Linda Nochlin: Why Are There No Great Women Artists?

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Linda Nochlin’s Impact upon View of Women Artists

Linda Nochlin’s question “Why have there been no great women artists?” has opened the floodgates to the feminist study of art history over the past forty years. Before her challenging proposal, few people had even considered the question that Chadwick poses as: “Why had art historians chosen to ignore the work of almost all women artists?” (8). As we explore this idea of the discriminatory treatment of women artists, we will discover the profound impact that Nochlin’s bold question had in increasing the status of women artists. By addressing this issue, Nochlin helped to establish the idea that indeed women possessed the same artistic talents and abilities as men, but societal attitudes and institutional discrimination had disadvantaged many women from being able to succeed in the art world.

In considering the question about the eminence of women artists, we must first acknowledge the role of women artists in a male-dominated society. As Collins explains, “males…have dominated the art world because they have dominated everything in this society” (61). Perhaps this is why many people didn’t even question the fact that most art history books included no information about or works by female artists until the 1970’s and even later. Today we generally accept the idea that women
and men possess the same artistic abilities. “We are all aware that talent has been
distributed to men and women alike; both men and women create art and have
throughout the centuries” (Zimmerman 5). However, this scenario presents us with
another dilemma: If women are equal to men, demonstrate the same artistic ability and
talent, and create equal works of art, then why have they not been documented in art
history?

Nochlin addresses this issue by proposing the idea that there could be a
“recognizable feminine style” within women’s artwork that distinguishes it from men’s
work. In the past, this feminine style could have been perceived as a lesser quality of
work than a more “masculine,” powerful or dramatic work by a man. Nochlin
continues to argue that perhaps “there is a different kind of ‘greatness’ for women’s art
than for men’s…different both in its formal and expressive qualities and based on the
special character of women’s situation and experience” (148). Upon first glance, this
idea seems to make sense, because “in general, women’s experience and situation and
situation in society, and hence as artists, is different from men’s” (Nochlin 148).

When looking through books of paintings of women artists, this idea of a
feminine style in art seems plausible. As Nochlin suggests, “Women artists are more
inward-looking, more delicate and nuanced in their treatment of their medium, it may
be asserted” (149). Many women artists from the past who are prevalent in today’s art
world are known for their works depicting women, children, and flowers. For instance,
the painting The Child’s Bath by Mary Cassatt (Fig. 1) portrays a scene of great intimacy
between mother and child as she washes her child’s delicate foot, carefully holding the child in her lap. The painting *Poppy* by Georgia O’Keeffe (Fig. 2) displays the bright colors and soft petals of a poppy flower. Both paintings, even though they are from different eras, could be interpreted as having a feminine style because of their tender, delicate features.

However, as Nochlin also mentions, there are many men artists who have created very delicate, “feminine” works, like Fragonard’s *The Swing* (Fig. 3), which features the scene of a young woman in a beautiful pink dress swinging daintily through the air. Another example of a male artist with a “feminine style” is Thomas Kinkade (Fig. 4), whose delicate landscapes and scenes of churches and houses are filled with pastel colors and soft sunlight.

In contrast, there are also many women artists who have created works that are far from being described as feminine, like Helen Frankenthaler’s *Viewpoint II* (Fig. 5), a large canvas of bold, gray and brown colors and abstract blurs. Another example is Asian American Artist Kay Kang (Fig. 6), whose works are very abstract. Kang uses dark colors and often includes wood and metal materials in her works. Through these examples, we see that it’s obvious that both men and women are very capable of producing a variety of artistic works, both those that are conceived as “masculine” and “feminine.” Therefore, this notion of females demonstrating a “feminine” artistic style is perhaps not always true.
What could instead be suggested is that throughout history, many women artists have chosen to depict similar subjects in their works. Perhaps this is influenced by the idea that “The making of art is generally subject to three influential factors: an artist’s training and practice, the prevailing historical and critical attitudes of the time, as well as the artist’s social milieu and environment” (Sandell 19). Socially, the domestic life of caring for children and doing household chores is the world that most women were limited to. Because of their situation and their limited experiences, they simply followed the artistic opportunities available to them, painting the scenes that they knew best. For instance, the Dutch realist Clara Peeters is best known for her still life paintings of every day objects; she has over fifty paintings “featuring glasswares, precious vases, fruits and desserts, breads, fish, shells, and prawns, sometimes with flowers added” (Chadwick 132). Her Still-Life (Fig. 7) presents a table with flowers, a vase, and some snacks, an image very typical of a domestic woman’s environment of the time. However, it is also stereotypical to think that all women have painted domestic subjects; we can simply acknowledge a definite trend of similar subjects within the works of many women artists through the early 1900’s.

