Citation

Myers, Nicole. "Women Artists in Nineteenth-Century France”

Unlike their male counterparts, women seeking professional careers in the fine arts were restricted in their opportunities to receive an artistic education. Excluded from receiving free training at the state-sponsored École des Beaux-Arts until 1897, women turned for instruction to the studios of established artists or to private academies, which provided them with a reduced curriculum often at great expense. These private art institutions based their courses on the French academic system, which placed the mastery of human anatomy through the study of the live nude model at the core of its program. This classical training was crucial for the success of artists aspiring to success in history painting, the most elevated and lucrative category of painting.

While life drawing classes were an essential part of academic study, they were denied to women in both public and private institutions through much of the century as they were deemed inappropriate and even dangerous to the mores of proper young ladies. Without access to nude models, female artists could not receive the training necessary for the production of "important" works of art. Accordingly, women artists were virtually excluded from state commissions and purchases as well as from participation within official competitions such as the coveted Prix de Rome, a prestigious scholarship offered to history painters for continued study at the French Academy in Rome.

To make a living, many women turned to portraiture, genre painting, landscape, and still life, subjects that were not held in high esteem, as Bracquemond implied when she described her training in Ingres's studio. It was not until the 1870s that life drawing classes became more readily available to female students in Paris. All-women classes were offered at Charles Chaplin's studio and the women's section of the private Académie Julian. Marie Bashkirtseff, a Russian art student enrolled in the latter, depicted her colleagues' activities in her painting In the Studio, exhibited in the Salon of 1881.

Just as inhibiting to women seeking careers in the fine arts were contemporary attitudes toward class and gender roles. In a letter to the mother of Edma and Berthe Morisot, their private art instructor expressed the implications of the two girls' burgeoning talents: "Considering the characters of your daughters, my teaching will not endow them with minor drawing room accomplishments, they will become painters. Do you realize what this means? In the upper-class milieu to which you belong, this will be revolutionary, I might say almost catastrophic." While amateur talents in drawing and watercolor were encouraged as part of a good bourgeois education, professional careers for women who did not need to work were considered detrimental as they were thought to divert women from their prescribed roles as wives and mothers. Rather than heed their teacher's alarm, Madame Morisot responded to her daughters' potential by sending them to further their studies under the tutelage of Joseph-Benoît Guichard, a pupil of Ingres and Delacroix. Familial support and encouragement in the face of social taboos were key prerequisites for women of a certain social standing in their pursuit of a profession in the fine arts.

Indeed, social pressures could be so great that many women artists felt the need to choose between a career and marriage. Equally promising in talent as her sister, Edma Morisot stopped painting upon her marriage in 1869, a decision she mourned in letters to her sister. For her part, Berthe did not marry until later in life, when her artistic reputation was already well established, and her husband—Édouard Manet's younger brother—was exceptionally supportive of her profession. Marie Bracquemond eventually quit her promising artistic career when it caused tension in her marriage to fellow artist Félix Bracquemond.

In general, the most successful female artists of the nineteenth century, such as Rosa Bonheur and the Americans Mary Cassatt and Cecilia Beaux, remained unmarried. Additionally, virtually all of the women artists who enjoyed a significant degree of public acclaim in this period were closely associated with successful male artists as their pupils, models, or daughters. For example, Berthe Morisot's acceptance into avant-garde circles was facilitated by her close relationship with Manet, her brother-in-law, for whom she also posed on several occasions.

Rosa Bonheur was trained by her father Raimond, a drawing teacher and landscape painter who believed in gender equality and avidly supported his daughter's career. Bonheur made her reputation by specializing in the popular field of animal painting (87.15.109). In 1848, she received a gold medal at the annual Salon for Cows and Bulls of the Cantal, but her greatest triumph came with the exhibition of The Horse Fair (87.25) at the Salon of 1853. This monumental painting, purchased by an American collector in 1857, became one of the most celebrated works of the century, making Bonheur a financial and critical success both at home and abroad.

