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Greer: The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work /
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a Woman

Germaine Greer. *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work.* New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979. 373 pp. \$25.00.

Anthea Callen. *Women Artists of the Arts and Crafts Movement.* New York: Pantheon, 1979. 232 pp. \$10.95.

Mirra Bank. *Anonymous Was a Woman.* New York: St. Martin's, 1979. 128 pp. \$9.95.

Review Essay by Judith E. Stein

In February 1875 the author of a short article on women artists began by noting: "It is still, we believe, an open question with a good many intellectual people whether women can be artists at all, unless in a few exceptional cases." One hundred years later, in the enlightened age of the feminist movement, this once popular opinion has by no means disappeared. Indeed, we may even be denied our few exceptions: The 1977 edition of H. W. Janson's standard *History of Art* mentions not one woman artist in its lengthy chronicle of 5,000 years of art. To counter such retardataire attitudes, growing numbers of feminist art historians have been addressing themselves to the open question of women artists.

Linda Nochlin's pioneering essay, with the tongue-in-cheek title "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1971), provided an answer by exposing the underlying bias of the question. The inquiry about great women artists is like the issue of great Eskimo tennis players: the answer is not to be found in genetic potential but in social history. In her recent book, *The Obstacle Race*, feminist theorist Germaine Greer eschews what she terms the "philistine" issue of greatness and instead chooses to answer such questions as what is the contribution of women to the visual arts? If there were any women artists, why were there not more? If we can find one good painting by a woman, where is the rest of her work? How good were the women who earned a living by painting?

From the onset, Germaine Greer sets her answers to these questions within the context of the new sociology of art:

The intention is to show women artists not as a string of over-rated individuals but as members of a group having much in common, tormented by the same conflicts of motivation and the same practical difficulties, the obstacles both external and surmountable, internal and insurmountable of the race for achievement.

To demonstrate her thesis that women artists have more in common in their minority status as women in Western society than in their minority affiliation as artists, Greer imposes a unique principle of organization on her material. Under the heading "The Obstacles," the first half of the book presents evidence of commonality in the areas of family, love, the illusion of success, humiliation, dimension, primitivism, and the disappearing oeuvre. While we gain a strong sense of recurring injustice from this format, we lose the gestalt of many careers.

This is less true in the second half, entitled "How They Ran," in which Greer discusses the genres of Western art most accessible to women: still life, flower painting, and portraiture. In chronological sequence she traces the contributions of women artists from the medieval cloister to the nineteenth century. One special chapter, "The Magnificent Exception," is devoted to luminary Artemisia Gentileschi, and another treats the modern phenomenon of amateurism, which was particularly applicable to women of the leisure class who were prohibited from undertaking professional careers. Following her goal to "re-people the historical artscape," Greer periodically packs in virtual lists of women about whom little is known beyond their names. This evidence makes for tedious going and more properly fits the context of a biographical dictionary, Greer's original conception for her book. In the present format, we pass from these lifeless inventories to energetic and often brilliant passages of descriptive prose, sparkling with a lush and patrician vocabulary.

During the decade it took Greer to research and write her text, many excellent art historical studies were published, the most rigorous and complete to date being Linda Nochlin's and Ann Sutherland Harris's *Women Artists: 1550-1950* (1976). Her debt to this scholarly exhibition catalog is clear and acknowledged. Not an art historian by training (her doctorate was in literature), Greer is nonetheless a thoughtful scholar whose ample footnotes refer to hard-to-locate primary sources as well as to recent feminist-periodical articles. Readers interested in iconographic problems will miss mention of such innovative studies on the subjects chosen by women artists as Robert Rosenblum's "The Origin of Painting: A Problem in the Iconography of Romantic Classicism" (1957), which discussed the theme of Dibutade, the legendary female inventor of drawing (to whom Greer refers as "Kora").

Many black-and-white photographs and several fine color reproductions document *The Obstacle Race*. Yet except for the grouped color plates, there are no references within the text itself to figure numbers. Thus the reader never knows, while in the midst of a description of a particular painting, whether it will be reproduced at the turning of a page or not at all. Information contained in the idiosyncratic captions is in no way consistent: a uniform system of dating, even a most general "circa" or "flourished" together with the present location of the work, would have helped us to better coordinate text with illustration.

