendary founder of the Roman Republic on the basis of his physiognomy?

It was, however, Copley's portrait of Derby as St. Cecilia, the capstone of her Grand Tour, that would offer visible proof of her transformation.³⁸ According to Jules Prown, it is a rare example of Copley placing a sitter in a specific role and is based directly on Reynolds' famous portrait of Mrs. Elizabeth Sheridan (1775; Fig. 5), which Derby likely knew.³⁹ However, the painting departs from Reynolds's in that Derby, posed against a classical balustrade and fluted column, plays a harp, not an organ.⁴⁰

In 1803, the harp was still closely associated with continental Europe and specifically France. French refugees fleeing the Revolution in Santo Domingo had introduced the harp to Charleston's drawing room society in 1793. Charleston also had a Saint Cecilia society, founded in 1766, to promote musical culture.⁴¹ Moreover, the shape of the harp was thought to flatter the female form. As the anonymous author of *The Mirror of Graces* (1811) advised in a description perfectly attuned with Derby's portrait:

The shape of the instrument is calculated, in every respect, to show a fine figure to advantage. The contour of the whole form, the turn and polish of a beautiful hand and arm, the richly-slipped and well-made foot on the pedal stops, the gentle motion of a lovely neck, and above all, the sweetly-tempered expression of an intelligent countenance; these are shown at one glance, when the fair performer is seated unaffectedly, yet gracefully, at the harp.⁴²

Like the harp, Derby's choice of costume (as well as her rouged cheeks) was explicitly French in inspiration if not in origin. Requiring no padding or layers of heavy petticoats, sheer, narrow dresses caused a sensation at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The introduction of neoclassical dress (or undress) excited much commentary. The more conservative members of British society condemned it, and in America, magazines such as *The Port Folio* voiced disapproval over bare elbows and "the growing fashion of leaving off a certain number of petticoats."⁴³ Derby had expressed both admiration and shock after first encountering the latest French fashions in England, but by the time she sat for her portrait, she had embraced the real and symbolic freedoms implicit in the new style.⁴⁴

Many of the women who adopted allegorical "disguises" in their portraits were promoting public or professional personae, and in fact, two of Derby's near contemporaries painted as Saint Cecilia, Elizabeth Sheridan and Mrs. Billington, were celebrated for their singing.⁴⁵ While the harp might be interpreted as a literal depiction of Derby's accomplishments, she was, in fact, as Margaret Manigault later commented, "no musician." On the contrary, Richard was the musically talented partner,⁴⁶ but

contemporary viewers would have understood that Derby was portraying herself as a patron, not as a musician.

This over-life-size portrait makes conscious reference to the illustrious history of western painting, from Reynolds and the academic tradition of Grand Manner portraiture to Raphael's famous St. Cecilia altarpiece and Guido Reni's ecstatic heroines.⁴⁷ As William Gerdts has argued, the harp provides a "sensuous extension into the realm of beautiful sound."⁴⁸ Derby's posture and costume allowed Copley to emphasize the features most admired in the period: her long neck, oval face, flawless skin, tiny feet, elongated limbs, slender arms, and graceful hands. The portrait was a tribute to both the visual and musical arts, the culmination of Martha Derby's European experience, and a projection of her future role. Replete with explicit references to French culture, Copley's painting effectively affirmed Martha's status as a "beauty" and a woman in the public sphere. The artist exhibited it the following year, accompanied by a flattering ten-line quotation from Dryden's "Ode on St. Cecilia's Day," at London's Royal Academy.⁴⁹

Following their two-year tour, the Derbys planned to settle in Boston, and in anticipation, Martha selected furniture, accessories, textiles, and art in Europe.⁵⁰ The Derbys commissioned a house (attributed to Charles Bulfinch) in the new neighborhood of Beacon Hill. According to Ogden Codman, it was "the finest house ever built" on Chestnut Street and contained a dining room modeled on one at the Petit Trianon, perhaps the first American interior so inspired.⁵¹

Traveling Americans formed collections featuring a wide range of decorative arts, casts, copies, and prints as well as paintings by living American and European artists. Although there is little specific information in Martha Derby's journal regarding her European art purchases, they would have conformed with the accepted norms of the time—copies of famous masterpieces or works by approved artists seen as models of beauty and good taste, and prints and souvenir *vedute*.⁵² William Bentley noted in his diary the arrival of the Derby's "antiquities"—"Busts, antiques, in Plaster of Paris, with a fullsize Appollo Bellvedere [sic], & a Venus de Medicis."⁵³ Despite being emblematic of good taste, the display of nude statuary in their home placed the Derbys in the cultural avant-garde.⁵⁴ A niece described the Derby's home as having "an oval hall, surrounded with statues, and with busts over the doors" and "fine oil paintings covering the walls entirely."⁵⁵

Elite Europeans granted women a more prominent role in polite society than Americans did. Well-traveled women such as Martha Derby and her close friends, Alice Izard and her daughter Margaret Manigault of Charleston and Philadelphia, sought to introduce this model to America. Like them, Derby would reign over a salon that attracted local luminaries as well as foreign dignitaries. Staunch Federalists, the Derbys' circle believed that they constituted a natural aristocracy that should serve as arbiters and guardians of an emerging national culture, and that women would play an essential role in America's cultural development. Appreciation and knowledge of European art and culture were central to the construction of this elite American identity.⁵⁶

Martha Derby shaped her domestic environment as a quasi-public stage that would showcase her sophistication and



Fig. 6. Gilbert Stuart Newton, *Martha Coffin Derby* (c. 1815-17), oil on panel, 31 1/4" x 27". Courtesy of Historic New England.

accomplishments and express in visual terms her aspirations and expectations for America's cultural prospects. Meant to constitute a formative site for art education, Derby indeed hosted salons and in the 1810s a twice-weekly drawing "academy" for young ladies.⁵⁷ Upper-class women not only fashioned such domestic spheres but reached beyond to shape American aesthetics and national taste.

Derby's life coincided with the emergence of Boston as a center of art and culture. Richard Derby was among the original subscribers of the (all-male) Boston Athenaeum, one of the city's most significant cultural institutions. For its inaugural exhibition in 1827, the Derbys lent paintings by Raphaëlle Peale, Charles Cromwell Ingham, John Neagle, Thomas Sully, as well as a "Nymphs and Cupids" probably purchased in Europe, and following her death, Martha's portrait by Copley was shown there annually.⁵⁸

Although she thought of Europe as the "fountain-head," Derby took a keen interest in the art and artists of her native land, actively championing American artists. Around 1816, Derby allowed the young artist Gilbert Stuart Newton to paint her portrait (Fig. 6), noted on the back as "his first ever in oils," before providing him with letters of introduction for his own European tour.⁵⁹ She assured Manigault that the painter Alvan T. Fisher "will one day add to the fame of American Artists, his forte is home scenery, Cattle farmyards and landscape & it is so truly American that [Gilbert] Stewart hopes he may not go to Europe & lose this native touch." She expressed the hope that "this country has caught somewhat of the spirit of Europe. America has been the parent for so many Artists that she must be a very unnatural mother to abandon them wholly to

strangers.”⁶⁰ Derby’s letters following her trip reveal her ongoing interest and attentiveness to the state and progress of the arts, particularly the visual arts, in the United States.

Although she was an important patron of the arts in her day, Derby’s impact on American aesthetics and taste has gone unrecognized. In the years following her Grand Tour, she traveled widely throughout the United States, and in 1817 the Derbys returned to Europe for a year, sharing a house in Paris with the noted Baltimore collector, Robert Gilmore. Although European travel and study has long been recognized as important for American artists, it also was essential for their potential patrons to become conversant with European artistic traditions. The international experiences of the Derbys and a handful of Americans would help shape the progress of American art in the early national period. These individuals established European travel as an educational endeavor and a marker of social distinction, and helped, through their collections and activities, to promote the arts in the Early Republic.

Throughout their lives, the Derbys would be known as collectors and connoisseurs.⁶¹ Shortly after his death in 1854, an article on “The Arts in America” credited Richard as one of the “first to give a decided impulse to the arts in this country.”⁶² Martha Coffin Derby’s fame as a “beauty” and her feminine virtues may have overshadowed her other accomplishments, but all the evidence suggests that she also played a significant role in promoting the visual arts in this formative period of national artistic development. •

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NOTES

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1. Only about 10 percent of the thousand Americans who traveled to England during 1740-1776 or to France during 1806-1811 were women. As late as 1840, only 42 of the 231 Americans who disembarked at Le Havre were women. Daniel Kilbride, “Avoiding a ‘Little, Mean, [and] Despicable’ Republic: Privileged Women and the Cultural Work of the Grand Tour in the Post-Revolutionary Era.” Paper given at Society for Historians of the Early American Republic, Buffalo, N.Y., July 21, 2000. See <http://www.h-net.org/~shear/s2000.d/pa/KilbrideDan.htm>, accessed July 10, 2004.
2. Three surviving journals of Martha Coffin Derby (hereafter MCD) are catalogued as the “Switzerland Journal,” “Journal I” and “Journal II,” Ms N-126, Box 1, Folders 2-4, Derby-Peabody Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston (hereafter MHS). In quoting the diaries, I have preserved Derby’s spelling and capitalization but have added some punctuation for clarity. The diaries are not paginated.
3. Copley’s wife, Susanna Farnham Clarke, daughter of the Boston merchant and loyalist Richard Clarke, would have known the loyalist Coffins. MCD’s niece, Sarah Ellen Derby, married Clarke’s great-grandson, John Rogers, in 1827.

4. Elias Hasket Derby was a key figure in the development of maritime trade and an important patron of architecture and the decorative arts. See for instance, *The Making of a Mansion: Samuel McIntire and the Creation of the Derbys’ Dream*, eds. Barbara Ward and Moira Thames. (Salem: Essex Institute, 1989) and Fiske Kimball, “The Elias Hasket Derby Mansion in Salem,” in Essex Institute Historical Collections (Oct. 1924): 273-91.
5. The Derbys’ itinerary between October 1800 when they were in Newport and March 1801 is unknown but they probably wintered in Charleston. MCD, Boston, to her sister Eleanor Coffin, Portland, Me., Aug. 1800. MCD, Sandy Hill, S.C., to Eleanor Coffin in Portland, Mar. 10, 1801. Transcripts are on-line at Derby descendant Joan Jackson’s web site <http://jacksonsweb.org/marthacoffin.htm> (hereafter JJW). A number of letters survive only as transcriptions. MCD, Portland, to Margaret Manigault, N.Y., July 14, 1801. Manigault Family Papers, South Caroliniana Library, Univ. of South Carolina, Columbia, (hereafter MFP).
6. Smith gave the Derbys a letter of introduction to the Countess of Albany, an acquaintance Martha maintained for many years. Joseph’s brother, William Loughton Smith, former Minister Plenipotentiary to the Court of Portugal, returned to Charleston in 1804 with an art collection which he displayed in the Manigaults’ home. E. P. Richardson, “Allen Smith, Collector and Benefactor,” in *American Art Journal* 1 (Autumn, 1969): 8. George C. Rogers, *Evolution of a Federalist: William Loughton Smith of Charleston* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1962), 306, 337, 356.
7. MCD, London, to Eleanor Coffin, Portland, Mar. 1, 1802, JJW.
8. MCD, Bologna, Nov. 4, 1802, “Switzerland Journal,” MHS.
9. MCD, Florence, Nov. 20, 1802, *ibid*.
10. MCD, Rome, to her mother Eleanor Foster Coffin, Portland, Dec. 19, 1802, JJW.
11. MCD, Florence, to Harriet Coffin Sumner, Boston, n.d. [Nov. 8, 1802] JJW.
12. Samuel L. Knapp, *Female Biography: Containing Notices of Distinguished Women* (New York: Phoenix, Wood & Co., 1834), 190. Martha’s close friends Eliza Southgate and her sister Octavia attended Mrs. Rowson’s Academy outside Boston. A letter from Eliza to Octavia suggests that Martha and Octavia were in close contact and may have been together at the school. Anne H. Wharton claims that Martha attended school in Annapolis with Eleanor (Nellie) Custis and Elizabeth Bordley. Eliza Southgate, Boston, to Octavia Southgate, Medford, June 12, 1800. Eliza Southgate Bowne, *Letters of Eliza Southgate* (reprint, Williamstown, Mass.: Corner House Publishers, 1980), 24. Anne H. Wharton, *Heirlooms in Miniatures* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott 1897), 153.
13. Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (1980; reprint, New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), 214-15. Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Women’s Sphere in New England, 1780-1830* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), 115. Also see Jane C. Nylander, “Useful & Ornamental Education for Young Ladies: Mrs. Rowson’s Academy, Boston, 1797-1822,” *New England Ancestors* (Winter 2006): 19-26.
14. Jane C. Nylander, “Some Print Sources of New England Schoolgirl Art,” *Antiques Magazine* (August 1976): 296.
15. MCD, Rome, to Eleanor Foster Coffin, Portland, Dec. 19, 1802, JJW.
16. MCD, Bologna, Nov. 4, 1802; Verona, Oct. 18, 1802, “Switzerland Journal.” Reynolds’s influential “Discourses Delivered at the Royal Academy” (1769-91) advocated understanding the grandeur of art through rigorous study and attention to the Old Masters.
17. MCD, Daily Memorandum, Oct. 18, 1802, *ibid*.
18. MCD, Rome, to Eleanor Foster Coffin, Portland, Dec. 19, 1802, JJW.
19. See, among others, Joseph Forsyth, *Remarks on Antiquities, Arts and Letters During an Excursion in Italy in the Years 1802 and 1803*. Keith Cook, ed. (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 2001), or J. G. LeMaistre, *Travels After the Peace of Amiens, through Parts of*