Sandell’s quote about “the making of art” also mentions the impact of “an artist’s training and practice” as well as “the prevailing historical and critical attitudes of the time” upon his or her work. This is the area that Nochlin pinpoints as the reasoning for why women artists have not been recognized throughout art history. In the beginnings of institutional art education, women were not allowed to paint from nude models; only
men were allowed this artistic advantage. As Nochlin elaborates, “it is all right for a ('low,' of course) woman to reveal herself naked-as-an-object for a group of men, but forbidden to a woman to participate in the active study and recording of naked-man-as-an object, or even of a fellow woman” (160). Johann Zoffany’s The Academicians of the Royal Academy (Fig. 8) depicts this bias, as members of the Royal Academy are seen studying and sketching the male nude models. The few members of the academy who were women were not allowed to be present; they are instead seen as portraits hanging on the wall.

Zoffany’s painting led to discussion of the idea that “There is clearly no place for the two female academicians in the discussion about art which is taking place here” (Chadwick 6). While one might not understand the significance of this incident of discrimination to the status of women artists as a whole, it is crucial to see that the study of the nude model “formed the basis for academic training and representation from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century” (Chadwick 7). Furthermore, “To be deprived of this ultimate stage of training meant, in effect, to be deprived of the possibility of creating major art works...It is rather as though a medical student were denied the opportunity to dissect or even examine the naked human body” (Nochlin 160). Their lack of opportunity to study the human form also constitutes why many women chose to paint “the ‘minor’ fields of portraiture, genre, landscape, or still life” (160), providing us a more solid reasoning for the trend in common subjects of women’s art. Therefore, the initial discrimination of women had a profound impact upon the
future of women artists and the status they were able to achieve. This is why Nochlin argues that, because of this “single instance of deprivation or disadvantage- the unavailability of nude models to women art students… it was indeed institutionally made impossible for women to achieve artistic excellence, or success, on the same footing as men, no matter what the potency of their so-called talent, or genius” (176).

On the other hand, critics of Nochlin suggest that her argument “ignores the complexity of contradictory possibilities” (Mullarkey). Indeed, it seems that Nochlin’s argument rests heavily upon the unavailability of nude models to women during art education so many years ago. While this idea is certainly credible, there could be countless other reasons for the discrimination of women artists, including financial concerns, differing social statuses, prevailing attitudes about females of the time, and obligations in the home. By only attributing the discrimination of women to their lack of the nude model, it seems that Nochlin is limiting herself and greatly weakening her argument. Also, we should note that many art schools today do not even use the nude model in their teaching, yet they train some of the finest art students in the country, males and females. If the unavailability of nude models hasn’t affected these new artists, why does Nochlin insist that it had such an extreme impact upon women artists throughout history? Perhaps Nochlin’s argument is one of many that work to explain the complex situation of the discrimination of women artists throughout history.

It is important to understand that Nochlin’s argument does not end in a depressing manner; she instead encourages women to “face up to the reality of their
history and of their present situation, without making excuses or puffing mediocrity” (176). By being bold and direct in her argument, “she challenged feminists to transcend immediate demands and confront the controversial but fundamental question ‘Why?’” (Rom 19). It was critical for Nochlin to ask the fundamental question, “Why have there been no great women artists?” in order to increase awareness of the limitations on women, even in the late 1900’s. Nochlin’s article was monumental in demonstrating that idea that there had been no great women artists because they lacked the artistic talent and ability was completely false. Instead, Nochlin showed that misperceptions of a “feminine style,” social limitations, and institutional discrimination placed women artists at a severe disadvantage. As Rom elaborates, “Acceptance of the fact that there were no female equivalents to Michelangelo is imperative to understanding the art world’s limitations and biases, and Nochlin cogently refuted the conventional theory of individual genius, which attributes successes or failure to the artist and minimizes societal and institutional structures” (19-20). This realization opened many new institutional and educational opportunities for women artists, giving them the boldness and the confidence to express themselves freely in the art world.
Images and Image Sources

Fig. 1 Mary Cassatt, *The Child’s Bath*, 1893.
Image source: http://www.artic.edu

Fig. 2 Georgia O’Keeffe, *Poppy*, 1927.
Image source: www.globalgallery.com

Fig. 3 Jean-Honore Fragonard, *The Swing*, 1766.
Image Source: www.angelo.edu

Student Research

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Fig. 4. Thomas Kinkade, *Forest Chapel*, 1999.
Image Source: www.kinkadecentral.com

Fig. 5. Helen Frankenthaler, *Viewpoint II*, 1979.
Image source: www.butlerart.com

Fig. 6. Kay Kang, *Untitled*, 2001.
Image Source: www.1890bryant.com/aawaa/image3.jpg
Fig. 7. Clara Peeters, *Still-Life*, 1611.
Image source: www.wga.hu/art/p/peeters/stillife.jpg

Fig. 8. Johann Zoffany, *The Academicians of the Royal Academy*, 1771-72.
Image source: www.npg.org.uk
Works Cited


Nochlin, Linda. “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” Women, Art, and

