

Part II: The Nineteenth Century and the Victorian Woman Artist

The Nineteenth Century and the Gifted Lady Amateur

As the nineteenth century progressed, an increasing number of women exhibited in the Salons and Academy exhibitions in England and France, but the subject matter of their work was problematic. Portraits, miniatures and watercolour were not material for establishing a reputation as a great artist when history paintings in oil or canvas were used as a measure of artistic success. These relatively unimportant subject matter areas were the characteristic choices of women artists in France, England and by this time the United States and Canada in the nineteenth century. Thus, although Graves' *Dictionary of Artists*, published in London, and listing exhibitors from 1760 to 1893, lists one hundred and fifty women's names under the letter A alone, today we know little of these women artists for the reason that the subject matter and scale of their work were simply not significant enough to attract critical attention. The women artists whose names do rise to the surface during this period were all exceptional women, individuals, who worked outside of traditional women's subject matter choices, and for this reason could scarcely have been regarded as possible role models by their women artist contemporaries.

Many of the other "unknown" women artists were probably amateurs, even serious amateurs: but a woman's expected career was marriage, not art, and it was difficult to make the transition from serious amateur to serious professional artist without society's sanction. In the final analysis, the numbers of women involved in the making of art based on lists such as Graves' *Dictionary of Artists* appears to have increased during the nineteenth century. Yet traditionally, art history makes very little mention about women artists in the nineteenth century, except to suggest the existence of "gifted lady amateurs." Nevertheless, what options did women who wanted to become professional artists have? Societal conventions dictated that marriage and the rather arduous domesticity that followed were to be the standard fate for the average woman. If a woman expressed an interest in or a talent for art there would have been little encouragement to pursue such interests. In addition, her talent might have been steered in the direction of the more acceptable decorative arts. Certainly there was little opportunity for a woman to pursue the art education that her male contemporaries were able to participate in. without good

technical art training it was difficult for women to compete in an era when one of the principle requirements of a painting was an accurate representation of reality.

Women's Art Education in the Nineteenth Century

For the young upper-middle class Englishwoman in the Victorian era, it is likely that in most instances her education would have included art as an "accomplishment." Instruction at this accomplishment level would have taken place at school or at home, with lessons given by drawing masters or governesses. There was also a proliferation of journals of instruction for young ladies in the nineteenth century. All were designed to make the recipient of the instructions more "ladylike." Comments from one such text provides an indication as to how art instruction for women was regarded. Mrs. Ellis wrote in her manual, *The Daughters of England, Their Position in Society, Characters and Responsibilities* (London, 1845), "Female Character though invested with high intellectual endowments must then fail to charm without at least a taste in music, painting or poetry." She also suggested that this facility was useful for the recording of the places they visited or the features of those dear to them. Again, portraits or the "taking of a likeness," landscapes, still-life painting, and to a lesser extent, figurative compositions were the subject matter choices at this accomplishment level of commitment. Moreover sketching and the painting of small watercolours were quite socially acceptable and could be managed within the constraints imposed by household duties and childbearing. The preferred medium was watercolour not oil painting. Charlotte Yeldham, in *Woman Artists in Nineteenth Century France and England* (New York, 1984) writes, "Oil painting was not, on the whole, a part of accomplishment art. Several reasons may be advanced for this. Oil painting was hardly suitable as a drawing room activity, it involved more materials, and mess than watercolour. In addition, it was associated with highly finished pictures and most women lacked the serious training necessary for working up pictures to finish. Finally, it implied larger pictures than women were thought capable of completing." (p.67)

Accomplishment art was a leisure time pursuit, and leisure was the prerogative of the middle and upper classes. Beyond this basic level of instruction, opportunities for art education for women, in England for example, prior to 1858, were negligible. Women were not admitted to the royal academy schools until 1861. Prior to this, although there were several art schools in London, such as The Female school of art (a government sanctioned design school for women, that did include "ladies" classes in their curricula, thus providing an option for a young woman who wished a proper art education), none of these schools included life drawing as part of their

instruction for women. Thus, women's participation in the predominantly male mainstream of art activity was considerably restricted.

Those women who did participate, albeit minimally—for the years 1800 to 1875, only 5.5 to 10.5 percent of the contributors to the royal academy exhibitions were women—were from artistic families, a circumstance which allowed a certain "licence" to practice art as well as in many instances receive actual art training. Thus in one sense the father/daughter artist tradition continues. Otherwise, women who rose to a degree of prominence in the art world at this time did so because of exceptional circumstances or because they received a measure of critical acclaim which might be best described as patronizing. John Ruskin, the preeminent British art critic, was not generally supportive of the efforts of women artists. Within this critical climate, there was a considerable discussion as to whether women could even be called "artists." Rather they were referred to as "paintresses," the more prevalent terminology in an era when a separate vocabulary existed to describe all of women's endeavours, artistic or otherwise. Gender distinction and gender hierarchy were norms in the nineteenth century.