- France, Switzerland, Italy, and Germany (London: J. Johnson, 1806).
20. Gertrude Meredith to David Meredith, May 3, 1804, Meredith Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, quoted in Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 196, see also 220.
 21. MCD, Boston, to Margaret Manigault, December 11, 1816, MFP.
 22. MCD, Paris, April 24, 1803, "Journal II" MHS.
 23. Chloe Chard, "Antique Sculptures As Sights and Wonders: The Unease of Viewing and Commenting," *Richerche di Storia dell'arte* 72 (2000): 11.
 24. MCD, Florence, Nov. 20, 1802, and Rome, Daily Memorandum, Dec. 13, 1802, "Switzerland Journal."
 25. MCD, Florence, Nov. 20, 1802, *ibid.* Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture, 1500-1900* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981), 274-77. For commentary on the merits of the group see Forsyth, *Remarks on Antiquities*, 28; and Mariana Starke, *Travels in Italy Between the Years 1792 and 1798*, vol. 1 (London: R. Phillips, 1802) 257, n.
 26. MCD, Rome, Dec. [20] 1802, "Switzerland Journal."
 27. See for example, Murray Roston, *Changing Perspectives in Literature and the Visual Arts, 1650-1820* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990), 221-23.
 28. Quoted in John Sunderland, "The Legend and Influence of Salvator Rosa in England in the Eighteenth Century," *Burlington Magazine* (Dec. 1973): 786.
 29. MCD, Turin, Oct. 7, 1802, "Switzerland Journal." See also "On the Apennines," Nov. 6, 1802, *ibid.* In Switzerland, Derby made frequent reference to the work of Rousseau. On Radcliffe and the aesthetics of travel see Elizabeth Bohls, *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716-1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995).
 30. Angelica Kaufmann is the only living artist Derby mentions visiting in Italy. Joel Roberts Poinsett was a lifelong friend of the Derbys; he became president of the short-lived South Carolina Academy of Fine Arts and was the first president of the National Institute for the Promotion of Science, the forerunner of the Smithsonian Institution. MCD, Basel, Aug. 22, Interlaken, Sept. 3; Berne, Aug. 31; Geneva, Sept. 27, 1802, "Switzerland Journal."
 31. Reni's *Mary Magdalene* was in the Barberini Collection when Derby saw it. The *Lucretia* she admired at the Uffizi has proved impossible to identify precisely, as there are numerous versions by Reni.
 32. E. McSherry Fowble, "Without a Blush: The Movement Toward Acceptance of the Nude as an Art Form in America, 1800-1825," in *Winterthur Portfolio* (1974): 106, n. 12; Grose Evans, *Benjamin West and the Taste of His Times* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1959), 29-31.
 33. Matthew Baigell, *A Concise History of American Painting and Sculpture* (Boulder: Icon Editions, 1996), 28.
 34. Knapp's lengthy entry on *Lucretia* focuses on her role in the establishment of the Roman Republic and seeks to refute a contrary view by an Italian scholar. Knapp, *Female Biography*, 292-98.
 35. MCD, Rome, Dec. 15, 1802, "Switzerland Journal."
 36. MCD, Berne, Aug. 29, 1802, "Switzerland Journal." Johann August Nahl's monument was "sunk into the pavement like a grave" and depicted the shrouded Langhans and her "infant struggling with its little hands to release itself from the tomb," as described by William Coxe, *Travels in Switzerland. In a Series of Letters to William Melmoth, Esq.*, vol. 2 (London: T. Cadell, 1789), 308, a book Martha referred to often.
 37. MCD, Florence, Nov. 20, 1802, "Switzerland Journal."
 38. Other than noting that on July 4th, she "spent the morning partly at the Copleys," Derby says little about the circumstances of the commission in her journal (practically abandoned by this time). A letter from Mary Copley confirms that her father was still working on the portrait at the end of July, just prior to the Derbys' departure for America. MCD, July 4, 1803, London, "Journal II." Mary Copley, London, to her sister Elizabeth Copley Green, July 31, 1803, in Martha Babcock Amory, *The Domestic and Artistic Life of John Singleton Copley*, R.A. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1882), 246.
 39. Martha sat next to Richard Sheridan at a dinner in London. Reynolds's portrait of Mrs. Sheridan (Waddesdon Manor, National Trust) was shown at the Royal Academy in 1775, and William Dickinson's print was exhibited at the Society of Artists of Great Britain the following year. A number of notable women were portrayed as Saint Cecilia, though none with a harp, including Reynolds's portrait of the singer Mrs. Billington (1790), Sir Godfrey Kneller's portrait of Elizabeth Cromwell (1703), and George Romney's portraits of Lady Emma Hamilton (c. 1782-1786) and Mrs. Billington (n.d.). MCD, November 14, 1801, London, to Eleanor Coffin, Portland, JJW; Jules David Prown, *John Singleton Copley in England, 1774-1815* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1966), 279.
 40. Two precedents were Richard Cosway's portrait of Marianne Dorothy Harland, "A Lady Playing on the Harp," shown at the Royal Academy in 1779, and Rose Adélaïde Ducreux's self-portrait playing a harp exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1791. However, neither subject was portrayed as an allegorical figure.
 41. I am grateful to Nicholas M. Butler for pointing this out. See his "Votaries of Apollo: The St. Cecelia Society and the Patronage of Concert Music in Charleston, South Carolina, 1766-1820." (PhD diss., Indiana Univ., 2004).
 42. The author goes on to say that, "the attitude at a pianoforte, or at a harpsichord, is not so happily adapted to grace... it is hardly possible that it should not appear rather inelegant." *Regency Etiquette: The Mirror of Graces* (1811) by A Lady of Distinction, (reprint, Mendocino, Calif.: R.L. Shep, 1997), 194-95. See also David Selwyn, *Jane Austen and Leisure* (London: Hambledon Press, 1999), 126.
 43. Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1740-1850* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1930), 234, 247-48. See also Michelle Hargrave, "Neoclassical Dress and its Enemies: Female Neoclassical Dress in Georgian Satirical Prints and Prescriptive Literature, c. 1793-1820" (MA thesis, Bard Graduate Center, 2003).
 44. Martha Derby's dress is comparable to one belonging to Betsy Patterson Bonaparte (Evening Dress, France, 1804-1805, MMA, 1983.6.1), who in 1804 shocked Washington society by wearing a dress of Parisian design that was, as Rosalie Stier Calvert described it, "so transparent that you could see the color and shape of her thighs, and even more!" The shape of Derby's leg and a hint of warm skin tone are quite evident in her portrait. MCD, London, to Eleanor Coffin, March 1, 1802. JJW. Calvert quoted in Charlene Boyer Lewis, "Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte 'Ill Suited for the Life of a Columbian's Modest Wife,'" in *Journal of Women's History* 18 (2006): 32.
 45. Another example is Richard Samuel's *The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain* (1779), portraits of nine well known writers, scholars and painters, including Angelica Kaufmann, as the Muses in the Temple of Apollo. Gill Perry postulates that the use of a "seductive allegorical image" substituted for the "uniforms, poses and possessions" used for male portraiture. See her "'The British Sappho': Borrowed Identities and the Representation of Women Artists in Late Eighteenth-Century British Art," *Oxford Art Journal* 18 (1995): 48, 55.
 46. Margaret Manigault, Philadelphia, to Mrs. Joseph Allen Smith, Shrewsbury, NJ, Jan. 23, 1814, MFP. Thomas Wilson, *The Aristocracy of Boston: Who They Are, and What They Were: Being a History of the Business and Business Men of Boston, for the Last Forty Years* (Boston: Thomas Wilson, 1848), 14.
 47. Derby would have known Raphael's Saint Cecilia altarpiece from S. Giovanni, Bologna, as among the most esteemed works of the period. It was one of the few works Napoleon specifically enumerated as a condition of the armistice ending his Italian campaign. A small engraving of Saint Cecilia after Raphael is among the Derby-Peabody papers. MCD, Bologna, Nov. 4, 1802, "Switzerland Journal." Cecil Gould, *Trophy of Conquest: The Musée Napoleon and the Creation of*

- the Louvre (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 54.
48. Gerdt's comments referred to Thomas Sully's 1818 portrait of Eliza Ridgely. William H. Gerdt, "Natural Aristocrats in a Democracy: 1810-1870," in *American Portraiture in the Grand Manner: 1720-1920*, Michael Quick, ed. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1981), 35.
 49. Prown, *John Singleton Copley*, 388.
 50. MCD, Florence, to Harriet Coffin Sumner, Boston, [Nov. 1802], JJW.
 51. The house was torn down before 1865. Allen Chamberlain, *Beacon Hill: Its Ancient Pastures and Early Mansions* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1925), 166-67. See also Harold Kirker, *The Architecture of Charles Bulfinch* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1969), 201.
 52. R.A. McNeal, "Joseph Allen Smith, American Grand Tourist," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 4 (Summer 1997): 72-74, 80-81.
 53. William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley, D.D. Pastor of the East Church, Salem, Massachusetts*, vol. 3, ed. Peter Smith (1784-1819; reprint, Salem, Mass.: The Essex Institute, 1962), 55. The Derbys shopped for their casts in Paris with Robert R. Livingston, the U.S. Minister to France. He had earlier suggested a cast of the Apollo Belvedere to his sister and was instrumental in arranging for the Academy of Fine Arts in New York to purchase a set of casts after the antique. MCD, Daily Memorandums of May 11, 18-20, 1803, Paris, "Journal II." Lillian B. Miller, *Patrons and Patriotism: The Encouragement of the Fine Arts in the United States, 1790-1860*. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966), 91-92.
 54. On the American reception of nudity in art, see for example, Fowble, "Without a Blush."
 55. Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children [Mary Jane Peabody], *Old Boston for Young Eyes: A Letter From Grandmama to the Little Folks* (Boston: John Wilson & Son, 1880), 14-15.
 56. Kilbride, "Avoiding a 'Little, Mean, [and] Despicable' Republic." On the role of women in the Federalist party see for example, Rosemarie Zagarri, "Gender and the First Party System," in *Federalists Reconsidered*, Doron Ben-Atar and Barbara B. Oberg, eds. (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1998): 118-34.
 57. MCD, Boston, to Margaret Manigault, Jan 16, 1815, MFP.
 58. Robert F. Perkins, Jr. and William J. Gavin III, eds. *The Boston Athenaeum Art Exhibition Index, 1827-1874* (Boston: Library of the Boston Athenaeum, 1980), 40.
 59. One was to the Countess of Albany, who advised Newton to settle in London where he became a successful genre painter. Newton's portrait of Derby is in the collection of Historic New England. Samuel Longfellow, ed. *Final Memorials of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Boston: Ticknor & Co., 1887), 56. Clarence F. Jewett, ed., *The Memorial History of Boston* vol. 4 (Boston: James R. Osgood and Co., 1881-1883), 397.
 60. MCD, Boston, to Margaret Manigault, Jan. 4, 1822, and Dec. 26, 1818, MFP.
 61. See for example, A. Forbes, *The Rich Men of Massachusetts: Containing a Statement of the Reputed Wealth of About Fifteen Hundred Persons, with Brief Sketches of More Than One Thousand Characters* (Boston: W.V. Spencer, 1851), 24-25.
 62. Anon., "The Arts in America." *The United States Magazine* III, no. 5 (November 1856): 403.



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In Passionate Pursuit: A Memoir

by Alessandra Comini
George Braziller, 2004

Reviewed by Virginia Pitts Rembert

This is the lively and intriguing story we might have imagined from Alessandra Comini. A well-known and prolific art historian, who for more than three decades has taught at Southern Methodist University (SMU) in Dallas, she tells us, with much fascinating detail, about an interesting life that still has chapters to be written. Her great accuracy in remembering so much about the incidents, places, and personages along the way is due to the daily records she kept in forty-eight diaries.

Threaded throughout the memoir are her fascination with Vienna and with the Viennese artist Egon Schiele, which resulted in a doctoral dissertation at Columbia University as well as five publications in German and English. In fact, she begins her story in the middle, with the incident that became the "single most productive event" in her career (12): her discovery by secretive means of the prison in the provincial town of Neulengbach, Austria, where Schiele was incarcerated for three weeks because of his "immoral" drawings. Comini was twenty-eight when she discovered the prison, the same age as Schiele when he and his wife Edith died in the worldwide influenza epidemic of 1918. What first attracted her to Schiele in a small sampling of his draftsmanship in an exhibition at the University of California at Berkeley (in March 1963) was the artist's "relentless exposure of bodies and psyches under tension [within] the dual themes of sexuality and death" (13). This led eventually to her return to Vienna and a lengthy connection with the "intriguing world of Egon Schiele's family, sitters, settings, collectors, and works of art" (12).

Despite being told that Schiele's two surviving sisters were "verrückt" (crazy) recluses who did not even speak to one another, Comini sent each a letter requesting an interview. Soon after, she was invited by Melanie, the eldest, to

meet her at a restaurant. The encounter proved so successful that Melanie invited Comini to her home, and for the next eleven years, until Melanie's death at eighty-seven, Comini stayed with her when she visited Vienna.

While Comini learned as much as possible about Schiele and his family, Melanie showed as intense an interest in learning as much about her guest. And so Comini begins her own remarkable story:

Just how a young woman from "the Wild West" with an Italian surname and no Germanic background was lured into that far away, complex, multidimensional world of early twentieth-century Vienna is a tale in itself. It is a story with meandering chapters that first interlock at the moment of that Berkeley encounter with the work of Egon Schiele. I have traveled so much in search of art, sites and historic personalities that the results gloss much of what I teach and write still today, as repeatedly I find myself in the company not only of Schiele and Klimt, but also of Goethe and Beethoven, Napoleon and Goya, Ibsen and Munch, Duse and D'Annunzio, Mahler and Kollwitz, Picasso and Nijinsky (33).

Alessandra Comini was the firstborn of a remarkable set of parents, her mother Megan (self-changed from Eleanor Frances), a Minnesotan of Scotch-Irish background, and her Milanese Italian father Tino. The two met and fell in love on the Spanish island of Ibiza, where Tino was managing a small hotel. Megan, newly graduated from Barnard College, had gone to Spain in search of a literary favorite, Ernest Hemingway. Before the birth of their first daughter, the couple headed to Megan's family home in Winona, Minnesota, to provide their baby with American citizenship. They returned to Europe but, to escape the rise of Franco in Spain and Mussolini in Italy, they again fled to Winona. Soon after, with three-year-old "Sandrina" and baby brother Gian Paolo in tow, they drove to Dallas in search of warmer weather.

Both parents were amateur musicians; Megan played the harp and Tino the violin, mandolin, and banjo. He supported the family as a portrait photographer, and Megan later became a professor of languages. They were pleased to find many cultural advantages in Dallas: a fine art museum, theater, and symphony orchestra. Many of the performers and visiting notables Tino photographed also became dinner guests at the Comini home. He and Megan prepared a delicious Italian dinner and the children were included in the music, conversation, and fun. A new sister, Adriana, joined the family when Alessandra was thirteen.

The Cominis supplemented their daughter's education with lessons in photography, music, and languages. The family traveled frequently, and Megan taught her daughter not just to look at but to *see* each environment. With family encouragement, from early childhood to adulthood, she explored every interest: ballet, painting in oils and watercolors, piano, flute, cello, guitar, accordion, even bongos! She read vociferously and wrote poetry, attended summer music camps, and traveled with her family to Milan for visits with her grandparents. Throughout the book, Tino and Megan appear as energetic, fun-loving parents who made learning and life an adventure. When public education seemed inadequate, her parents sent her to private schools, one a Catholic Ursuline high school where she was thoroughly immersed in Latin, French, philosophy, logic, and religion.

Following in her mother's footsteps, Comini arrived at Barnard College in 1952, which proved to be an excellent fit. Among the rich list of courses Comini undertook were German, a language in which she would become almost as fluent as in Italian, and something she had never heard of—art history. Her professors, Marion Lawrence and Julius Held, became mentors and friends. This is just one example of the many times in Comini's rewarding life where she is befriended in a personal manner by those she meets and works with—professors, museum directors, artists and their cohorts, collectors, etc. Continuing her first love, music, she also joined the Columbia University choir and played chamber music trios.

What was to have been a study trip to Vienna in the fall of 1956 following her graduation from Barnard was altered by the outbreak of the Hungarian Revolution. Moved by the great influx of refugees into Vienna, Comini used her Opel station wagon to help with the rescue effort along the Austro-Hungarian border.

During the next few years Comini spent time in California, Mexico, and several other places taking various jobs—from secretary to folksinger. Her dilemma about whether to pursue graduate studies in music or art history was best epitomized by a reproduction she acquired of Angelica Kauffmann's c. 1760 *Self Portrait Hesitating between the Arts of Music and Painting*. On several stops in Italy, she saw her "Nonna" in Milan; the grandmother's Italianate effusiveness toward her family and smothering concern for the grandchildren make for some amusing anecdotes (as when Alessandra discovered her own and her brother's birthdates on markers in the family crypt).

As always, her parents generously supported their daughter's peregrinations, although they may not always have approved of her purchases. One was for a small motor-bike on which she made increasingly lengthy trips out of Perugia, where she had gone to study a pure form of the language, traveling as far east as Ravenna and, by selling the bike, as far south as Naples. Megan and Tino naturally expected their daughter to concentrate on Italian art history when she finally made her career choice, but they eventually conceded to her new direction, turn-of-the-century Vienna.

The parts of Comini's book that most intrigued me concerned why such a multi-talented person ultimately turned to art history. The answer lies in an account of her studies at Columbia with Dr. Held: "Never before had I encountered a subject that seemed to draw from so many fields, that incorporated so many subtopics, that required knowledge of different languages, and depended as much on educating the eye as well as the mind" (79).

After earning her doctorate at Columbia, she stayed on to teach for almost ten years before returning to Dallas in 1974, having been invited to

help develop the art history program at SMU. She was joined there by her friend Eleanor Tufts, who became chair of the division that included studio and art education as well as art history. To her own interests, Comini had added those of Tufts: Spanish art (beautifully represented at SMU by works in the Meadows Museum of Art), and a new field, feminist art. Tuft's pioneering book on the subject, *Our Hidden Heritage: Five Centuries of Women Artists*, was published in 1974. Comini and Tufts made dozens of trips together in search of neglected women artists. One of the most worthy, to whom they gave much attention, was the French painter Rosa Bonheur. They followed their many interests throughout Europe and America, studying artists both female and male, publishing widely, and bringing the excitement of their findings into their classrooms.

Comini tells in moving terms of the deaths of her parents and of the untimely death of Eleanor Tufts from ovarian cancer. She has continued the legacies of all three in her energetic and "passionate pursuit" of material on artists in general, and women artists in particular, to which she added authors, actors, and, above all, musicians such as Beethoven and Mahler. Travels to the Balkan and Scandinavian countries have added new subjects and details to her popular lectures.

Of course, she has continued her Schiele research, meeting many of that artist's collectors. A most charming story is of her seeking out a famed collector, Victor Fogarassy, and his family in Graz, Austria. She made such an impression on him, his wife Dollie, and their four daughters, that they "adopted" her into their family. Subsequently, Megan visited her daughter's other "family" in Austria, and Dollie Fogarassy came to see them in Texas.

Throughout this fascinating and very readable story are evidences of Comini's success with teaching. Her intriguing personality, her genuine love of art history, all of the efforts she has made to add photographs and detailed knowledge to her lectures, and her interdisciplinary approach to many areas of expertise have made her an unusually popular teacher at SMU and a widely known lecturer in several countries. To her students, along

with art history, she generously imparts wisdom about life:

Long ago I fashioned a life rule for myself that I dare to pass on to the more idealistic students who come my way. I call it the Three Ls—Living, Learning, and Loving, and sometimes I suspect that perhaps my classroom lectures in art history are really just subversive attempts to mold character and pass on one simple truth—that life is so precious, each day of it must be spent living it, learning from it, and loving, loving life, others, and oneself as well. (46) •

Virginia Pitts Rembert, an art historian and critic now based in Birmingham, Alabama, is a frequent contributor to *W&J*. She is the author, most recently, of books about Mondrian (2002) and Bosch (2004).

Women and Experimental Filmmaking

edited by Jean Petrolle and Virginia Wright Wexman
University of Illinois Press, 2005.

Reviewed by Shana McGuire

Feminist film critics have long recognized a special connection between women filmmakers and experimental cinema. While Annette Kuhn observes that "low investments in money and professionalism have meant that avant-garde cinema has historically been much more open than the film industry to women,"¹ Pam Cook links the avant-garde's preoccupation with personal self-expression to feminism's attention to the private and domestic spheres.² This affinity has nonetheless been fraught with many tensions and complexities. How are women to make a space for themselves and their specific concerns in an area such as the avant-garde, a tradition that has conventionally been defined by patriarchal and even

explicitly misogynistic tendencies?³ Rather than simply joining the male-dominated avant-garde, pioneering women experimental filmmakers questioned the very foundations of the context in which its practices were created, and the female artists who have followed in their footsteps have since carved out an alternate space, one in which their own subjectivities, bodies, experiences, and desires take center stage.