Although Greer states at the beginning her desire "to avoid duplicating information which may easily be come by in other places," it is occasionally unclear why certain data are missing. Except in the wording of the book's subtitle, "The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work," she offers no explanation for her exclusion of sculptors, unlike Nochlin and Harris. Yet she included a discussion of Properzia de' Rossi's *Crucifixion*, which was sculpted on a cherrystone. An important aspect of the sociology of women artists is thus neglected by her exclusion of that stellar group of women sculptors, termed "The White Marmorean Flock" by Henry James, which flourished in Rome in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹

The inclusion of some material—omitted because it was no doubt unfamiliar to Greer—would have served to strengthen her thesis of the commonality of women's experiences. To the case of Rosa Bonheur's nurturing family, we can add that of Cecilia Beaux'; to the examples of Paula Modersohn-Becker and Ida Nettleship, who died of childbirth complications, we can add the sad case of Louisa May Alcott's artist sister, May Alcott Niericker; and to Greer's recitation of nineteenth-century professors who married their younger art students, we can name the well-known academic painter William Bouguereau and his longtime romance with and marriage to Yankee Elizabeth Gardner. Indeed Gardner is another example, to supplement Greer's mention of Rosa Bonheur's donning of cross-sexual clothes, of a woman who chose to dress as a man in order to gain entrance to a Paris art school in the 1860s, when women were not accepted as students.

As a feminist theorist, Greer has liberated herself from many of the received values of the history of art. We benefit specifically by her inclusion of folk art, a subject not normally included in art historical surveys. In her chapter entitled "Primitivism" she offers a cogent feminist analysis of women's high visibility in the diverse folk genres of the art of eccentrics, religious visionaries, and the mentally ill. After musing about "what female genius might be like if it could emancipate itself from the cultural institutions of men" (which is what folk art does as a result of genuine ignorance or indifference), she observes a special correlation between women's socialized personalities and the form of much naïve and *faux-naïf* art. For Greer, women demonstrate the "timidity of oppressed peoples," as a result of subjection to a lifetime of enforced infantilism.

Her arguments are less incisive when, within the same chapter, she discusses "the enduring archaism" and the "arch-conservatism" of women's art work in general. Although her insight that "it comes of the very insecurity that these women felt upon entering into competition with the men who seemed to have made all the running so far" is relevant, she neglects to consider the whole issue of deviance. By definition, a professional woman artist was a social deviant, regardless of how she was admired for being one. Thus if her very life's activity broke with ex-

pected behavior norms, a woman artist would hardly be tempted to go further against the grain and adopt or evolve a painting style at radical odds with prevailing taste.

Tucked here and there in several chapters is evidence of two of the special problems attending women artists: we can call one the "Since it's not important let the women handle it" attitude and the other, the recurring "It's now too important to be left to the women" syndrome. For example, one can argue that women artists are abundantly represented in various folk genres because they are not tied to the vagaries of the high-art marketplace, with its systems of patronage and commissions. Free of official support, women were also free of the active forces of discrimination and suppression. That we can infer societal values from the presence or absence of women working in a particular area Greer attributes to the following kind of explanation:

The absence of good English female portraitists at the time when France was producing a group of brilliant women in the field is simply that in England portrait painting was not a secondary medium. . . . Women portraitists in England were competing for room at the top.

A corollary to the high percentage of women in the traditional "minor" and low-prestige arts is the situation of an entirely new field. Media in their earliest stages of development were frequently pioneered by women. Only when the field caught on were women pushed aside. As Greer noted in relation to still life painting: "The conspicuous activities of the [women] pioneers were buried in the explosion of the baroque still life; nevertheless women continued to work, if less independently than before."

In the twentieth century, there is often near-parity in the gender of the artists who introduce new media. This is true today in the areas of holography, project and performance art, and video. Yet as soon as any one of these media begins to be viewed as more significant and essential, and no longer tangential to the mainstream, we will see the percentage of women working and exhibiting drop, given the past experience in some of the analogous situations described by Greer.

Leaps of descriptive fancy, arguable psychoanalytic interpretations, and the periodic slight of relevant material make *The Obstacle Race* an idiosyncratic piece of scholarship. Yet it is a provocative treatise on the history of women artists by a generalist who amassed little-known material from her own scholarly gumshoe work and from a multitude of secondary sources. Most of its value lies in its appeal to a broad readership curious to investigate the most recent project of a well-known feminist. Greer's impassioned presentation is already sparking discussions of feminism and art history in quarters that the less controversial Nochlin and Harris catalog never reached.²

Another significant work of recent feminist art history is Anthea Callen's *Women Artists of the Arts and Crafts Movement* (1979). If Greer's scholarly ire was roused to muster whole armies of women to combat public ignorance and misunderstanding, then Callen's was prompted to focus on one period and issue. Better organized than Greer's, Callen's study of British and American craftswomen from 1870 to 1914 is a richly researched response to the sexist attitudes inherited by the nineteenth century, which held both women and the decorative or minor arts in similar low esteem.