The Sexual Politics of Jean Jacques Rousseau (Schwartz, 66) refers to a letter written by Rousseau in 1842. In this letter, Rousseau "contends that there is something inherently masculine about great works of art, something which depends on a differentiation between the principles of the two sexes. When the differentiation is destroyed, when art is reduced to an exercise in femininity and is no longer an expression of masculinity art loses its claim to greatness....In art, as in politics, masculine greatness is dependant upon femininity but seemingly is destroyed by effeminacy." Commentary such as this set the tone for the remainder of the nineteenth century.

The Nineteenth Century and the Exceptional Woman Artist

In the Salon of 1850, one third of the exhibitors were women and the Salon was referred to as the Salon des Dames. However, few of these artists seem to have risen beyond the listing of their names, because of a lack of training, subsequent choice of subject matter, or societal inability to commit themselves to a professional career. The women who received a small measure of recognition can be regarded as both exceptions as women and exceptional in their abilities.

Rosa Bonheur

Rosa Bonheur (1822-1899, French) was one of these exceptions. She was one of these exceptions. She was an exception because of her upbringing. Her father belonged to a religious sect called the St. Simonians, a sect believing in the equality of women as a religious necessity. Her father was an artist who taught all of his four children to paint. Rosa began studying animals at the age of 10 in the Bois du Boulogne, and it was an interest that she developed, pursued and on which her reputation as an artist was based. Animals as subject matter were the ideal choice for a woman artist. There were no restrictions placed on the study of animals, just on the study of the human figure. Rosa Bonheur purchased and dissected animal parts, and went to slaughter houses, horse fairs and cattle markets. She adopted men's dress trousers and short hair, with official authorization to dress this way from the prefect of police. Painting took precedence over her earlier sculptures and she worked on large compositions such as her most famous painting *The Horse Fair* 1853-55 which was 8' in height and 16 1/2' long. Purchased by an American, it was gifted to the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) in New York where it still hangs today.



Rosa

Bonheur: The Horse Fair (1853-55)

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f6/Rosa_bonheur_horse_fair_1835_55.jpg

She also worked on a series of paintings about the Far west, a series which included a portrait of, interestingly enough, Buffalo Bill on horseback. Her work was popular and popularized by steel engravings in Europe and the United States. For her work, she was awarded the French Legion of Honour by Empress Eugenie who upon the presentation stated that "genius has no sex." Again, Rosa Bonheur was an individual in her life and work. She was a professional artist at a time when societal restrictions made it difficult for women to pursue a career as a professional artist. What she had was an unusual supportive living arrangement. She never married and although unmarried women usually remained to live out their lives within the family, Rosa Bonheur lived with a childhood friend, Nathalie Micas and her mother. Nathalie, who was also a painter, devoted her life to Rosa's career, placing it before her own and playing out the role of an artist/wife in relation to an artist/husband.

Elizabeth Thompson (Lady Elizabeth Butler)

Rosa Bonheur's English counterpart was **Elizabeth Thompson (Lady Elizabeth Butler)** 1850-1933, English) who painted military and battle scenes such as *Scotland Forever*.



Lady

Elizabeth Butler: Scotland Forever (1881)

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/65/Butler_Lady_Scotland_for_Ever.jpg

Her subject matter choice made her somewhat of an anomaly but guaranteed her success, and like Rosa Bonheur, her work was extremely popular. John Ruskin, an art critic who was a contemporary of Butler's made the following rather revealing statement: "I never approached a painting with more iniquitous prejudices against it than I did Miss Thompson's, partly because I have always said that no woman could paint, and secondly because I thought what the public made such a fuss about must be good for nothing." Women artist and public taste were not in good standing with Ruskin. But public taste was justified because Lady Elizabeth Butler's work was technically competent and accurate. Like Rosa Bonheur, she was able to circumvent restrictions but the means that she used was wealth. Her family was able to finance art school training with its restrictions but was also able to augment it with travel abroad and private study of the nude. Her marriage, appropriately enough to a military man, permitted her continuing study of her subject matter as she accompanied her husband on her travels. Her career path was unique and not one that could be easily followed by other women.

The Narrative Tradition

Finally there are the women artists who worked within the narrative tradition of painting in nineteenth century England and the United States. In this style of

painting, the picture told a story, sometimes commenting on Victorian morality, and the paintings were popular with the general public, reproduced for the home once again in the form of steel engravings or prints. **Edith Hayter's**(English) *A Summer Shower* falls into this category as does **Emily Mary Osborn's** (English) *Mrs. Sturgis and Children*. **Lily Martin Spencer** (1822-1902, American) can be considered the equivalent in American art history to these English women artists. In the United States, there was also a group of women sculptors who travelled to Rome. Here they lived quite independently, away from societal restrictions and were referred to as the White Marmorean Flock because of the white marble dust that covered them as they worked and pursued their careers as sculptors in their studios. **Harriet Hosmer** (1830-1908, American) is the best known of these women artists, but again the style in which these women worked fell out of favour and their work was neglected.