This revisionist spirit pervades *Women and Experimental Filmmaking*, an important and long-overdue collection of essays edited by Jean Petrolle and Virginia Wright Wexman. They contend that the importance of the contribution of women directors to experimental film practices has been either overlooked or undervalued, and that this anthology endeavors to correct such an anomaly. The directors highlighted in *Women and Experimental Filmmaking* prove that there is indeed a wealth of active female voices whose work provides a multitude of oppositional and supplementary discourses and also contributes significantly to traditions of formal innovation. The work included ranges from that of vanguard artists such as Germaine Dulac (1882-1942) and Maya Deren (1917-61), to the more contemporary films of well-established filmmakers such as Chantal Akerman (b. 1950), Yvonne Rainer (b. 1934), and Trinh T. Minh-ha (b. 1952), as well as the perhaps lesser-known work of artists like Lourdes Portillo (b. 1950), Anne Charlotte Robertson (b. 1949), and Rea Tajiri (b. 1958), among others.

Petrolle and Wright Wexman's introduction is essential reading as it provides an excellent overview not only of the essays that follow but also of the history of women's experimental cinema in general. They also include a section in which they attempt to differentiate the terms "experimental" and "avant-garde," stating that the latter may be thought of as a subcategory of the former. They assert that "avant-garde" refers typically to shorter, non-narrative films that remain somewhat on the margins of mainstream means of production and distribution, while "experimental" designates a broader, more open category. Although the distinctions made are well elucidated, the two terms nonetheless

seem to be used throughout the rest of the introduction (as well as the majority of the chapters) as though they are more or less interchangeable. This is, however, only a minor distraction, and the editors' essential point is made clear: consistently using only the expression "avant-garde" can potentially limit the scope of women's experimental cinema in that it is often understood solely in terms of formal and aesthetic innovation. Petrolle and Wright Wexman insist that formal concerns are indeed essential but that content must also weigh heavily in any definition of the field, bearing in mind that experimental films made by women "undertake to discover, among other things, formerly unknown principles at work in the lives and psyches of women," and that "even the most formalistic experimental films by women can also be viewed in political terms" (5). In fact, the gradual merging and eventual inextricability of the aesthetic and the political in women's experimental cinema is perhaps the most prominent concept running throughout the majority of the essays. Other tensions that Petrolle and Wright Wexman highlight as inhabiting feminist revisions and re-presentations of the avant-garde include the juxtaposition of narrativity and non-narrativity, positioning narrative pleasure in conjunction with narrative disruption, and allowing viewers to identify with what they see on the screen as well as maintain a critical distance. The essays are ordered in such a way as to provide the reader with a foundation for the book in the first two chapters by dealing with gender as well as institutional, definitional and historiographic issues within the avant-garde tradition. The remaining essays then proceed to bring to light the central issues and debates that haunt the work of these women filmmakers: challenging and revising former categories of representation and fixed images of femininity; resisting superficial categorization through the elaboration of hybrid and diverse film projects; re-presenting women's bodies, subjectivities, and private and public lives through autobiographical modes of expression; and expanding the vocabulary of the medium with daring formal experimentation.

William C. Wees's opening essay "No More Giants" gives a lucid account of the paradigm shift that took place in avant-garde and experimental film circles in the 1980s, the resulting tensions and repercussions of which shook the very foundations of the New American Cinema movement. Influential critics of the period openly denigrated the "moribund," "increasingly sterile, derivative, and self-involved" (22)⁴ experimental work of the new generation of filmmakers, while at the same time lamenting the loss of the original (male) "giants" of the avant-garde movement. Wees selects Leslie Thornton (b. 1951), Su Friedrich (b. 1954), and Abigail Child (b. 1948) as representatives of this momentous shift in avant-garde film practice insofar as they all reject what Wees refers to as the "Romantic, Emersonian, Great-Man Theory of individual creation" (22) that had long been perpetuated by the male-dominated official canon of great films and filmmakers. These women experimentalists dared to tread upon the revered territory of the "original masters," all the while challenging former hierarchies of categorization and indicating new directions for the avant-garde. What is perhaps most striking about the work of these filmmakers are the ways in which they fully engage with the contemporary world in all its subtlety and complexity. By dissolving the boundaries between high art and low popular culture, by fusing the personal and the social, the aesthetic and the political, the critical and the cultural, Thornton, Friedrich, and Child find harmony in their multiplicity. Wees concludes that their works "clearly reveal the unifying control of a single maker, but it is a unity incorporating diversity—diversity of sources, of cinematic styles, of voices, and modes of representation" (25).

Diversity is also a hallmark of the work of Chantal Akerman, a woman who has been called "arguably the most important European filmmaker of her generation."⁵ In his essay "Chantal Akerman's Revisionist Aesthetic," Jerry White challenges traditional understandings of the avant-garde and instead chooses to revel in the challenging and ambiguous aesthetic eccentricities of Akerman's filmic creations. By closely analyzing

News from Home (1976), *Les années 80* (1983), and *A Couch in New York* (1996)—three seemingly very divergent films created at different points in her career—White successfully demonstrates that Akerman's work eschews critical simplifications and binary divisions by engaging with both formally rigorous experimentation as well as traditional notions of narrative pleasure. Always paradoxical and never easy to classify, Akerman combines an intriguing mix of distance and emotion, criticism and lyricism, subversion and pleasure in her films; in so doing, White argues, she exemplifies the ways in which women's cinematic experimentalism refers to, departs from, and revises avant-garde traditions.

In her eloquent essay, "The Violence of Desire in Avant-Garde Films," Maureen Turim posits that much contemporary experimental filmmaking is indebted to the historical avant-gardes of Dada and Surrealism. These are traditions, however, in which male artists are notorious for positioning the female within their works as an object passively receiving the violence inflicted upon her. Turim contends that female surrealist artists therefore struggled to locate their own fantasies and expressions of desire within these doctrines, and thus were unable to fully appropriate violence as representative of their own power. In a search for alternatives, Turim then charts a path through an impressive array of avant-garde women filmmakers who use violence—or, more specifically, the physical and metaphorical act of cutting—in order to re-appropriate the power of such acts. Turim begins by exploring the violent imagery in the works of pioneers such as Germaine Dulac and Maya Deren, and then proceeds through discussions of the somewhat more recent works of several influential experimental filmmakers, including Abigail Child, Yvonne Rainer, Su Friedrich, as well as the performance artist Marina Abramovic (b. 1946). Turim astutely observes that, rather than evade it, these women are willing to boldly represent violence in their work both in an effort to portray women as active agents in control of their own

subjectivity as well as to heal the violent wounds of the past and present.

Internationally acclaimed independent filmmaker Nina Menkes (b. 1963) is the subject of Jean Petrolle's provocative contribution, "Allegory, Politics, and the Avant-Garde." Petrolle examines the ways in which Menkes manipulates particular forms of postmodern aesthetics—namely fragmentation, allusion, and allegory—in her 1996 film *The Bloody Child: An Interior of Violence*. Petrolle observes that "allegory enables a filmmaker to represent material that, because of its abstract and invisible qualities, resists representation" (15). Instead of perpetuating the voyeurism and sensationalism often attached to images of woman-as-victim, Menkes's elliptical stylistic strategies distance and alienate the viewer, thereby eliciting a more active, critical response. Petrolle argues that the allusive nature of allegory allows Menkes to explore the invisible, nonphysical, psycho-spiritual dimensions of violence, which, in turn, lead the viewer to a deeper understanding of violence as a vast network of socially destructive forces.

Petrolle's essay successfully shows how Menkes's film makes startling connections between an individualized story of an act of violence and more large-scale acts of war and imperialism. Such linkages of the personal and the political are also investigated in Kathleen McHugh's contribution, "History and Falsehood in Experimental Autobiographies." By relating the affectivity and individualism of the self to the material world and the social conventions and political institutions to which the self is subjected, media artists Lourdes Portillo, Rea Tajiri, and Cheryl Dunye (b. 1966) enact what McHugh might refer to as a "historicization of the self." She also shows how these women experimentalists reorient, transform and expand the traditions of autobiography in an effort to reveal the representational gaps and flaws that they see as intrinsic to the cinema. Suspicious of the veracity of depictions of history, Portillo, Tajiri and Dunye each attempt to capture lost or absent people and experiences through the creation of "false images." According to McHugh, it is perhaps only through falsehood and invention that the truth of these women's realities can fully be expressed.

Links to the autobiographical mode are also evident in Sally Potter's (b. 1949) autofictional *The Tango Lesson* (1997), the experimental film discussed in Lucy Fischer's playful yet pedagogical contribution entitled "Passion, Politics, and Production in *The Tango Lesson*." Fischer leads her readers through a series of ten "lessons" that can be learned from Potter's film: lessons, for example, on the difficulties burdening the female author; on reworking the rigid feminist binaries of sexual pleasure and oppression; and on seeing anew cultural notions of masculinity, femininity, and sexual dynamics. However, Fischer's most engaging arguments deal with her investigation of the ideological implications of the tango itself. In spite of accusations of melodramatic excess proffered by some disparaging critics, she enthusiastically demonstrates the extent to which Potter's film is a highly theoretical meditation on gender politics interpreted through the provocative "ideological dance" of the tango.

If Potter's films use melodramatic excess to deal with the complexity of both art and romance, Yvonne Rainer's work "makes melodrama politically progressive" (147). Patricia Levin's chapter, "Yvonne Rainer's Avant-Garde Melodramas," draws our attention to Rainer's progression from minimalism's "neutral body" to a more political engagement with a sexed and gendered subject. Levin shows that, in addressing complex questions of sexuality and identity, Rainer's films open up a space in which the chaos of the everyday experiences of women's lives is allowed to unfold. Again, like Potter, Rainer is also a former dancer and performance artist, and as such, her avant-garde films evoke powerful preoccupations with the body, its movement and gestures, as well as the ways in which the body is shaped and represented by mass culture.

The significance of corporeality pervades the work of several of the experimental filmmakers in this volume, but perhaps none more so than that of Safi Faye (b. 1943) and Trinh T. Minh-ha. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster's essay, "Experiments in Ethnography," gives a compelling account of how Faye and Minh-ha position the woman's body at the center of their experimental ethno-

graphic documentaries, connecting, as Foster asserts, “the body to subjectivity and letting the presence of the body problematize narration, so that the narration cannot pretend to suppress or contain difference” (179). During the course of her discussion, Foster draws upon the theories of several prominent thinkers such as Jean-Louis Baudry, Paul Ricoeur, and Walter Benjamin to demonstrate the ways in which Faye and Minh-ha reinvent and reinvigorate experimental documentary by combining self-reflexive techniques with innovative narration. Foster convincingly shows how the female body in Faye’s and Minh-ha’s films is thereby liberated from the constraints typically at work in ethnographic and documentary film.

In “Two Sisters,” a somewhat shorter yet entirely absorbing chapter by Amy Lawrence, the field of independent animation is brought to the forefront. The sisters in question are Faith Hubley (1924-2001) and Caroline Leaf (b. 1946), two of the best known independent animators, who have exhibited a particular interest in formal experimentation throughout their successful careers. Lawrence’s chief concern is to show how the techniques manipulated by each filmmaker “make literal her views of sisterhood” (195), the term “sisterhood” being used here in the familial, not political, sense. Lawrence analyzes Hubley’s *Windy Day* (1968) and Leaf’s *Two Sisters* (1990) in an attempt to illustrate how each filmmaker uses animation to negotiate relationships between sisters. Despite their contrasting views and techniques, Lawrence confirms that both filmmakers succeed in painting a complex portrait of how “self and subjecthood emerge in the emotionally charged environment of sisterhood” (201).

The final essay in this impressive collection is, in many ways, a fitting tribute to all women filmmakers whose experimental explorations have long been under-celebrated in the male-dominated history of cinema. Petrolle and Wright Wexman are to be congratulated for choosing to conclude the volume with an essay that offers, as they suggest, “an altogether peaceful, creative, and lyrical metaphor” (16) for women’s cultural and artistic contributions—that of cultivating a garden. Scott MacDonald’s elegant essay

“Avant-Gardens” investigates women’s filmic depictions of the garden, a domestic outdoor sanctuary that they envision as “a safe space within which the spirit can be nurtured despite the demands of an outer world whose focus and velocity tend to be determined by men” (209). MacDonald honors the work of Marie Menken (1909-70), Carolee Schneeman (b. 1939), Marjorie Keller (1950-94), Anne Charlotte Robertson and Rose Lowder (b. 1941), artists whose autobiographical modes of filmmaking blend images of the domestic and the Edenic, the psychic and the social, the erotic and the organic. It is through images of the garden that these women express an almost utopian vision of emotional and spiritual connection with both the people and the natural world that surround them. For MacDonald, this vision is essentially one of hope and of the creative potential of the domestic sphere, a space in which all humans, in some capacity, must coexist.

Even if the work of many women experimental filmmakers is not currently at the forefront of critical discourse on avant-garde cinema, MacDonald, as well as the other contributors to this anthology, do much to show how experimental films made by women have shaped and influenced their peers, both past and present. Other details worth mentioning: the volume contains an up-to-date filmography for each artist studied which sometimes includes email addresses and websites; the authors also provide an extensive bibliography as well as a thorough index of artists, writers, film titles and key concepts. The one imperfection I will point out is the lack of images in the volume; although this does not detract from the over-all effectiveness of the collection, accompanying such visually evocative texts with images would have only rendered them all the more intriguing. I unreservedly recommend this collection both to those already familiar with the experimental films and filmmakers under analysis, as well as to the newcomer who is yet to discover the richness and diversity of the work that women experimentalists are contributing to the history of cinema. •

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NOTES

1. Annette Kuhn, *Women’s Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 185.
2. Pam Cook, “The Point of Self-Expression in Avant-Garde Film,” in J. Caughie, ed. *Theories of Authorship: A Reader* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 271-81.
3. For example, the now infamous opening sequence of Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel’s 1929 avant-garde film *Un Chien Andalou* depicts a man slicing a woman’s eye with a razor.
4. J. Hoberman, *Vulgar Modernism: Writing on Movies and Other Media* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 174.
5. *Ibid.*, 148.

Frida Kahlo

edited by Emma Dexter and Tanya Barson
Tate Publishing, 2005

I Will Never Forget You... Frida Kahlo to Nickolas Muray: Unpublished Photographs and Letters

by Salomon Grimberg
Schirmer/Mosel, 2004

Reviewed by Lynda Hoffman-Jeep

Perched side-by-side on the shelf in the gift shop at the Tate Modern during the Frida Kahlo exhibit (June 9–October 9, 2005), these two books address what it means in terms of Kahlo to see and to be seen, as well as to write and to be read. The catalogue of the Tate show, the first monographic exhibition dedicated to a Latin American artist at that museum, curated by Emma Dexter and Tanya Barson, features five distinct studies. For newcomers to Kahlo, there is a biographical essay by Christina Burrus, and “A



Fig. 1. Nickolas Muray, *Frida with Magenta Rebozo* (1939) (printed for André Breton). Courtesy of Nickolas Muray Photo Archives.

Frida Kahlo Glossary” compiled by Tanya Barson, which “attempts to provide an insight into the breadth of Kahlo’s work while addressing some of her key subjects, symbols, influences and sources” (55). Also included are a helpful chronology of the artist’s life (1907–54), a list of the exhibited works, seventy full-page color plates, and many additional photographs and color reproductions that embellish each section.

Emma Dexter lays down the approach of the catalogue in her opening essay “The Universal Dialectics of Frida Kahlo.” Citing Kahlo’s fascination with opposites and dualisms, she uses this matrix as a foundation upon which to illuminate the artist’s multidisciplinary intellectual and thus creative canvas. The section headings of Dexter’s essay (Mexico, The Problem with Surrealism, The United States, Still Life or The Life Force, Reconciliation) give only a rough hint of their actual content, for the scope of her study transcends these categories.

Dexter aptly refers to a little-known study by Salomon Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo: The Little Deer* (1997), that accompanied an exhibit at Miami (Ohio) University School of Fine Arts, as a pertinent example of a multidisciplinary approach used to explain the complex iconography

that Kahlo uses in *The Little Deer*. To the disciplines that Grimberg enlists in his study (psychology, gender studies, pre-Columbian history, Mexican pop culture of the 1930s, and Hindu studies), Dexter adds European modernism and the Mexican Revolution. Dexter plots out an inspiring essay that opens our eyes to what Kahlo saw and how she read her world.

Gannit Ankori’s essay “Frida Kahlo: The Fabric of her Art” and Oriana Baddeley’s “Reflecting on Kahlo: Mirrors, Masquerade and the Politics of Identification” might be read as companion pieces in so far as they both address identity. Drawing on her 2002 monograph *Imaging Her Selves: Frida Kahlo’s Poetics of Identity and Fragmentation*,¹ Ankori focuses on Kahlo’s personal identity as it relates to her family heritage, childhood, Mexican social structures, as well as various national, religious and cultural paradigms of her era. She further places Kahlo’s self-representations within the context of European and Latin American art.

Baddeley mediates the shift in Kahlo fascination “from the politics of identity to the politics of identification” (50). She discusses Salma Hayak’s portrayal of Kahlo in the film *Frida* (2003) together with intertextual responses by contemporary artists Julio Galán, Joe Bravo, and Yasumasa Morimura. While Ankori explains how Kahlo saw herself, Baddeley addresses how others read and see Kahlo.