The recounting of these still viable stereotypes is offered within the context of the nineteenth-century revival of interest in handicrafts. Repugnance toward the mechanized aesthetics of the Industrial Revolution had set in early in Great Britain. Philosophers like Carlyle and Ruskin looked back with admiration to the medieval period when each craftsman took pride in designing, executing, and selling his own work. William Morris, the best-known exponent of what came to be called the Arts and Crafts Movement, is responsible for the popularization of these largely socialist ideals. The split in socialist thinking, in which concern for the worker was divorced from an awareness of the subjugation of women, has, in Callen's view, never been resolved. Thus many of the craftswomen in her study felt an abiding sense of "otherness" in the literal brotherhood of art.

As Callen shows, this enlightened movement, which brought us Morris chairs, Liberty silks, and Doulton pottery, never focused its social conscience on the debilitating restrictions on women's lives. With few exceptions, it perpetuated the traditionally rigid sexual division of labor. Even in the areas normally viewed as women's work, such as embroidery, the high-status job of designing was often the sole prerogative of men. Females fortunate enough to be employed in the arts were relegated to the most menial of tasks, and in Callen's analysis, "rarely reached a sufficiently elevated position in the hierarchy to receive recognition for their work," a situation which reinforced a prevailing prejudice that "men can create, women only appreciate."

"Superfluous women," or those hapless females who failed to be supported by fathers or husbands, were a source of embarrassment to the Victorians, horrified by the thought of middle- and upper-class women earning independent wages. Reluctantly they acknowledged the grim truth that without any vocational training, destitute women or "decayed gentlewomen" had few means other than prostitution with which to earn a livelihood. Yet so widespread was the fear that trained women would push men out of jobs, that an early British class in China Painting (thought particularly suitable for women) tried to handicap the women students by not permitting them to use armrests, as the men did.

Callen's excellent account of the founding and manipulated floundering of the British Female School of Design is a horror story of thwarted intention and cruel suppression of opportunities for women's vocational training.³ Or,

for another cautionary tale, consider the case of the feminist bookbinder L. M. Wilkinson in the 1890s. In a classic Catch-22 situation, classes in bookbinding at the Central School of Arts and Crafts were open only to those already employed in the trade. But while classes were not specifically closed to women, Wilkinson was effectively barred from the necessary training because no women were then employed in the trade.

In chapters devoted to the crafts of ceramics, embroidery and needlework, lacemaking, jewelry and metalwork, woodcarving, furniture and interior design, and hand-printing, bookbinding, and illustration, Callen investigates the numerous examples of women who worked despite (and occasionally because of) the restrictive stereotypes for appropriate gender and class behavior. For example, rural working-class women were encouraged in cottage crafts by middle- and upper-class ladies whose management of the philanthropic craft organizations afforded them new opportunities for power and fame. Given such a clear understanding of the roadblocks, we follow with great attention Callen's unfolding of the careers of such successful artists as May Morris, Margaret Macdonald, Candace Wheeler, and Kate Greenaway.

Obscurity and anonymity are manipulated phenomena of history. Callen shows that, like May Morris of the Morris clan, many of the women who were in the vanguard of the movement and who achieved widespread acclaim during their lifetimes are not mentioned in recent histories of the period. Important exceptions are the Americans Louise McLaughlin, founder of the Cincinnati Pottery Club, and Maria Nichols, founder of Rookwood Pottery, who have received sustained attention as the pioneers of the American art pottery industry.⁴

It's a good bet that your first examination of Callen's book will take the form of a leisurely browse, looking at the pictures and reading the richly informative captions, before settling into the text. Not only are we given plentiful images of the craft objects themselves, but whenever possible Callen reproduces portraits of the artists and views of studio interiors.

Excellent picture research is also the hallmark of Mirra Bank's recent book, *Anonymous Was a Woman*. Luscious color photographs of samplers, quilts, and needle pictures make this a glorious album; we move slowly through it as if at the elbow of the author, who shares her collection, one beautiful piece at a time. Filmmaker Banks has worked on the book's layout as carefully as she had organized her film of the same name which preceded it.