By the time of her death in 1899, Bonheur had received numerous international honors, including Commander of the Order of Isabella the Catholic in Spain, the Order of Leopold of Belgium, and the Legion of Honor in France (the first woman to be so named). Her great institutional success was anomalous among women artists of her time, as was Bonheur herself. Rejecting contemporary gender roles, she cut her hair short and requested special permission from the police department to wear men's pants so she could go unnoticed in the male-dominated horse fairs, stockyards, and slaughterhouses that she frequented to study animal anatomy.

In fact, the inability to explore public spaces and travel unescorted constituted a serious disadvantage for female art students. Bashkirtseff bemoaned this situation in her journal: "What I long for is the freedom of going about alone, of coming and going, of sitting in the seats of the Tuileries, and especially in the Luxembourg, of stopping and looking at the artistic shops, of entering churches and museums, of walking about the old streets at night; that's what I long for; and that's the freedom without which one cannot become a real artist." This lack of freedom greatly limited what women artists could represent, tipping the scales in favor of subjects that could be painted in the home: genre scenes, portraits, and still-life paintings. Likely for this reason, nineteenth-century women artists gravitated toward anti-academic movements such as Realism and Impressionism, which emphasized everyday subjects over historical themes that required proficiency in the painting of nude or semidraped figures.

Although she began her studies in Chaplin's studio, Eva Gonzalès became Manet's student, model, and friend from the time of their meeting in 1869. Heavily influenced by her mentor, Gonzalès favored strong contrasts between light and dark tones, thick patches of broadly applied pigments, and contemporary subject matter. Many of her paintings depict young women relaxing in gardens and fashionable theatergoers, as in A Loge at the Théâtre des Italians , a subject also popular with the Impressionists.

With its emphasis on contemporary life, Impressionism was accessible to artists of all artistic backgrounds and Morisot and Cassatt became two of the movement's core members. Though their upper-class status prevented them from frequenting the Parisian café-concerts and dance halls so often celebrated by their male colleagues, they did have access to everyday subjects of middle-class leisure and domesticity and the landscapes that became the Impressionists' staple.

Berthe Morisot was one of the group's most instrumental members, both in the creation of its aesthetic as well as the organization of its exhibitions. Morisot was the only Impressionist to participate in every show, with the exception of the one held in 1879, the year her daughter was born. With her light palette, feathery brushstrokes, and quiet scenes of female domesticity, she was considered by many critics of the time as the purest and most successful of the Impressionists.

As was the case with most American artists in the late nineteenth century, Cassatt went to Paris to further her studies and remained in her adopted city for most of her life. Like Gonzalès, she studied in Chaplin's studio and was influenced by her close friendship with Edgar Degas. Upon his invitation, Cassatt began exhibiting her works with the Impressionists in 1879 and received critical praise for painting appropriately "feminine" subjects like women taking tea and crocheting (22.16.17; 65.184). In the 1890s, she turned increasingly to depictions of mothers and children, which became her specialty (29.100.47). Cassatt also produced portraits, several series of color etchings, and a large mural, Modern Woman, for the Women's Building at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago (23.101; 1997.207; 16.2.2).

Though France offered female artists the best options for private training, it was one of the last countries in western Europe to provide women with state-sponsored education. Well behind its counterparts in Sweden, England, Denmark, Germany, and Russia, the École des Beaux-Arts did not open its doors to women until 1897, admitting ten female students after a protracted effort by reformists. Initially excluded from painting and life study classes and taught separately from men, female students would not win equal opportunities until the opening years of the twentieth century.

cole Myers

Institute of Fine Arts, New York University

Citation

Myers, Nicole. "Women Artists in Nineteenth-Century France". In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/19wa/hd\_19wa.htm (September 2008

Source: Women Artists in Nineteenth-Century France | Thematic Essay | Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History | The Metropolitan Museum of Art