Raquel Tibol’s contribution, “Pain—Love—Liberation: Frida Kahlo’s Words,” introduces a novel approach to understanding Kahlo through her writings: the letters, diary entries, poems, essays, brief messages that Tibol has collected and published in *Escrituras de Frida Kahlo* (2004). She goes so far as to claim that Kahlo “wrote a key chapter in confessional literature” (191). With her collection of Kahlo’s writings, Tibol offers us “Kahlo as seen by Kahlo” (189). Certainly, the study of Kahlo’s writings in their own right or paired with images is an alluring invitation to scholars, one that Grimberg begins to tackle in *I Will Never Forget You*.

I Will Never Forget You... is a stunning book, with 179 photographs, most of Kahlo herself, including 25 color and 31

duotone plates, taken by Nickolas Muray, one of the foremost commercial photographers of his day. The volume ends with a chronology of Muray, followed by a collection of miniature prints of all of the photos he took of Kahlo, reproduced chronologically in black and white. Woven sensitively into Grimberg’s annotated essay are a number of letters, in English, from Kahlo to Muray, written between 1931 and 1940. Thankfully he also gives us two full letters and various parts of letters that Muray wrote to Kahlo between May 1939 and September 1941, when their love relationship came to an abrupt end.

The first pages of the book give us an overview of Muray’s own interesting biography up to May 1931 when he first met Kahlo. There are striking similarities between Muray and Guillermo Kahlo, Frida’s father: both were Hungarian Jews who studied photography in Germany and then became well-respected photographers in their adopted countries, the United States and Mexico, respectively.²

Grimberg’s study gains momentum and becomes even more compelling after Muray meets Kahlo in May 1931. The back and forth of her letters to him, with or without small drawings or paintings, countered by the striking photographs he took of her—some familiar, some never before published—sometimes accompanied by a letter, make for rewarding reading and looking. This reader of *I Will Never Forget You...* became enthralled with the rhythm and complex dynamics of this match. Grimberg is at his best when he analyzes an individual painting like *Xóchitl* (1938), or takes us into the heart of a photo session like the one that yielded the exquisite magenta rebozo photographs, one of which is on the back cover of the dust jacket.

All of this is contextualized within 1930s Mexico, the United States, and Europe. Because Muray was among the first generation making color photographs for popular magazines, we glean some fascinating details concerning the history and development of this medium in the service of fashion and celebrity photography in the U.S. The raw intimacy revealed in these letters and in many of the photos deserves even more detailed analysis. One

can read, for example, the poetics visible in Muray's photos of Kahlo. Figure 1 presents a striking example of these visual poetics: on an emotional level, Grimberg reads the photos as suggesting "a quiet knowingness that lies somewhere between something shared and something kept secret."³ In terms of body language, Kahlo's relaxed, leaning pose in these photographs speaks to her willing and welcome submission to Muray. Correspondingly, we see how Kahlo paints her situation with words in her letters to him when she writes: "I got thinner with the illness, so when I will be with you, you will only

blow, and ... up she goes! The five floors of the La Salle Hotel" (23).

It seems that there is always more to discover about Frida Kahlo, and these two books are fine additions to the ever-growing multitude of literature on this popular artist. Both provide insights of substance into her fascinating highly personalized images as well as opening new avenues for investigation. •

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Notes

1. For Salomon Grimberg's review, see *WAJ* 26:1 (S/S 2005): 50-52.
2. Two recent studies address the person and professional renown of Guillermo Kahlo. See Gaby Franger, ed., *Fridas Vater: Der Fotograf Guillermo Kahlo* (2005), and Rainer Huhle, *Einführung in das Werk Guillermo Kahlos* (2005).
3. Salomon Grimberg, email communication with the reviewer, Feb. 4, 2007.

Gertrude Stein: Woman without Qualities

by G. F. Mitrano
Ashgate, 2005

Reviewed by Julie L'Enfant

Clifton Fadiman once called Gertrude Stein the "Mamma of Dada," a sobriquet that evokes her expansive personality and her position at the center of an irreverent avant-garde.¹ G. F. Mitrano's *Woman without Qualities*, on the other hand, takes a more sober view of Stein as "an American woman who fought her way into literary culture" (1), a writer who positioned herself in relation to modernity, which Mitrano defines, in part, as the movement from the unique individual to "the anonymity of average humanity" and the liberation of art into life. Artists significantly influenced this development in Stein, and this study covers some new ground in Stein's well-known role in the visual culture of her day.

The title is adapted from Robert Musil's *Man without Qualities*, which presents the image of a man in a book-lined room looking at the world through a window. This disjunction between private and public, the wavering between private writing and public expression, also characterized Stein. As Stein wrote of herself in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, "she

always was, she always is, tormented by the problem of the external and the internal" (12).² In Chapter One, "The Woman without Qualities," Mitrano focuses on the image found near the beginning of the *Autobiography* of Stein's unpublished notebooks stacked on an Italian Renaissance table in the picture-lined atelier of 27 rue de Fleurus. Stein tended to present herself as having no other work than looking at pictures. Her transformation from collector to artist-writer was, she said, brought about by Cézanne, whose "fluid communication between the mind and the world" (18) tapped into ideas familiar to Stein from her former teacher and mentor, William James. Stein also responded to Cézanne's lack of respect for class boundaries in his presentation of the "stark truth of the material world" as compared with "the sensual evocation of the collective soul" characteristic of Renoir, the painter her brother Leo preferred (19). Cézanne became, for Stein, the model of an innovative artist who labored in obscurity but ultimately gained the recognition she craved. Stein's transformation into this artist-writer, as well as her discovery of her lesbianism, is reflected in photographs showing her change from a buxom corseted young woman—a traditional object of desire—to a modern "sensual intellectual" in loose, comfortable clothing.

The idea that identity is to be found in one's visual image is explored in a chapter titled "Mabel Dodge, Patronage, and the

Velvet Garment," which analyzes two photographs of Stein by Alvin Langdon Coburn showing Stein seated, Buddha-like, in a loose velvet robe. The robe, which evokes the *kosode*, a precursor of the kimono, is rich in cultural associations, from high art to contemporaneous fashion, including the vogue for exoticism spread by Diaghilev's Ballet Russe; it has the effect of cutting across cultures and times. As Mitrano puts it, the viewer is invited to imagine Stein as a "center of cultural mobility" (55). Yet the robe is also "over-determined" and a signal of Stein's anxiety as a writer at the edge of culture. That unease is reflected in Stein's "Portrait of Mabel Dodge at Villa Curonia" (1912), which examines the role of art objects in the construction of Dodge's identity, pointing up the snares of the worldly comfort Stein herself so enjoyed.

Another chapter on image, "The Looks of Modern Culture," is an excursus on Adrienne Monnier and Sylvia Beach, not so much because of their association with Stein and her circle as because of the visual similarity between Monnier, who usually wore a voluminous cape, and the robed Stein. Mitrano sees Monnier and Beach, along with Stein, Janet Flanner, Djuna Barnes, Berenice Abbott, and others, as part of a community of women who used clothes and photography to "assert their intellectual significance" (72). Mitrano's analysis of photographs of Monnier and

Stein is couched in the abstruse language of post-structural criticism that dominates these early chapters. For example, "Her [Monnier's] characteristic cape is the visual embodiment of [her] balancing work of reparation to keep modernity on the side of a timeless culture without letting it fall into history. Her cloak or mantle, which in Latin means veil (*mantum*), covers tattered cultural units" (77). Photographed in a peasant dress with apron, Monnier is seen as "an object of the imagination linking *Ulysses'* Penelope to post-structuralist presymbolic negativity" (76). Photos of Stein sitting in her atelier surrounded by pictures relate to "the discipline of autotelic repetition (words derived from images), and thus of an individual seduction of forms that could run out of hand" (83). Although in general Mitrano treats Stein as beyond gender—as Stein herself was wont to do—this chapter does discuss the ambiguous attitude toward gender identity to be found in certain "butch-femme" photographs of Stein and Toklas, contrasting these with Surrealist photographs that use gender ambiguity in order to "flee matter."³

"Picasso and Paper," the fifth chapter, examines Stein's writing in the 1920s in connection with her pivotal friendship with Picasso. He exemplifies European modernism, characterized for Mitrano by a new attention to knowledge and information in the population at large and leading to an art that becomes more and more like life itself. Stein's first public lecture, "Composition as Explanation" (1926), framed this phenomenon as "the thing seen by everyone living in the living they are doing" (91).⁴ Whereas Stein's earlier use of repetition had been a protest against bourgeois conformity, Mitrano calls this new phase "an Orphic accord with the external world" (92). Stein characterized Picasso, who had an extraordinary ability to externalize his private language, as "one having something coming out of this one" (100).⁵ Mitrano examines how his 1906 portrait of Stein succeeded in giving her a "public face," though one that is masklike, beyond all emotion. The use of a mask, she says, betrays Picasso's anxiety, and represents his modernity tempered by the

inclusion of an old-fashioned ruffle and brooch, though "in Stein's theory of value, anxiety is the aesthetic measure of the modern soul" (99).

Chapter Six, "From Song to Image: *Four Saints in Three Acts*," discusses Stein's transition into public performance. For the libretto of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, an opera with music by Virgil Thomson first performed in 1934, Stein chose the unlikely subject of Saints Teresa of Avila and Ignatius of Loyola because, in Mitrano's words, saints "represent a social body that is least disbanded by conflict and violence" (112). For Stein, the libretto was "landscape writing" because, like a landscape or still life, it could be contemplated without fear or anxiety. Saint Teresa, a childhood heroine of Stein's and also a central figure in William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1901-02), is understood as making a statement on the woman artist. Whereas James condemned Saint Teresa for making literary capital of her mystical experiences, however, Stein sees Teresa's writing as a legitimate form of inquiry, a way of knowing. According to Mitrano, Thomson's accessible music, Florine Stettheimer's colorful sets, and a charismatic all-black cast coalesced to transform Stein's experimental prose into a rousing public event.

Mitrano's final chapter, "'The Visitor': *Lectures in America*," shows Stein's actual emergence in public. While audiences at her lectures were sometimes irritated, even enraged, at Stein's cavalier or childish use of language, they were also charmed by her homeliness and humor. Mitrano discusses the lectures as performances that tapped into the nineteenth-century struggle of women for full participation in public life. Unlike her mannish nineteenth-century predecessors, however, Stein deliberately struck a domestic note, amplified by the presence of Toklas in the front row. As Mitrano puts it, "In the public eye [Toklas] was the reminder of the private destination of the writing of Gertrude Stein, whose modernist star had risen in the parlor of her home" (136). It is also useful, Mitrano suggests, to view the lectures as operas, where Stein's language could be valued precisely because of its rhythm and repetition, even its lack of conventional sense. Stein's unique voice

was like that of a diva, fascinating the crowd with its complex mix of transgression and vulnerability.

It is Mitrano's conclusion that Stein, as a public woman, came to believe that innovation could be achieved "only by crossing that dividing line symbolized by the stage, by the page, or by the canvas" (147). One must, in other words, become a doer rather than a spectator. This hardly is a revolutionary idea for artists and writers, nor is it unique to those positioning themselves in relation to "modernity." Other aspects of Stein's construction of her identity as an artist-writer are so common as to amount to clichés: she kept notebooks, she worried about getting published and achieving public recognition, she was uncertain and anxious about departing from sexual and artistic conventions. She was an American exile, and her relation to her "fathers" in the American tradition remained problematic. And Stein's struggle was not as hermetic as Mitrano's study would suggest. The image of Stein writing in private in her picture-lined atelier does not seem to take into account the Gertrude Stein of the salon, talking to and, even more importantly, *listening* to, Apollinaire, Marcel Duchamp, Ernest Hemingway, Georges Antheil, and others who were experimenting with simplification, rhythm, repetition, and the like. In fact, recent scholarship connects Stein to Dada and experimental theater.⁶ Mitrano does explore the roles Cézanne and Picasso played in Stein's development, but her main concern is their various notions of modernity.

Mitrano's book had its origins in a doctoral dissertation and remains in the heavily-documented dissertation style. Her stated aim is to enter into the post-structuralist critical discourse (2). That she has done. But her study is most enlightening when she departs from abstruse theoretical language and writes with clarity and insight on Stein and her public, as she does in the final two chapters, where Stein's complex personality begins to be felt. The quality of the book itself must be remarked upon as well: the dense text is printed on mediocre paper, and the sparse black-and-white illustrations are not of high quality. It is likely that only libraries will be willing to pay the high price of \$95. *Woman without*

Qualities is a conscientious study, but it will be of value primarily to scholars of early modern art and literature who share its post-structuralist approach. •

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NOTES

1. "Gertrude Stein Dies in France, 72," *New York Times Magazine*, July 28, 1946, <http://www.nytimes.com/specials/magazine/4/articles/stein1.html>, accessed 6/22/2006.
2. Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, ed. Carl Van Vechten, in *The Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 112.
3. Mitrano's point that Surrealists wished to "flee matter" as embodied in the female form runs counter to the idea that male Surrealists looked to women as muses

because they were so closely connected to the unconscious. See Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 13-65.

4. Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation," in *Gertrude Stein: Writings 1903-1932*, eds. Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman, vol. 1 (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 523.
5. Gertrude Stein, "Picasso," in *Portraits and Prayers* (New York: Random House, 1934), 18.
6. See, for example, Sarah Bay-Cheng, *Mama Dada: Gertrude Stein's Avant-Garde Theater* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

Painting the Difference, Sex and Spectator in Modern Art

by Charles Harrison
University of Chicago Press, 2006

Reviewed by Britta C. Dwyer

In its title, or more correctly subtitle, "Painting the Difference, Sex and Spectator in Modern Art" by Charles Harrison seems tainted by association: on the one hand with the popular media production "Sex and the City," on the other with Otto Weininger's fin-de-siècle publishing sensation *Sex and Character* (1903). Linking past and present in intriguing ways, both were phenomena that variously possessed the power to shock. This publication may not shock as much as challenge the idea of "sex" and "spectator" by looking anew at iconic works from the late-nineteenth century until today. In this book Harrison asks: What is the actual mode of vision? How are we to understand the interaction between subject and spectator across the picture plane? What is the relationship between the representation of women and the modernist project?

A book principally addressed to paintings of women by male artists, it is divided into five parts, each with chapters that address "exceptional paintings." Part I, "Looking Out, Looking In," has two chapters, and in the first, "The Picture Plane," Harrison outlines the framework of how he intends the

concept of the picture plane to be understood. As normally established it defines both the full extent—the breadth and depth—of the represented field of view, the literal surface of the canvas. But, he adds, given the illusion of depth, the picture plane may also be thought of as marking a division between the actual world that the spectator inhabits and the represented space that the painting contains. Harrison's concepts of an "imaginary spectator" and the "actual spectator" and the idea of an exchange across the picture plane provide the basic tools in his theoretical structure. Stressing factive and compositional aspects, that is the two-dimensional surface of a picture plane, he draws heavily on his own writings and consciously prioritizes his interpretation of a modernist, read formalist, tradition in the criticism of art.

In Chapter 2, "Renoir," Harrison develops a discussion of the significant use of the picture plane with a special focus upon Renoir's *Les parapluies* (c.1881-85; Fig. 1). As this account shapes the guidelines to his argument in general, I discuss it in more detail. The painting is a composition as imagined by Renoir himself looking through the eyes of a bourgeois man at an attractive working-class girl who is passing through the crowd as it was beginning to rain. Harrison points at various features to qualify an imaginary spectator as a means of access to the given painting's historical moment: the curious outward stare of the little girl at the right of the painting clearly directed at an occupied viewpoint, the shallowness of the



Fig. 1. Auguste Renoir, *Les parapluies* (c.1881-85), oil on canvas, 71" x 45". National Gallery, London.

pictorial space and the angle of vision to which the entire composition submits, and most poignantly, there is the evident self-consciousness of the soberly dressed young woman herself. Her meticulously described expression is explained as the fitting response to an interested regard, an imagined flâneur, and privileges a male viewpoint. But, insofar as the young woman's self-conscious response is set at the heart of the painting, it is, he claims, productive of a mode of reflection in which *her* viewpoint is also to be

imagined. While Harrison does not want to make Renoir a protofeminist, the painting counters the accusation that his art is the expression of a kind of unrelenting male chauvinism. In other words, in composing the picture Renoir adopted a certain imaginary viewpoint—a mask as it were—and wearing that mask had certain positive consequences for the pictured woman. He argues that with the advent of modernity women represented in paintings began to gaze out of the picture plane to confront the viewer, thereby shifting the way the spectator interacted with the two-dimensional surface of the image. In fact, it is at the level of the picture plane, Harrison claims, that key modern issues related to gender and sexuality are worked out. He boldly concludes, “This is tantamount to saying that paintings that are pictures of women played a crucial part in the development of a distinctly modern art” (36).