As in the movie she did for NET, Banks uses a patchwork of such published and archival sources as sermons, diaries, and letters as a foil for the visual images. Apart from a brief introduction, there is no text per se. Excerpts of didactic literature, offering vintage definitions of "true womanhood," are interspersed with pictures in the four chapters reflecting the life cycle divisions of childhood, marriage, family, and death.

Interest in folk art in general and women's crafts in particular has been increasing in the last decade. Feminists searching for a womanly heritage have come to the decorative arts and found an ancient and continuing tradition of women's handiwork. New York's Museum of American Folk Art last year organized an excellent display of folk art by American women called *Artists in Aprons*. Readers interested in a scholarly text and extensive bibliography should first consult that exhibition catalog before turning to Bank's work, which has minimal references (Dewhurst and MacDowells 1979).

Anonymous Was a Woman permits brief glimpses of vivid personalities, not all of whom are anonymous. There are the colorful watercolors by Mary Ann Willson, the original artist on whom Isabel Miller based her novel on early American lesbianism, *Patience and Sarah*; the dramatic quilts designed and executed by former slave Harriet Powers; and the clear vision of Shaker Hannah Cohoon's Spirit Drawing of a basket of apples.

The persistence of opinions holding that women are inherently incapable of creating art of significance have sparked the three authors under review into action. To alter these abiding prejudices they have taken many interdisciplinary tacks. To help explain the dearth of known artists in one-half of the population they have strayed into social history, anathema to the conservative discipline of art history. Of necessity feminist art historians turn to sociology to document the history of prejudice, discrimination, and suppression which accompanied the careers of even the most successful women artists.

Feminists bring a fresh vision to the definition of historical "significance." In refusing to accept the received hierarchical values which enshrine easel painting at the top of the list of subjects worthy of study, they mine the decorative arts and encounter a remarkable wealth of material to substantially enrich our general knowledge of the history of art. Too, they illuminate the sexist bias of much connoisseurship which has traditionally attributed "strong" unsigned work to the men under study and the "weak" to the women.

Yet it is not only overt sexism which has worked against the inclusion of women artists in our standard art history texts. For example, changing definitions of good taste have only recently validated the study of nineteenth-century academic painting, a field rich in previously unstudied artists, many of whom were women. Greer's concluding remarks, a public call for greater knowledge of the contributions of women artists and a plea for this new awareness to be manifested in higher market prices for women's art, sound the proper note of action for the general reader interested in ameliorating past injustices:

It is to our advantage to become the women artists' audience, not in a foolishly partisan way so that anything a woman does is good in our eyes, but to offer the kind of constructive criticism and financial, intellectual and emotional support that men have given the artists in the past.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, the essay by William H. Gerdtz, "The White Marmorean Flock," in catalog of exhibition, April 4-30, 1972, Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, New York.
- 2 It has not been uncommon for Greer's reviewers to tackle one another while themselves discussing her book: Hilton Kramer's "Does Feminism Conflict with Artistic Standards?" *Sunday New York Times*, 28 January 1980 drew the immediate response "Kramer vs. Women," from critic John Perreault in *The Soho Weekly News* 31 January 1980; Brigid Brophy's vitriolic review, "The One-Eyed World of Germaine Greer," *The London Review of Books* (reprinted in the *New York Review of Books* 6 December 1979) has drawn response from several quarters, among them Jane Marcus's in her review "Their Signatures Were Painted Over," for *In These Times*, January 16-22, 1980. Joining the connected train of Marcus and Brophy tugging at Greer's stubborn turnip, Maureen Mullarkey wrote, "*Obstacle Race* is a hard book to swallow," *In These Times*, March 12-25, 1980, p. 22. The end is not yet in sight.
- 3 Such was not the case with the American equivalent of this British model, which Callen did not investigate as thoroughly. As I demonstrate in my unpublished study, "The Genesis of the Philadelphia School of Design for Women," the American school's early success was assured when the enlightened self-interest of Philadelphia's philanthropic industrialists coincided with founder Sarah Peter's high-minded intentions for morally elevating careers and practical job training for needy young women. The school survives today as Moore College of Art, still devoted to women's art education.
- 4 See, for example, Robert Judson Clark, ed., *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America 1876-1916* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972) and *The Ladies, God Bless Them* (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Museum of Art, 1976).

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