In Part II, “Fantasy and Imagination,” Harrison reviews the previous argument, privileging Manet’s works *Le Dejeuner sur l’Herbe* (1863), *Olympia* (1863), and *A Bar at the Folies-Bergere* (1882) as the first notable occasion in which a distinctly modernist technique and approach was seen to serve a critical exchange of self-consciousness across the barriers of both sex and class. To support this, he provides a working distinction between fantasy and imagination. While Cabanel’s classicized Venus (in *Birth of Venus*, 1863) is projected into a timeless world of cultural reverie, depending on a willing submission to fantasy, in Manet’s works of pictured women we are dealing with different levels of response: on the one hand the imaginary circumstance we encounter as we look into a given picture to play the part of the client as male, second the countering sense of the woman’s self-consciousness as she looks back out through the picture plane. Harrison argues that the late-nineteenth century is a turning point in how gazes across the plane relate and interrelate. For all his discursive and circuitous arguments, there is a reward at the end of this section. Here it works, and I stress here, because I have reservations of how his conceptualizations hold up later in this study.

A chapter titled “Cézanne” is not so much concerned with how women look in the active or passive sense, but typically with the artist’s processes and techniques, as in his *Bathers* (c.1900-05) and also to a certain extent in *The Orgy* (c.1870) and *L’eternel feminine* (c.1877). What is obviated in Cézanne’s images of women is the relation between actual and imaginary spectator by which the fact of difference was insinuated in Manet and Renoir. In as much as Cézanne was an unparalleled and a highly idiosyncratic artist of his time, he would not “wear the mask” that allowed for the invention of subjects. Both inventor and the discoverer of his images, Cézanne identified the spectator consistently and wholly with himself to the exclusion of others who might be imagined as equivalent (78-79).

In Part III, “Modern Feelings,” Harrison devotes two chapters to Degas with a special focus upon the large format pastels of bathers and also the small monotype brothel scenes. The main claim in the first Degas chapter is to provide an alternative reading to the works in question as sadistic and voyeuristic in motivation and effect. In the second he establishes and defends that reading. This is by no means an easy matter. Of course it would be easier, he admits, to take on the role of the male voyeur. But, any painting can be made to carry a broad range of conflicting and contradictory meanings under different descriptions. So, he asks: How is a nude woman to be represented as an inhabitant of the modern world? How is a woman to be shown *in art* (118, Harrison’s italics) as if she were alone and not being seen? How are we to recognize the distinctive nature of the other’s experience/ the other’s feelings? He is opposed to the conclusions drawn by feminists Anthea Callen and Griselda Pollock that the artist was involved in the degradation and abuse of women, literally and figuratively. To be sure, the prostitutes are by no means sympathetically depicted. As Degas shows them, they are for the most part ugly, middle-aged, tired, and worn. Some monotypes of single figures depict women in private in what appears to be an off-duty time, others show a comfortable informality in social relations, such as moments of interaction among the

women when male clients are absent. In sum, “What they are is both more matter-of-fact and more richly steeped in the materials of irony than on any public discourse on sexual morality. Technically they combine decorative vitality with an incisiveness of observation that continually skirts the margins of caricature” (110). Turning to the bathing scenes, he writes that in *Woman Entering a Bath* (c.1890) the figure is not debased but uncanonized and unposed; to an unbiased eye she shows how an actual woman may look as she enters a bath (119). Other relevant clues for an alternative reading of the bathers come in the form of compositional devices and techniques. He elaborates on the expressive activity of the pastel strokes, he calls attention to the notable lack of any outward regard, thus allowing no access to an actual or imagined spectator, and suggests that Degas sought to construct pictures in which women are presented as though not subject to the gaze of anyone, male or female. He concludes:

In assenting to the truism that women are conventionally the object of sight while men are the bearers of the look, we recognize an asymmetry in the world at large which the traditionally conceived painting both exploits and reinforces. If, however, it turns out that the implication of a given composition is that the viewer’s imaginative command is compromised or rendered insecure—as in Degas’ works—then it may be less easy to accept the truism. The asymmetry may still be exploited but it is not reinforced (220).

In the following chapter, titled “Morisot and Cassatt: ‘A Woman’s Painting,’” Harrison questions to what extent his theoretical structure can be applied to women painters. He acknowledges the conditions that conduced to conservatism in women’s art. Citing assumptions by which the practices of their art were framed, he says that it is likely that they helped to shape the practical self-image of the women artists themselves, as well as set limits to the kind of enterprise they could practically engage

in. Distinguishing between private world and public spectacle, he points at Morisot's *Jeune Femme en toilette de bal* (1879)—a familiar subject-type of a dressed-up young woman on public display in works by Manet, Degas and Renoir—to write that Morisot does not transform this novel type of painting “as a woman” (134). What Morisot does is to instill into the [compositional] effect of the painting a telling uncertainty concerning who it is that is supposed to be seeing what the painting pictures. The discussion here is dense and difficult to follow. I cannot resist asking if we would have read the same kind of “uncertainty” into the painting if the gender of the artist were not known. His discussion of Cassatt's loge scenes of the late 1870s is more straightforward and convincing. Indeed, *In the Loge* (1878) is “different”: Cassatt's work withholds from the spectator the possibility of an appropriating regard upon the pictured woman. About Cassatt's mother and child images, he writes that she was making a risky play with a discredited genre, but he does not include a discussion of her pastels. The medium received considerable attention in the Degas section for its meanings “across the plane.” Are there not issues here that are of direct relevance to the concerns of this book? In other words, is there perhaps more to say about the picturing process in a woman's painting? That the two women were technically abreast of avant-garde tendencies and that they were “new” in sociological terms goes without saying. But there is that gap between what they are painting and who they are. As pointed out by Anne Higonnet (about Morisot and to an extent Cassatt, too): “the images concur with contemporary signs of gender...they are only signs, not women themselves” (133, n.17). In the end we are no wiser in terms of seeing and/or interpreting the question of “difference.” Also, for a chapter in a section on “Modern Feelings” this topic is addressed here in passing if at all.

In the fourth section, “Public and Private,” Harrison wants to discuss paintings of a very different kind and complexion. His purpose in Chapter 9, “Picasso,” on Cubism is to indicate the grounds on which the arguments by Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried, and Rosalind Krauss might be disagreed with. (Harrison

questions whether art does indeed proceed according to a logic of the kind either discerns: a formalist interpretation by Greenberg [c. 1948] and Fried [c. 1965] and a single and linear historical trajectory.) In essence, he argues for the sustained presence of figurative art and in some cases the distinctive character of its human content in the work of the early-twentieth-century avant-gardes. With specific focus on Picasso's post-1914 work of female figures, he addresses the issue of “human content” in the light of the analyses offered by Fried, and targets Krauss's postmodernist position and her idea of the “deskilling” of art. Human content is a slippery notion, he admits. In Picasso's apparent tendency variously to idealize and to demonize his female subjects we are bound to be affected by *what* is being represented. Harrison argues that it is in the *how* of representation that meaning is established (177). To support his thesis that some sense of emotional or psychological engagement with a pictured figure is clearly cued by composition within which it is included, i.e., not necessarily by the artist's “private” own state of mind, he points at Picasso's *Girl before a Mirror* (1932). Representing a young woman looking at her own reflection in a cheval mirror, the compositional effect is accessible to spectators irrelevant of their gender. Harrison's analysis seems disappointingly brief, almost unfinished. I want to know more of what he has to say about this work.

Chapter 10, “Matisse and Bonnard: ‘Painting the Emotions’” singles out some pictures of women in interiors to provide explanation and context for the women's expressions. For instance, Matisse's *Odalisque with Red Culottes* (1921) may indeed seem aptly to support a verdict offered by Carol Duncan of “weakness, mindlessness, and indolence [all typically attributes] of female sexiness” (189, n.13). Yet, the model's facial expression, her tedium, however plausible, is more than that. The more we look at the painting the more clearly it flaunts its own artificiality, Harrison argues. This is a setup, a studio masquerade quoting orientalist fantasies and erotic tourism. While Matisse's painting makes the materials for a male fantasy a part of its critically examined content, he reflects them back to the viewer drained of plausibility. What the

painting offers in exchange is an actual decorative ensemble in which response to the pictured studio scene is made to coexist with perception of color and texture on the literal marked surface. To return to Duncan and her interpretation. It is true that the practice in question is one in which the artist and model occupy very different and differently rewarded positions. But Harrison points out that alienated occupation is not the same as indolence, nor is boredom necessarily a sign of weakness or mindlessness (189-90). We might not agree with all that he says (here and elsewhere), but he does seem to find ways to turn the matter around and convince.

The relationship between pictorial content and facticity is again the crucial factor at work in Bonnard's *Morning in the Garden at Veronnet* (c. 1917). One of several paintings that picture Marthe de Meligny, his model, companion, and wife, the issue here is the woman's identity versus the opacity, decorativeness, and all-over painted surface. As in his discussion of Picasso's images of women, Harrison's aim here is to inquire into the aesthetic parameters of the medium. He sees Bonnard's works, especially those that include Marthe, as complex workings of a representation, not the subjective experience. As a result the viewer is uncertain about the validity of “seeing-in” or “seeing-as.” How to pin down Bonnard's “painting the emotions” is not easy, and Harrison admits that some of his readings may seem somewhat overwrought and fanciful. I am inclined to agree.

In the last section, titled “Painting the Unseen,” Harrison recapitulates in Chapter 11, “Rothko,” what he sees as the central concerns of modernist painting: the task of generating critical self-consciousness in the spectator. He argues that Mark Rothko's mature works (the stacked rectangles of the late- 1940s and 1950s) do indeed conjure up an imagined spectator as effectively as any painting possessed of an internal outward-facing regard. Yet, the one-to-one relation to spectator seems critically indifferent to the authority of any specific subjective position, including such as might be defined in terms of sex and gender. In this surrender of the self, the “male gaze” is surely a casualty, he writes, adding, that

Rothko's concept of a "consummated experience" may not be open to all, but insofar as some individuals may be disqualified, it is not *prima facie* on the grounds of their sex and gender (230). In his final chapter, "The Later Twentieth Century," Harrison is in essence addressing the changing character and status of the medium of painting. The emergence during the later 1970s and 1980s of avant-garde works by a number of women artists is tangential to the main concerns of his study, he explains, as they were not painters.

Taken together these chapters serve to demonstrate how careful looking can provide new insight into the making and meaning of iconic works. Conceptually challenging and rich in detail, this is an attractive volume with a generous number of illustrations, both in color and black and white, that help to support the author's claims and argument. That said, it is also a "difficult" book. On the one hand it rigorously attends to its theoretical structure (the meaning and significance of gender to the functioning of the picture plane); on the other, it is more contentious

taking the form of intellectual speculation, conjectures, and musings. I welcome Harrison's self-reflexivity, which serves to mitigate as it were the purism of ideational premises. But I feel burdened by the complexity and variety of his arguments. As Peter Burke points out in *History and Social Theory*, "simplification is the theorist's function."¹ An authoritative voice in the theory of art history, Harrison seems aware of the demands he makes upon the reader. Throughout the study he recapitulates and rehearses his concepts and relevant issues as if to make sure the reader does not lose the thread in his theoretical explorations. This is helpful. Yet the fact that he feels compelled to do so also reveals, even underscores, the study's main shortcoming: the scope and scale of the project is unwieldy and the book is longer than it need be in terms of the ostensible subject matter. As has already been suggested earlier, the analysis of works by Manet and Renoir (and perhaps also Degas) is compelling and even convincing. With Cézanne, a "difficult" artist to be sure, coherence is lost and the points Harrison tries to make

are not easily registered. (I find his fixation on the awkwardness of the half-attached foot in the late *Bathers*, a discussion that frames this chapter, overdone and troublesome.) As we move into the twentieth-century Harrison's theoretical infrastructure threatens to fall apart. He may still be raising some interesting questions, but the interpretation does not convince or compel. In sum, my criticism is not with the early chapters, but with the later ones where "Painting the Difference" is a slippery notion, if even pertinent to the topic at hand. These observations aside, the book is a valuable addition to university libraries and to scholars challenged by the two-dimensional paradigm of modernism. •

Britta C. Dwyer is an independent scholar, based in Cambridge, England. A frequent contributor to *WJ*, she is currently working on British artists Doris and Anna Zinkeisen.

NOTE

1. Peter Burke, *History and Social Theory*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Eng.: Polity, 1992), 164.

The Invention of the Model: Artists and Models in Paris, 1830-1870

by Susan Waller
Ashgate, 2006

Reviewed by Heather McPherson

In Paris between 1830 and 1870 the professional model emerged as a distinct social type and cultural trope. Drawing on popular texts, such as *physiologies*, and on caricatures as well as Salon paintings, *The Invention of the Model* examines the *métier* of the artist's model and explores how gender, social identity, and ethnicity shaped popular perceptions and stereotypes about this figure. Seamlessly weaving together social history, cultural studies, and art history with biographical narrative, Susan Waller's cross-disciplinary study elucidates the complex artist/model

transaction by critically analyzing popular stereotypes about the model against the backdrop of changing atelier practices and broader societal trends such as urban immigration.

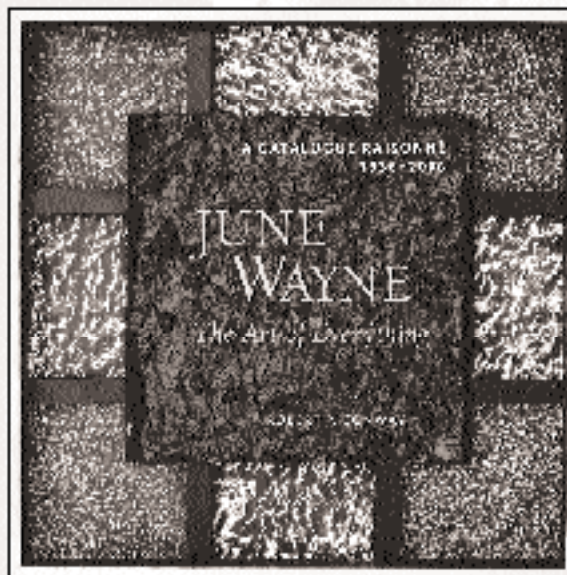
The book, which is organized thematically rather than chronologically, includes chapters on the history of the academic model and the praxis of the pose, the unmodest or vulgar model and the intersection of the studio and the *demi-monde*, and the Jewish and Italian model and ethnic stereotyping. Although the problematic status and ethnicity of the artist's model have been examined recently by scholars such as Marie Lathers,¹ Waller's social history approach and focus on the mass media and stereotyping differentiate her study and offer new insights about how the artist's model was perceived and represented in nineteenth-century Paris.

The first chapter rehearses the tradition of the academic model and tracks the gradual replacement of the *beau idéal* by

more specific depictions highlighting the particularities of the individual body, reflecting the influence of physiognomic theory. As the École des Beaux-Arts used more different models on a temporary basis, the position of the professional model was marginalized. Waller suggests that the emergence of stereotypes about the model as lazy and unkempt in works such as Edmond Texier's *Tableau de Paris* (1853), served to rationalize changes in studio practice and camouflage commercial exchange. During the nineteenth century history painting lost ground to genre painting and landscape, and female nudes displaced male nudes on the walls of the Salon. Although female models were prohibited at the École des Beaux-Arts until 1863, they posed on a regular basis in teaching studios and private ateliers and figured prominently in studio lore and popular clichés.

The second chapter focuses on the stereotypes surrounding the vulgar,

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morally suspect female model that posed for a living in Parisian ateliers. With the introduction of female models, the aesthetic and the erotic gaze became conflated and models were represented differently in popular discourses. Adrienne Grandpierre-Deverzy's *Interior of the Studio of Abel de Pujol* (1836; Pl. 12), a rare depiction of a model posing by a female artist, represents the model as a professional at work rather than an object of desire. Waller highlights the elusiveness and anonymity of artists' models, often referred to only by first name, who inhabited Bohemia, intersecting with the *demi-monde* and popular types such as the working class grisette and the *lorette*, or courtesan. *Physiologies* and caricatures by artists like Paul Gavarni and Edouard de Beaumont thematize the ambiguities of posing and the problematic relationships between artist and model and between the model and the figure she portrays. Waller also examines real-life *modèles de femme*, ranging from the anonymous Louise, known only through a brief description, to the celebrated Madame Sabatier who posed nude for Clésinger's notorious *Woman Bitten by a Serpent* (1847), commissioned by her protector and exhibited at the Salon. The chapter concludes with the nude female model posing at the center of Courbet's *Studio of the Painter* (1855), who was criticized as vulgar and inappropriate. Waller argues that Courbet's model exposes the problematic association between Bohemia and the *demi-monde* and the complex social realities of the artist/model/viewer triangle.

The third chapter focuses on the divergent stereotypes that developed around the Jewish model and the Italian model in the nineteenth century. Waller documents the assimilation of the Jewish community and the emergence of the Jewish model as a distinctive type in publications such as *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* (1840-42), but provides little by way of illustration. Although the *belle juive* escaped the physical signs of Jewishness that surfaced in masculine depictions at mid-century, she was commonly associated with venality and sensuality in literary texts and popular prints. By contrast, the Italian model appealed to artists at mid-century because she embodied antique and Renaissance

artistic ideals and the authentic primitivism of her peasant origins. Starting with Raphael's depictions of La Fornarina and nineteenth-century responses by Ingres and Vernet, Waller shows how the aesthetic and the erotic were conflated in depictions of the artist's model. In nineteenth-century Paris Italian models were portrayed as beautiful peasants in native costume whose authenticity contrasted with the artificiality of contemporary Parisian fashion. Among the most fascinating case studies is the Cinderella story of Maria Pasqua, the young Italian girl who posed for Léon Bonnat, Ernest Hébert, and Charles Jalabert in 1863, and was adopted at age seven by the eccentric Comtesse de Noailles. In its ambitious attempt to survey contrasting modern ethnicities, this chapter is less cohesive. Moreover, the privileging of the Italian peasant model changes the focus by shifting the discussion away from other types of painting such as the female nude.

In her brief yet suggestive epilogue Waller asserts that the artist's model was a distinctly modern invention related to changing patterns of artistic production and the displacement of the male model by female models that were valued for their gender and ethnicity. The popularity of panorama literature and *physiologies*, and the upsurge in popular prints as well as shifting social patterns such as urban immigration, also played a role in the emergence of stereotypes framed by gen-

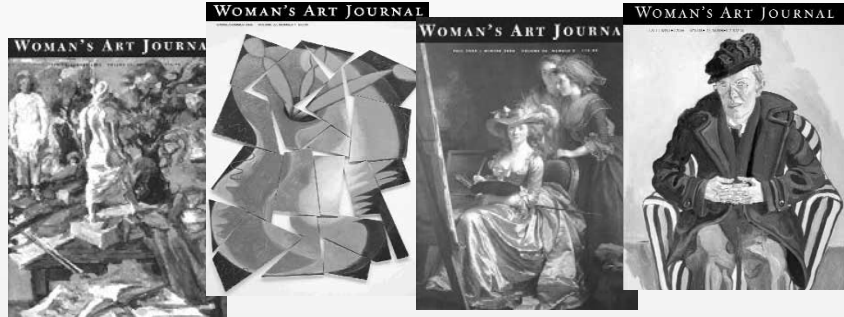
der and ethnicity and the dissemination of images to a broadening public.

Waller's clearly argued, methodologically sophisticated, cross-disciplinary study provides a useful framework for thinking about the shifting role and slippery social and sexual identity of the artist's model in nineteenth-century Paris. The fascinating case studies she introduces leave the reader hungry for more information. Likewise, her illustrations, though generally well chosen, could have been supplemented, which would have strengthened her central arguments about stereotyping. In particular, I wish Waller had fleshed out her intriguing analysis of the invention of the model as a distinctly modern phenomenon in the epilogue, and further developed her arguments about the relation of the artist's model to broader shifts in studio practice and artistic production. •

Heather McPherson is Professor of Art History at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and the author of *The Modern Portrait in Nineteenth-Century France* (2001).

NOTE

1. See Marie Lathers, "Posing the 'Belle Juive': Jewish Models in 19th-Century Paris," *WAJ* (S/S 2000): 27-32; and *her Bodies of Art: French Literary Realism and the Artist's Model* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), reviewed in *WAJ* (F 2003/W 2004), 42-44.



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The Satirical Gaze: Prints of Women in Late Eighteenth-Century England

by Cindy McCreery
Oxford, 2004

Reviewed by Heidi Strobel

In 1796, the printmaker James Gillray created *The Fashionable Mamma,—or—The Convenience of Modern Dress* (Fig. 1), condemning the increasingly public role of late-eighteenth-century British women. Through a window, a carriage decorated with the royal insignia awaits a young woman, who has donned a fashionable dress, gloves, and ostrich feather head-dress in preparation for the evening's entertainment. While the conveniently modern slits in her imported dress allow her to breastfeed her child, she does not see or touch her child, who is awkwardly placed at her breast. Encircling her are two more naturally maternal women: a nursemaid holding the child to the woman's breast, and on the back wall, in the painting *Maternal Love*, a nursing peasant. The upper-class woman is breastfeeding only because it is fashionable, and her discomfort is evident as she appears eager to pursue her interests outside the home. *The Fashionable Mamma* parodies the idea of innate maternal behavior and criticizes women for public and, thus, unnatural behavior. According to author Cindy McCreery, such sardonic prints were an integral part of the late-eighteenth-century England's "satirical gaze," a reflection of the contemporary debate and concern about women's unnatural presence in public places.

In *The Satirical Gaze: Prints of Women in Late Eighteenth-Century England*, McCreery scrutinizes the growth, development, and historical significance of satirical prints by examining the social, political, and commercial circumstances in which these images were produced. Her chronological focus is the golden age of British prints, 1760 to 1800, when images of women flooded the London print market, echoing the increased visibility of women in the street, theater, and government. McCreery's text examines a variety of

types of satirical prints from the British Museum. Unlike previous scholars, she does not treat social and political satirical prints separately, a methodology that encourages multiple interpretations of these images. In addition to prints, she relies on other types of written and visual material such as conduct books, novels, sermons, and pamphlets to provide contemporary attitudes about proper feminine behavior. Thematically organized chapters focus on prostitutes, street vendors, courtesans, actresses, literary ladies, campaigners, wives, mothers, adulteresses, and women over thirty-five, categories that were not mutually exclusive. Neither were media, for prints depicted beliefs about gender that were also seen in painting and sculpture. *The Satirical Gaze* thus offers several significant contributions to the field of eighteenth-century art history. It elevates the status of prints by suggesting that they inspired written and verbal media, rather than only deriving from them. Furthermore, its indispensable survey of images provides a wide-ranging picture of Georgian attitudes towards gender. Lastly, while McCreery discusses well-known women like Queen Charlotte and Georgiana, the Duchess of Devonshire, the oft-overlooked working woman, whether prostitute, fishmonger, or actress, forms the backbone of this survey.

As McCreery demonstrates, the production qualities of printmaking provide nuanced pictures of contemporary urban life and the London art market, and in the first chapter she analyzes the production, distribution, and consumption of images (both satirical and not) in this market. Compared to painting and sculpture, prints were raw images—quickly produced and circulated, and able to capture the ebbs and flows of public opinion. Their inexpensive cost also expanded the base for artistic consumption. Her thorough examination of print reception includes both purchasers and "window-shoppers," for visiting print-shop windows was a popular pastime in late-eighteenth-century England. McCreery also describes how a specific type of satirical print (mezzotint, droll, stipple) and the way that it was issued (whether part of a periodical or a single sheet) appealed to a variety of consumers. While upper-class



Fig. 1. J. Gillray, *The Fashionable Mamma,—or—The Convenience of Modern Dress*, pub. H. Humphrey, 15 Feb. 1796, col. engraving (BM 8897).

men purchased a majority of the satirical prints, women of all classes also saw them and used them to decorate their homes. The type of print often determined its location within a household. Social satires, which tended to appeal to a broad audience, were often framed and hung on the wall, while political satires and crude social satires were frequently stored in albums or placed in a drawer.

Many of the satirical prints produced during this golden age featuring women showed them as men's sexual partners, whether wives, courtesans, or prostitutes. This period should also be considered a golden age of prostitution, which was on the rise and a popular print subject, as demonstrated by William Hogarth's fantastically popular and pessimistic *A Harlot's Progress* (1732). Hogarth's story of a young woman's fall into prostitution profoundly influenced the images that comprise the second chapter, "Women in the Street: Prostitutes and Market Vendors." Like McCreery's chapter divisions, prostitutes and market vendors were not mutually exclusive, for sometimes women were simultaneously involved in both occupations. According to her, satirical prints of these women

either depict them as a necessary part of the urban fabric or view them as a social menace, or sometimes both. These images were not meant to be portraits but rather stereotypes of a variety of streetwalkers and vendors who were associated with different areas of London. Often featuring cheerful, pretty young women, these unrealistic prints seem to have offered men a safe and sanitized way to enjoy prostitution. They also rarely address the social ills associated with prostitution, such as illegitimate children, alcoholism, and violence.

Actresses and courtesans, or high-class prostitutes, form the core of McCreery's third chapter. The elevated status of courtesans at the end of the eighteenth century is signified by the fact that they were the popular subjects of satirical prints, oil portraits, newspaper articles, novels, plays, and sermons. Unlike images of street prostitutes, prints of courtesans were often portraits and refer to particular women, such as Mary "Perdita" Robinson, Kitty Fisher, Dorothy Jordan, and Elizabeth Farren. Several of these women were also well-known actresses, further blurring the lines between social classes. As royal mistresses to the sons of George III, Robinson, Jordan, and their progeny also became part of the aristocracy. McCreery suggests that the similar iconography used in images of courtesans, actresses, and aristocrats suggests the liminal nature of Georgian society. With such analysis, she consistently conveys the impossibility of clear-cut social categorization during this period. Just as social boundaries were permeable, contemporary definitions of masculinity and femininity were also in flux.

In McCreery's fourth chapter, "Women in Male Roles: Literary Ladies and Masculine Politicians," she explores women's participation in political, artistic, and literary arenas, which were traditionally considered to be masculine domains. Like Gillray's *Fashionable Mamma*, women who transgressed these boundaries were often satirized for both their unnatural public conduct and abandonment of their natural and more private duties as wife and mother. The most infamous example of such misbehavior was Georgiana, Duchess of

Devonshire, who publicly campaigned for the Whig politician Charles James Fox. Thomas Rowlandson's 1784 print *Political Affection* depicts her breastfeeding Fox instead of her hungry infant daughter. While this print undoubtedly influenced Gillray's subsequent print, its popularity also suggests a broader societal fear that women of lower social classes would also abandon their innate responsibilities.

Female artists such as Angelica Kauffman (1741-1807), Anne Damer (1748-1828), and Maria Cosway (1760-1838) were also the target of satirical prints during the Georgian period. McCreery avers that their participation in traditionally masculine fields encouraged the satirical examination of their relationships, femininity and, sometimes, sexuality. Such prints suggested unfounded romantic relationships between Kauffman and fellow Royal Academy members, a means of denigrating her professional success. Because Damer had an unhappy marriage and worked in the physically demanding medium of sculpture, contemporary prints questioned her heterosexuality. Conversely, Cosway's happy marriage to fellow artist Richard Cosway was the target of visual and written satires that mocked him for his unnatural support of Maria's profession. Caricaturists also aimed unduly harsh and microscopic attention at the relationships pursued by the historian Catharine Macaulay (1731-91) and writer Hester Thrale (1741-1821). Contemporary prints suggest that a woman's decision to work in the aforementioned areas was unnatural and would ultimately lead to professional failure and personal heartbreak.

In Chapters Five and Six, McCreery concentrates on the feminine roles that were considered more natural in the eighteenth century, those of wife and mother. Many of these domestic images featured upper-class mothers, such as Queen Charlotte or Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, who were also often depicted by oil portraitists. While Georgiana was often satirized as a bad mother, images of good mothers, such as the queen, were much more popular with and depicted more gently by Georgian satirists. Conversely, prints of good wives were outnumbered by bad ones, some of whom were prosecuted for

adultery during the 1780s. Several high profile trials involving the aristocracy inspired a satirical print boom. The popularity of such images suggests a desire to reinforce traditional definitions of gender and prevent unnatural (masculine and/or adulterous) behavior from spreading to the lower classes. Indeed, McCreery concludes that the behavior of wives, and aristocratic wives in particular, "was seen as a barometer of the nation's health" (183-84).

While bad wives provided titillating source material for satirical prints, images of them often reinforced traditional wifely stereotypes. On the other hand, prints of good mothers bolstered the bloodline by espousing a more natural conception of maternity. The ideas of Jean Jacques Rousseau, who advocated the abandonment of personal pleasure in lieu of maternal duty (such as breastfeeding), were central to this new ideal, which was also popularized by other means, such as conduct books, portraits, newspapers, magazines, and novels. The British ideal of motherhood was further bolstered by the domestic bliss of George III, Charlotte, and their fifteen children. The queen, however, seems to have been an exception, for satirists often depicted royal and aristocratic mothers, such as the Duchess of Devonshire and Gillray's *Fashionable Mamma*, otherwise. By comparison, a majority of "good mother" images featured idealized images of pretty, young, and lower-class women, who apparently embraced motherhood more naturally.

McCreery's final chapter, "Old Maids, Merry Widows and Cosy Wives," focuses on women in their middle and upper years, who were more often the subject of cruel satirical prints than were their younger sisters. Women who were past childbearing age were viewed as societal deadweight. Furthermore, the liberated status of single women such as old maids and merry widows symbolized a threat to the already beleaguered Georgian family. While a socially prominent woman such as the fertile queen was satirized as a content and cozy wife, many of these prints (like those of prostitutes), featured stereotypes rather than actual individuals. These prints were particularly popular in the 1780s and 1790s, when Gillray turned his attention from fashionable mothers to

dowdy dowagers.

The Satirical Gaze provides a much-needed, generously illustrated survey of the different ages, classes, and occupations of eighteenth-century women. McCreery's chapter divisions and conclusions make her text accessible to and enjoyable for both an undergraduate and specialist audience. As she indicates, her efforts are hampered by the fact that few Englishmen recorded their thoughts about satirical prints. Furthermore, even less is known about women's reactions, and while they were often the subject of these popular prints, women rarely produced or purchased them. Responding to them also occurred infrequently, for doing so would draw attention to themselves. According to McCreery, however, there was a profusion of female print sellers, for "a woman's role as a print seller was considered a natural and appropriate one" (25). More information about both the role of women in this world and their production of satirical prints would be helpful to the reader. One wonders why it was considered more natural for a woman to sell rather than produce prints of all kinds.

Was print selling considered a passive, derivative, and thus appropriately feminine behavior?

The popularity of satirical prints reveals a societal desire to reinforce the definitions of masculinity and femininity and buttress the shrinking Georgian family. McCreery demonstrates that the actions of certain wives and mothers were viewed as indicators of the nation's well-being. Satirical prints depicted women who strayed from societal norms as unnatural and sometimes unpatriotic. This latter categorization reflects the fear that revolution would arrive on British shores. While the anti-French bias of British satirical prints is covered by McCreery's text, it is worth broadening the geographical boundaries of this analysis. Britain's status as an empire in the eighteenth century changed the complexion of contemporary society and, by extension, the Georgian family. The insistence on preserving the family ideal was certainly related to the influx of more than just French ideas.

As McCreery indicates, satirical prints appealed to late-eighteenth-century

viewers, both foreign-born and native, for several reasons. They were amusing, inexpensive, easily portable, and often aesthetically pleasing. Like Joshua Reynolds's popular portraits of Sarah Siddons and Kitty Fisher, many satirical prints had multiple meanings. This ambiguity offers a timeless appeal to both Georgian and modern viewers. McCreery's porous categories reinforce one of the most salient characteristics of eighteenth-century life—the fluctuating definitions of masculine and feminine, public and private, natural and unnatural. Despite the variety of types represented in *The Satirical Gaze*, however, only one feminine role was free from societal censure—that of natural mother. •

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Envisioning Gender in Burgundian Devotional Art, 1350-1530: Experience, Authority, Resistance

by Andrea Pearson
Ashgate, 2005

Reviewed by Martha L. Dunkelman

Burgundian books of hours and devotional portrait diptychs, two groups of works much studied in conventional art historical circles, are here given new historical connections to each other along with new interpretations. Author Andrea Pearson asserts that the works can be read as challenges to societal "boundaries and hierarchies of gender" (3). The book's five chapters track a transition from books of hours (female-oriented, mostly from the fourteenth century), to the male-dominated portrait diptychs mostly of the fifteenth century, explicat-

ing, writes Pearson, "the participation of books of hours and devotional portrait diptychs in performances, negotiations, and hierarchies of gender" (27).

One of the most interesting points the author makes is that constructions of gender, whether male or female, are not monolithic but can be layered and nuanced. Although she states this explicitly in Chapter Three, which discusses two diptychs from Bruges, it is implicit all through the book as she examines the ways in which works convey a variety of messages about gender roles. By going beyond the initial realization of the importance of works in conveying messages about mainstream gender roles, and considering their intervention in less common situations, Pearson has moved toward a second (or perhaps third) generation of gender studies.

To support her contention that books of hours and portrait diptychs carry important messages about gender roles, Pearson

in her introduction challenges the idea that these two types of works were primarily for private audiences. She points out that books and family portraits would have been available to chamberlains and invited guests, for example, and perhaps even visible during worship, as in the scene in a manuscript of c. 1457 showing Philip the Good at Mass, which includes a group of onlookers who are able to see the duke with both a prayer book and a diptych. The idea that such objects were not entirely private is an intriguing proposition, since it allows us to assume that the gendered messages she identifies in books and diptychs would have been disseminated. The number of examples she collects, however, and the audiences for them that she describes remain quite small, even if they do widen the impact of the works beyond single owners. Perhaps those with access to the works were the people to whom the gendered messages would have had the most significance, but

the reader ends up with the impression that the world in which these works functioned was still quite narrow.

Pearson's first chapter, "Authority and Community in Women's Books of Hours," looks at books of hours as agents of feminine identity. She interprets them as vehicles used by women to establish levels of religious power in an essentially patriarchal society. Her discussion moves from descriptions of holy women who recited the hours as early as the thirteenth century to books of hours from the fifteenth century, specifically those of Margaret of York and Mary of Burgundy. Pearson's description of the use of prayer by saintly women to find their own identity is fascinating in itself. The later prayer books are then understood to carry some of the empowerment attributed to the earlier women; according to Pearson, books of hours were seen by later laywomen as a link to these pious female exemplars. To support her thesis, the author looks at a variety of related material, including the use of incarnational piety and the formulation of women's reading communities. Of all the sections of the book, this one ranges the most widely, and its internal connections are the least convincing. While the central idea, that books of hours were used by women to create an identity, specifically a religious identity, seems very appealing, the line of reasoning employed to bolster the thesis has many gaps. The author herself notes, for example, that the collection of volumes belonging to Mary of Burgundy's mother did not include books of hours (42). Indeed, books of hours owned by women at the highest levels of society, such as Margaret of York and Mary of Burgundy, may have been part of women's efforts at establishing identities that carried some amount of power. But whether this thesis holds true for books of hours as a genre, and whether connections to the much earlier saintly women who recited the hours are as direct as Pearson would like them to be, remains open to question.

The second chapter of the book, "Regendering the Faith: Books of Hours, Devotional Portrait Diptychs, and the Affirmation of Men," tracks the appropriation of books of hours by men from the

purview of women, a process for which Pearson uses the term "regendering." Men added their own portraits to books associated with women and began commissioning books of hours for themselves. Then, as described in one of the most interesting sections of the book, men began to use devotional portrait diptychs to strengthen their authority, both by appropriating feminine authoritative forms and by promoting the masculinity of Christ. Ironically, emphasis shifts from incarnational piety, the worship of the male child, to adoration of the female mother as intercessor, an attitude characteristic of male saints. This analysis provides a much-needed societal explanation for the shift from books of hours to painted diptychs, an explanation that goes beyond standard stylistic or technical ones. Pearson provides convincing statistical proof of the change to support the examples that she presents in depth.

The third chapter, "The Problem of Male Embodiment in Two Diptychs from Bruges," frankly confronts the fact that gender identity is not monolithic but rather "fragmented and variable" (90), an important theme implicit in much of the volume. Pearson chooses a subgroup of portrait diptychs that, in her careful analysis, illustrate the ideals of men who chose to follow the alternative route of virginity rather than the norm of marriage and fatherhood. Her discussion centers on Memling's diptychs from the 1480s of Martin van Nieuwenhove and Jan du Cellier. Both works contain numerous elements that indicate the physical self-control practiced by their subjects, such as male saints known particularly for their physical abstinence, including St. George and St. John the Evangelist. Other details within the works that support her thesis include parallels between the purity of the Virgin and that of Martin van Nieuwenhove, and the care taken to dissociate the images from suggestions of homosexuality or any sexual activity. While she may again wander somewhat far afield in tracking the history of admiration for physical self control and the negative responses to its opposite, her more specific examples and interpretation are convincing. The chapter might have been further strengthened by more compar-

isons to diptychs that present men who followed a more standard lifestyle, or by the kind of statistical survey that she applies in earlier chapters to the changing patronage of books of hours.

The remaining chapters also concentrate on very specific works. Chapter Four, "Nuns and Clerics: Ambiguous Authority in a Devotional Portrait Diptych," derives from the author's 1995 dissertation for the University of California at Santa Barbara and also rather closely overlaps parts of her 2001 *Renaissance Quarterly* article, "Nuns Images, and the Ideals of Women's Monasticism: Two Paintings from the Cistercian Convent of Flines." Pearson examines a relatively standard diptych of c. 1506-13 by Jean Bellegambe that comes from the convent of Flines and is now in the Frick Art and Historical Center in Pittsburgh. Its interior panels show a Cistercian monk presented by St. Bernard to the Virgin and Child. The diptych is unique in having on its exterior a female portrait, that of the abbess Jeanne de Boubais. Pearson believes that this unusual occurrence was meant to establish the abbess's compliance with the male-centered reforms that were being imposed on women's convents during the period. She subjects the exterior image to a detailed reading that aligns most of its features with obedience to the new directives, which in fact reflect a loss of power for the abbess. The books behind her, for example, are understood to establish her dedication to Bernardine spiritual reading, and the closed garden is a reminder of the nuns' strict cloistering. The enlightening presentation of this diptych is tightly argued, although it should be remembered that the object, with its exterior female portrait, is very much an exception. So while it provides a fascinating case study of one woman's submissiveness, it does not necessarily inform us about wider societal trends.

The last chapter of the book, "Disrupting Gender at the Court of Margaret of Austria," concentrates on four diptychs related to Margaret of Austria. Margaret's diptychs are shown to have correspondences to her unusual role as a woman with real power. Her images, according to the text, negotiated her status and allowed her enough flexibility to choose her own role within a

male world. The diptychs are convincingly interpreted as not only a reflection of the gendered political situation, but also as active participants in it. Margaret used the masculine format of the diptych to assert her often-contested power. She also used them to display her own spirituality, since they present her in closer contact with Jesus than men appear to be in standard male diptychs of the time. She was thus reasserting the particular power previously claimed by women through incarnational piety, seen especially in the books of hours discussed in Pearson's first chapter, and creating a unique role for herself that bridged both masculine and feminine spheres.

Illustrations, mostly black and white but several in color, enhance Pearson's discussions of these works. The volume concludes with a useful checklist of devotional portrait diptychs and a substantial bibliography.

At times, the reader wishes for more information about mainstream works, to provide background for the more exceptional examples that are examined at length in each essay. While a wider con-

text is sometimes provided, particularly in the last chapter where the diptychs of Margaret of Austria are very clearly distinguished from the standard types of the day, more such overviews would have been welcome. For example, additional descriptions of works showing "normal" gender roles for men would have enhanced the chapter on men choosing a chaste lifestyle. This wish, however, undoubtedly springs from a desire for more information inspired by the wealth of ideas in the text.

It should also be noted that several of the chapters depend rather closely on material in Pearson's earlier publications, a fact that, somewhat surprisingly, is not always made immediately clear. The discussion of the diptych in Pittsburgh, mentioned above, is one example, as is the description of the miniature of Philip the Good at Mass, which Pearson discussed in her 2000 *Sixteenth Century Journal* article, "Personal Worship, Gender, and the Devotional Portrait Diptych." The article is listed in the book's bibliography, but no footnote connects it to this current discussion of the miniature.

Envisioning Gender is an important contribution to gender studies, particularly for Burgundian art, to which such methodologies have not been often applied. Each section, with the possible exception of the first chapter on books of hours, serves as a kind of case study of a way in which books of hours and/or devotional portrait diptychs contributed to the establishment and manipulation of gender roles in Burgundian society. Pearson attempts to draw threads from one chapter to the next, even though they vary in approach and in the breadth of the material they discuss. Bringing all of these studies into one volume serves to emphasize the importance that gender played in the period and shows us a series of examples. Thus the book opens many doors onto the meanings and uses of books of hours and devotional portrait diptychs. •

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The Medusa Reader

by Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers
Routledge, 2003

Reviewed by Carolyn Springer

One trait evidently shared by Ovid, Freud, and Gianni Versace was a fascination with the figure of Medusa. In a shrewd marketing move, Versace chose the image as logo for a fashion empire. Although the designer was not above self-parody (as shown in an ad campaign for men's underwear where a model absurdly poses as Perseus in a flight suit), there was nothing frivolous about his choice of Medusa as heraldic emblem of the House of Versace. More than a decorative motif, it was a stylized provocation, connoting both pleasure and danger, beauty and monstrosity. The Versace brand simultaneously mocks and exploits the ambivalence toward female

sexuality that is symbolized throughout western culture by the image of Medusa.

Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers have assembled an anthology of seventy-three references to Medusa in literature, philosophy, advertising, and the arts that is useful, entertaining, and eclectic. These include a selection of primary texts through which the trope has been transmitted (Homer, Ovid, Dante, Petrarch, Goethe, Shelley) and critical discussions of its significance (Freud, Benjamin, Derrida, Barthes, Cixous). Some interpretations are familiar, even canonical: John Freccero on Dante's Medusa ("Medusa: The Letter and the Spirit," 1972); Louis Marin on Caravaggio's self-portrait as Medusa (*To Destroy Painting*, 1977); and Neil Hertz on Medusa in the French Revolution ("Medusa's Head: Male Hysteria under Political Pressure," 1983). Others are less so: Jo Springer (no relation to the author of this review) cheerfully suggests in the Betty Crocker Home

Library volume *The Pleasure of Crevel* that we embroider our own Medusa, reconceiving the image in a more positive way—substituting flowers, birds, and butterflies for the traditional snakes. "An improvement, don't you agree?" she concludes (122). "The design would also make an attractive pillow."

The book includes a brief excerpt of each editor's own work: Vickers's 1985 essay, "'The blazon of sweet beauty's best': Shakespeare's *Lucrece*," and Garber's "Macbeth: The Male Medusa" (1987). Ordered chronologically rather than thematically, the selections trace the history of the Medusa legend and of its modern revisions and appropriations. Not surprisingly, this leads to a focus on feminist theory of the past few decades and to the female poets, painters, musicians, and performance artists who have reclaimed Medusa as a symbol of power. Emblematic of this reversal is Hélène Cixous's famous response to



Fig. 1. Audrey Flack, *Colossal Head of Medusa* (1990), polychromed terra-cotta-colored fiberglass. 36" x 18" x 18" (with attached base). Courtesy Louis K. Meisel Gallery.

Freud: "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (133).

Of particular interest is the association between Medusa and Africa in texts from antiquity to the present. Diodorus Siculus asserts that the Gorgons, like the Amazons, were a warlike race of African women whose queen Medusa was conquered by the marauding prince Perseus. (Eventually both tribes, he relates, were eliminated by Hercules: "for it was a thing intolerable to him, who made it his business to be renowned all the world over, to suffer any nation to be governed any longer by women," [29]). Lucan writes that Medusa lived in the African desert, "in a wide, untilled, treeless region which she had turned entirely to stone merely by gazing around her...entire tribes of neighboring Ethiopians were transformed to statues" (41). When Perseus carried off her severed head the goddess Athena forbade him to fly over Europe, thinking of the damage it would cause to that civilization: "On seeing such a large object flying aloft, everyone would look up, and be turned to stone; the corn would also be ruined" (42). To spare its cities and cultivated lands, he flew

instead over the sterile Libyan desert; the region's many poisonous snakes were bred from her blood.

The fact that Medusa was deployed as a figure of racial (as well as sexual) difference has intrigued many contemporary feminists. The poet Colleen J. McElroy sees "Medusa hair" as a symbol of black pride. Citing Audre Lourde, Brenda Walcott, and other black feminists and lesbians, Emily Erwin Culpepper identifies Medusa as the "face of our own rage" (239).

Accompanying the texts are thirty-two illustrations from painting, sculpture, advertising, and the media. The choice of images and artifacts (Etruscan amphoras, illuminated manuscripts, Renaissance still lifes, a roller coaster in New Jersey) is creative, provocative, and playful. Grouped chronologically, the figures tell a story of the legend and its metamorphoses in material culture that evokes its many contradictions: Courbet's audacious frontal nude *The Origin of the World* (1866) appears opposite Barbara Kruger's "Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)" (1981), while graceful busts by Harriet Hosmer and Evelyn de Morgan offset the febrile fantasies of Magritte. Audrey Flack transforms the archetypal Medusa Rondanini (Roman copy of an original by Phidias, c. fifth century B.C.E.) by weaving shells, coral, industrial rope, and bullets into her snaky hair (1990; Fig. 1). The facing-page images of Perseus holding the head of Medusa by Cellini and Canova show how the iconography of the Perseus figure evolves and its relationship to political change.

This book will appeal both to a general audience and to scholars in a variety of disciplines—literature, visual arts, gender studies, psychoanalysis, religion, and anthropology. The volume is supported by an extensive bibliography that suggests many directions for future research. Its free-wheeling thematic organization, however, is essentially arbitrary and includes, confusingly, texts in which Medusa is never explicitly mentioned. The notes preceding each selection provide useful context and make the book suitable for an introductory course. Given the range of references, however, an index would have been helpful.

There will always be readers who object to finding references to Coluccio

Salutati and Annie Lennox in the same volume, but they are unlikely to pick up this book in the first place. Those who accept the premise that high art and popular culture can be mutually illuminating will find much to enjoy here. It is only the quality of the illustrations that is disappointing; the figures are small and (with one exception) black and white. Given the nature of the subject, it is surprising that the visuals were not made a priority. Caravaggio's Medusa, the parade shield that prompted Marin's reflection, is the only image reproduced in full color, but it is a detail and hence fails to illustrate the full complexity of Marin's vertiginous and often exasperating argument. A better view would have enabled us to savor the irony that this classic image of the infernal feminine is the self-portrait of a man. •

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Byzantine Women and Their World

by Ioli Kalavrezou
Harvard University Art Museums, 2003

Reviewed by Marice E. Rose

Museum exhibitions have been important venues for scholarship of both Byzantine art and ancient women. The 1976 "Age of Spirituality" exhibition was the first of three in a landmark chronological cycle of Byzantine art exhibitions that took place at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Twenty years later, the blockbuster "Glory of Byzantium" inspired further inquiry as well as a line of gold-embroidered dresses by Gianni Versace in his final Paris collection.¹ The more modest exhibition "Byzantine Women and their World," which opened at the Arthur M.

Sackler Museum at Harvard University in October 2002, looked at Byzantine art from a different perspective. Rather than focusing on a specific period or on the splendor of the Byzantine court and church, the stated goal was to reveal the daily life of “unexceptional” Byzantine women (13). This aim echoed that of other important American exhibitions in the mid-1990s that displayed art and artifacts from the lives of ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman women.² According to Ioli Kalavrezou, the exhibition’s organizer, an additional purpose was to correct the misperception that Byzantine women were powerless (13). The temporal and geographical scope of the exhibition, covering the entire Byzantine realm from the fourth to the sixteenth centuries and spanning Italy, North Africa, the Balkans, Asia Minor, and the Holy Land, was ambitious, as the catalogue reflects. Most of the 186 objects are pictured in color and accompanied by a detailed essay. The exhibition and the catalogue were the culmination of a graduate seminar taught by Kalavrezou, and the catalogue entries were written primarily by her students. It is a valuable resource that will further stimulate the study of women in Byzantium and also of Byzantine life.

Two introductory essays provide the reader with a good background. In her essay, titled “Women in the Visual Record of Byzantium,” Kalavrezou warns that one must take care not to make generalizations about women’s lives when relying on material evidence, owing to the limited nature of its survival, and must consider the differences in traditions and customs of the widely varying places and periods covered (14). She then provides a chronological summary of examples and themes in Byzantine art that offer evidence for women’s lives. A particularly interesting section of the essay is her discussion of the phenomenon of Middle and Late Byzantine secular images, such as twelfth-century scenes of courtship. These scenes occur within a period that is better known for its sacred art, after the mythological references to classical art became less frequent in the empire with the dominance of Christianity. I would argue that, contrary to her implication

otherwise, Early Byzantine art did sometimes depict contemporary, non-mythological women in a secular fashion (see, for example, the Sevso Casket [5th-6th c.] picturing nude women in a public bath).³

The second introductory essay, “Women in the History of Byzantium,” by Angeliki Laiou, condenses and makes accessible the author’s benchmark work on this topic.⁴ Laiou begins with a brief historiography in which she identifies the Orientalist attitude toward Byzantium that resulted in the European view of Byzantine women as either being invisible harem-dwellers or plotting empresses. The rest of the essay focuses on women’s roles in the ninth to fourteenth centuries, including a history of marriage as well as of women’s working outside the home. While some of these topics might not seem germane in an art catalogue, they help to fulfill the mission of this work: to be a resource about the whole of women’s experience in Byzantium.

The catalogue is divided into eight thematic sections: Civic Life, Elite Women, Public Devotion, Work, Home, Marriage, Adornment, and Health, each introduced by a substantial, well annotated text. As is clear from these divisions, the emphasis throughout the catalogue is not on iconography or differing approaches to the depictions of women, but rather on works of art as historical artifacts that had a role in women’s lives. An exception is Elizabeth Gittings’s “Women as Embodiments of Civic Life,” in which she treats allegorical images of women as personifications, statues of goddesses and empresses, and coins and weights bearing the imprints of empresses. The catalogue entries for each item in this section are more than simple descriptions and contribute significant scholarship. An example is the entry on empress bust weights by Diliانا Angelova, who shows that the weights depict features associated with the virtue of wisdom, including widened eyes that symbolically watch that commercial transactions will be fair (cat. nos. 12–14). Gittings’s article, “Dignity, Power and Piety,” in the section on elite women (which is surprising so early in the catalogue considering the exhibition’s intent to focus on average women) provides historical evidence for



Fig. 1. Candelabrum with Aphrodite (Egyptian, 400-599) bronze, 20" x 12" x 10". The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: Nelson Trust, 58-5. Photo: Robert Newcombe.

the power of elite women in Byzantine society, as well as discussing the ability for non-elite women to raise their social status and hence their power through marriage or concubinage. She considers the philanthropic roles many women took—motivated by both political ambition and religious concerns—in the church, as well as the opulent lifestyles of women in the upper echelon of society. This section includes striking full-page color photographs of sculpted empress portraits (cat. nos. 24–27), as well as discussions by Gittings on the empresses of different dynasties (e.g., Theodosian, Macedonian) that are excellent mini-histories for a student or general reader.

“The Virgin of Constantinople: Power and Belief,” Bissera Pentcheva’s essay on public devotion, offers an unconventional perspective on the cult of the Virgin. She focuses on the Byzantines at the Blachernai church and the Hodegon monasteries in Constantinople who attributed victories over the Avars to the Virgin Mary’s intercession and therefore venerat-

ed her as their leader and protector, especially in war. Images of the Virgin in monumental paintings and icons were seen to protect the populace during sieges—icons actually were carried into battle. As is the case in articles and essays throughout the catalogue, the effective use of primary texts, in this case inscriptions and sermons, makes vivid the discussion. The catalogue entries that follow clearly illustrate this theme, for example a coin that depicts the Virgin surrounded by an impenetrable fortress wall (cat. no. 63). Pentcheva links the Blachernai and Hodegon images to the Virgin of Vladimir, which similarly served a protective function for the city of Moscow. Two icons that depict the miracles of the Virgin of Vladimir icon are treated together with a detailed essay (cat. nos. 51, 52). Also in this section, and contrasting dramatically to images of the modestly draped orant Virgin or Virgin and Child, is the medallion that depicts St. Thekla, with bare breasts, bound to two beasts and flanked by angels (cat. no. 68). While the author considers the effect such an image would have had on its viewers, being “both enticing and awe-inspiring to members of her cult” (136), it would have been interesting as well to consider different gendered viewerships of such an image.

Molly Fulghum Heintz, in “The Art and Craft of Earning a Living,” expresses the danger in relying for information on Byzantine authors, who treat either empresses and aristocrats or dancers and prostitutes but rarely those women in the middle of the social spectrum (139). She discusses the “average” woman’s main work being in the domestic sphere, raising children, managing the household, and producing textiles, but also surveys the evidence for women working outside the home, in occupations such as female nursemaids, midwives, and professional textile producers.⁵ Catalogue entries include a late fourth-century silver figurine in the form of a seated dancer who sits, holding her foot. She is one of several images of dancers in the catalogue (cat. nos. 16, 86, 87, 159) but is the only one not performing. If literary evidence tells us that dancers were marginalized in Byzantine society because of the erotic nature of their work, this begs the question of function and audience. Since

the dancer is not an erotic image, were there more depictions of working women shown in realistic poses and situations that have not survived? This example recalls Kalavrezou’s warning about making generalizations and may also indicate how little we can trust the writings of elite men as reflections of everyday attitudes.

Alicia Walker’s three essays, “A Space ‘Rich in Blessing,’” “Wife and Husband: ‘A Golden Team,’” and “Enhancing the Body, Neglecting the Soul?,” on home, marriage, and adornment, respectively, and the catalogue entries for these sections, are particularly strong in conveying aspects of Byzantine women’s lives that are rarely alluded to in literature. Walker effectively uses primary sources of saints’ lives and patristic texts, pointing out the conflict between the material culture and the prescriptions of the Church Fathers. The objects include an architectural frieze and textiles that depict female personifications, which probably were believed to have had magical properties promoting household abundance; decidedly unglamorous storage vessels and tableware; marriage rings, which had an amuletic function of safeguarding the marriage’s harmony; and hairpins, cosmetic containers, and applicators. Walker’s commentary on a bronze candelabrum (5th–6th c.; Fig. 1) that depicts Aphrodite at her toilet aided by nereids and ichthyocentaurs addresses the issue of original location, positing that it would have been in a woman’s dressing room (cat. no. 111). She also makes the insightful suggestion that, not only would the owner have seen herself as Aphrodite but that her attendants as well would have seen themselves reflected in the artwork (198).

Throughout the catalogue, such discerning commentary helps bring to life the Byzantine domestic experience. The entry accompanying an unusual incense burner in the shape of a bejeweled Queen of Sheba (cat. no. 112), for example, explains that the jewelry she wears suggests her own wealth and prosperity and also may have been magical for the household (200). Also, since incense was imported from Arabia, the Queen of Sheba was an appropriate character to choose, as the smoke could emanate from her Phrygian cap. Two

carved ivory icons depicting the *koimesis* (Dormition of the Virgin) (cat. nos. 116, 117) would have been especially poignant to the Byzantine viewer, according to the catalogue entry, because the dead were mourned within the home before burial (205–06). Such insights also fulfill the goal of the catalogue.

“Magic, Medicine, and Prayer,” Heintz’s essay on health, rather than considering art discusses instead the physical difficulties faced by women in menstruation and childbirth. The catalogue entries that follow strongly reveal the fears of Byzantine women, and that, although they may have been more literate, worldly, and professional than previously thought, they still lived in a world very different from our own. The objects in this section include amulets worn in hopes of conception or a healthy labor that depict the womb as an octopus-like creature with a female face or sometimes as a jar with a key. A female demon who was believed to cause miscarriages and steal babies appears on amulets with hero saints and the evil eye—these were used to protect oneself from her. There are many amulets with Christian motifs such as the Holy Rider and the Virgin Mary (cat. nos. 167–173) and examples that combine Christian imagery with magical imagery, for instance a necklace with a cross and two amulet cases (cat. no. 176). This section, and the catalogue itself, closes with a sixteenth-century Russian icon that depicts Saint Anne and the birth of the Virgin. Although not strictly within the parameters of the exhibition, the icon reflects Byzantine models and depicts concerns of the exhibition, including “family, the home environment, and the careful attention given to new mothers” (cat. no. 186) (304).

Not discussed in detail in the entry for the final icon or in the rest of the catalogue are the servant girls attending Saint Anne or servants who appear in various other works (cat. no. 70, figs. 20 and 21). In the interest of reflecting the varied experiences of Byzantine women, more attention to women in servitude would be appreciated, especially since they appear frequently in art. One also wishes that some of the essays went further in using feminist, gender, and reception theory, to consider the

construction of gender in the Byzantine period and possible variations in response to some of these images. Kalavrezou's aim, however, is certainly accomplished, and impressively so. The catalogue is a significant resource and can be a springboard for more theoretical inquiries. It is beautifully produced, with supplementary materials including a chronological list of Byzantine empresses, a fold-out map with the boundaries of the Byzantine Empire under Justinian, Basil II, and John V Palaiologos, and a fold-out map that shows a plan of Constantinople with empress and goddess statues marked. •

Marice E. Rose is an assistant professor of art history at Fairfield University in Connecticut. Her research focuses on Late Antique images of women in domestic contexts.

NOTES

1. See Kurt Weitzmann, ed., *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979); Helen C. Evans, ed., *Glory of Byzantium: Arts and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, A.D. 843-1261* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000); the third exhibition "Byzantium: Faith and Power," postdated the exhibition under discussion today. See Helen C. Evans, ed., *Byzantium: Faith and Power 1261-1557* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004). See also Amy Spindler, "New Word in Couture: Fun," *The New York Times*, July 9, 1997.
2. Anne K. Capel, *Mistress of the House, Mistress of Heaven: Women in Ancient Egypt* (New York: Hudson Hills, 1997); Ellen D. Reeder, ed., *Pandora: Women in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Diana E.E. Kleiner and Susan B. Matheson, eds., *I Claudia: Women in Ancient Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1996).
3. Maria Mundell Mango and Anna Bennett, *The Sevso Treasure Part One: Art Historical Description and Inscriptions* (Ann Arbor: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1994), 444-73.
4. Angeliki Laiou, "The Role of Women in Byzantine Society," *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 31 (1981): 233-60 and "Addendum to the Role of Women in Byzantine Society," *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 32 (1982), 198-204.
5. Judith Herrin discusses the possibility that it was considered improper for men to attend to female bodies in medical matters in "In Search of Byzantine Women: Three Avenues of Approach," in Averil Cameron and Amélie Kuhrt eds, *Images of Women in Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1983), 169.



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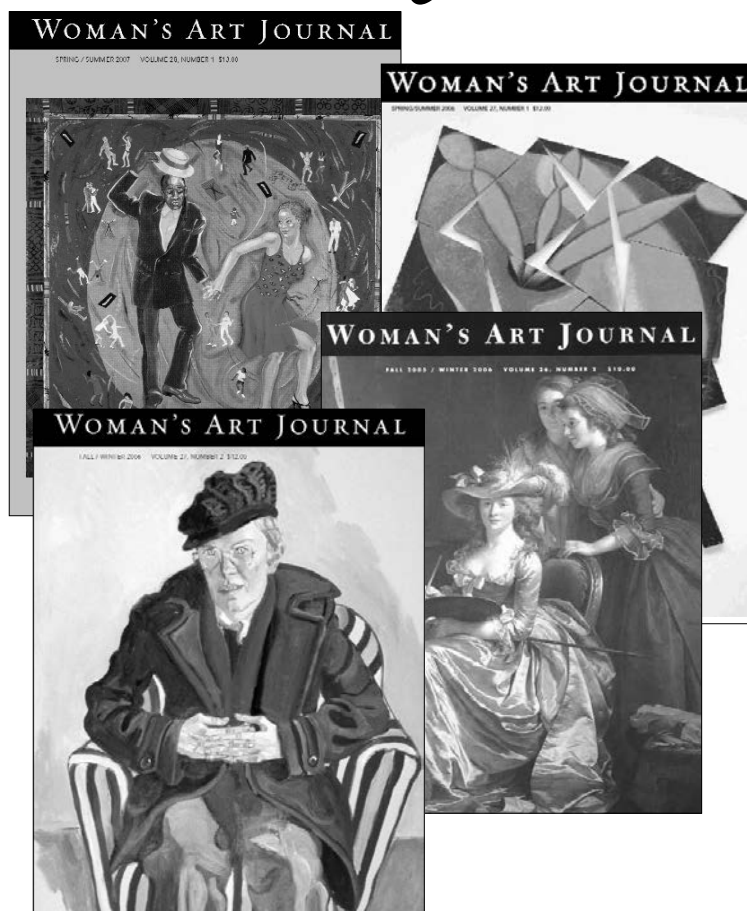
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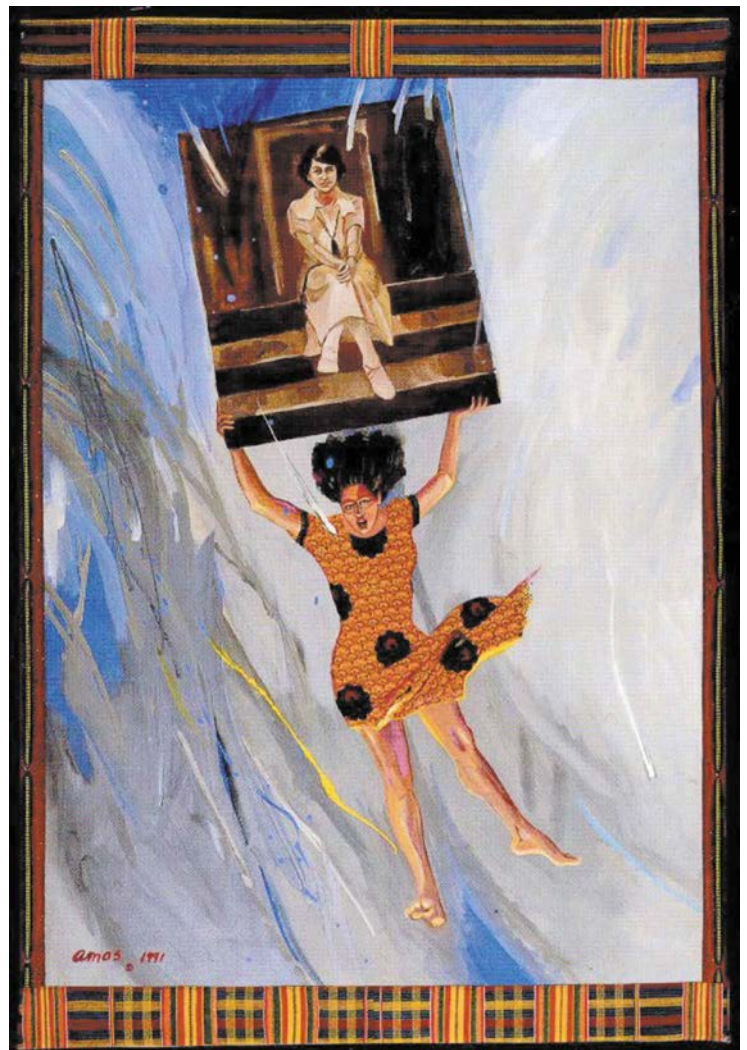
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Pl. 1. Emma Amos,
Harmony Rug (2002),
wool hooked rug, 51" x 30".
Private Collection.
Photo: Becket Logan



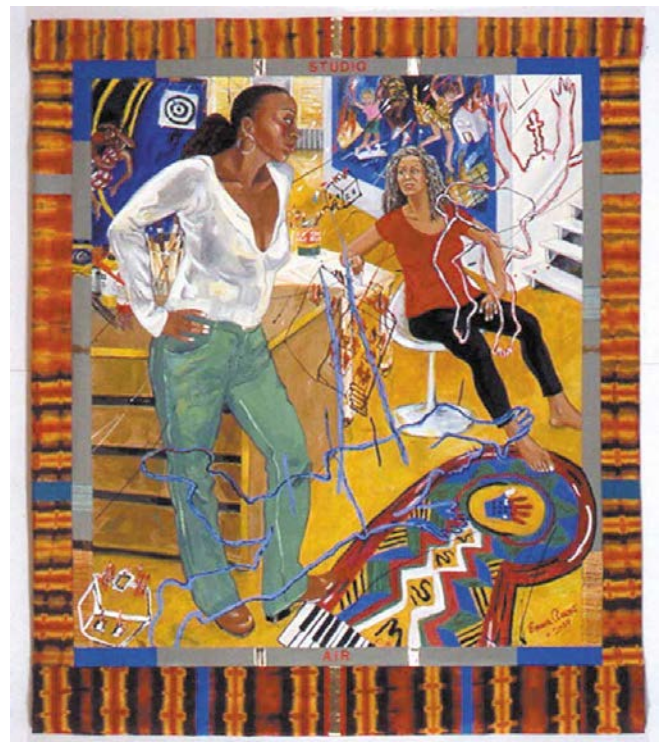
Pl. 2. Emma Amos
Will You Forget Me?
(Falling Series) (1991),
acrylic on linen canvas with
African fabric borders, 64" x 44".
Private Collection.
Photo: Becket Logan.



Pl. 3. Emma Amos,
Katherine Dunham (1998),
oil on linen with African fabric, 36" x 43 1/2".
Private Collection.
Photo: Becket Logan.



Pl. 4 . Emma Amos, *A Reading at Bessie Smith's Grave* (1985), monoprint, silk collagraph on Sekishu rice paper,
5 part variable edition of 3, 72" x 135". Private Collection. Photo: Becket Logan.



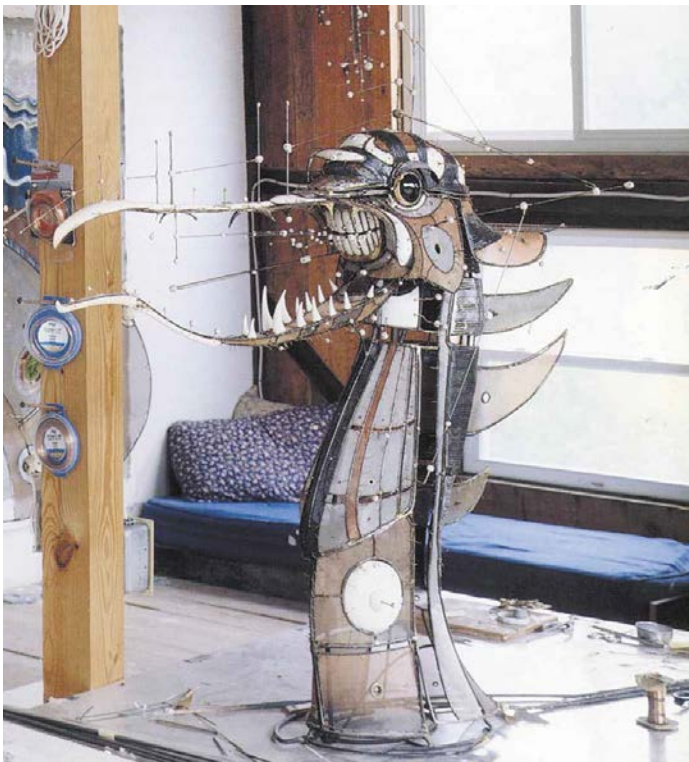
Pl. 5. Emma Amos,
Studio Air (2003),
acrylic on linen canvas with
African fabric, 72" x 61".
Private Collection.
Photo: Becket Logan.



Pl. 6. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (1969), vacuum-formed plastic, 30" x 57" x 21", © Lee Bontecou/Courtesy Knoedler & Company, New York.



Pl. 7. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled* (1969), vacuum-formed plastic, plastic tubing, frosted acrylic, h. approx. 8'. Location unknown.



Pl. 8. Lee Bontecou,
 Studio detail with *Untitled* (2001),
 welded steel, wire mesh,
 porcelain, and wire, 45" x 47" x 21".
 Photo: Will Brown, 2003.
 © Lee Bontecou/courtesy Knoedler &
 Company, New York.



Pl. 9. Eva Hesse, *Untitled* (1960-61), oil on canvas, 49 1/2" x 49 1/2". © Estate of Eva Hesse. Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.



Pl. 10. Eva Hesse, *Untitled* (1964), collage, ink, watercolor, gouache, acrylic, and graphite on paper, 19-3/4" x 24-1/2". © The Estate of Eva Hesse. Hauser & Wirth Zürich London.



Pl. 11. Eva Hesse,
Untitled (1964-65),
oil and graphite on canvas 78 3/4" x 79".
Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Switzerland.

Pl. 12. Adrienne Grandpierre-Deverzy,
Interior of the Studio of Abel de Pujol
(1836), oil on canvas, 37-3/8" x 51-1/4".
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Valenciennes.
Photo: Réunion des Musées
Nationaux/Art Resource, NY.

