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Women's Art as a Lens for Historical Disparity

The qualities of a great artist may often include ingenuity, mastery of skill, and resonance with an audience. These traits aren't necessarily born with the artist, in fact they can arguably be nurtured, yet many male artists are referred to as geniuses of their time. Nochlin addressed the question of why there have been no great women artists by saying that institutional barriers historically exclude women from educational opportunities. She discusses many such barriers, like how nude models were largely unavailable to women artists and how literature discouraged women from devoting time to activities outside of caring for others[1]. Her argument is persuasive because of the variety of evidence and nuances discussed. She rightfully cautions against trying to find a universal feminine style in art, with examples like Rosa Bonheur's *Horse Fair*, the delicate Rococo style of the 18th century, and the domestic scenes by Renoir and Monet[2]. While it is important to discourage judging women's art with different standards, considering the perspective and audience of women artists could provide further insight on social barriers. By examining the artworks of Cassatt, Morisot, Renoir, and Monet, differences in composition, experimentation, and audience interaction reveal how social limitations for women impact more than just subject matter.

Though Nochlin convincingly rejects the idea of a singular or universal femininity in women's art, it is important to recognize that patterns do emerge when works are compared within the same genre and period, an analytical scope her essay largely avoids. When Mary

[1] Linda Nochlin, "Why have there been no great women artists?" ARTnews (2015). https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists-4201/.
[2] Ibid.

Cassatt and Pierre-Auguste Renoir each depict the audience of an opera, subtle artistic choices reveal themselves. In Renoir's *Le Loge* (Fig. 1), the viewpoint hovers mid-air, as though the viewer is floating above any seating. This imagined perspective carries no bodily consequence, when compared to Cassatt's *Le Loge* (Fig. 2). Cassatt positions the viewer slightly below the women, creating an uncomfortable tension and a gaze that the two girls in the center can feel. In both paintings, the women glance sideways, but Renoir's subject appears luminous with pale skin, unaware of being observed. Cassatt's women, though balanced in a symmetrical composition, have flushed cheeks, strained eyes, and rigid posture. Additionally, the girl on the left covers herself with a fan and holds her elbow with her other hand as a self-protective gesture. Compared to the complicity of the woman in Renoir, the two girls in Cassatt's painting carry the labor of being publicly on display, or as Pollock describes it, a "suppressed excitement" from this unease[3]. Pollock also writes that the two girls are sitting at an oblique angle so that they are not contained by the frame's edge[4]. This contrasts the framed, almost portrait-like women in Renoir's. Renoir's background figure intensifies this divide, because he looks upward through binoculars, aimed at another woman in the crowd. This parallels the audience spying on his wife, becoming a scene depicting male gaze. Women become both the objects and the punchline of a joke shared amongst men. With a predominantly male audience for art consumption and receival, audience resonance is more likely if the artist plays into male fantasies as opposed to challenging them. Both Impressionist paintings are of the same subject matter, but differences in the paintings are also artistic choices that should not be overlooked. While Nochlin does not use this

[3] Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Feminity," in *Expanding Discourse*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary Gerrard. (London: Routledge, 1992), 131-132.
[4] Pollock, "Spaces of Femininity".

type of analysis in her article, it strengthens her argument that the existing art institutions favor male artists, meanwhile women face extra burdens from a young age.

The contrasting degrees of mobility afforded to men and women in the 19th century shaped where artists could go, ultimately shaping artwork further than just subject matter and location. Nochlin is correct when she writes that "restriction to certain subjects is not to be equated with a style"[5], but this restriction is still worthwhile to examine because of how it impacts an artists' chance of being 'great'. Eisenman discusses the concept of *flaneur*, a male individualist response to the abrupt socioeconomic changes that Haussmannization brought to Paris[6]. Manet and other artists embodied the concept of strolling down the streets, observing and judging the spectacle that is Paris itself. This ideology is clear when viewing Caillebotte's *Paris Street; Rainy Day* (Fig. 3), a depiction of men's uninhibited wandering through public spaces. Similarly, while Manet could look for inspiration as he traveled "between home and studio… vagrantly searching the city for models and motifs"[7], women simply did not have this privilege[8]. This is why women often paints scenes of domestic life, with a mother and child almost always front and center, like in Cassatt's *Mother and Child* (Fig. 4). Cassatt paints to depict the nurturing ability of women, the composition similar to historical Madonna and child paintings. Nochlin mentions that men also paint scenes of domestic life, like Degas' paintings of women bathing[9]. But for Degas that was a choice, and as many of the Impressionist and Realist paintings exhibit, domestic life was not the most common choice for male artists. Male artists' existence as individualists meant they could not be as controlled by salons, so they had more freedom and

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[5] Nochlin, "Women Artists".
[6] Stephen Eisenman, "Manet and the Impressionists," in *19th Century Art*, ed. Stephen Eisenman. (London: Thames, 1994), 283-284.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Pollock, "Spaces of Feminity", 130.
[9] Nochlin, "Women Artists".

cushion from risk to experiment as artists. One example is Manet's *Olympia* (Fig. 5), which may be an exception to the complacency towards gender expectation, as seen in Renoir's and Caillebotte's work. Manet's *Olympia* was heavily criticized but because of his male privilege, he could take this risk that ultimately contributed to his recognition as an artist much later[10]. Thus, differences in artists' perspective and experimentation between men and women exists and suggests a complicated network of both outright and covert barriers for women. Studying paintings within the same time period can contribute to Nochlin's argument of institutional barriers, even though she does not include this type of analysis to avoid classifying women's art as entirely different.

When comparing Impressionist paintings, the difference in composition and experimentation between men and women artists further stress women's barrier to ingenuity, a quality shared among many great artists. Even when women like Berthe Morisot turned toward outdoor scenes, like *A Summer's Day* (Fig. 6), their perspectives reveal a consistent proximity of subjects rather than the detachment in many male Impressionist paintings. Monet's *Impression: Sunrise* (Fig. 7) adopts a remote, panoramic viewpoint that can only be explored with the freedom and lack of domestic roles that a flaneur has. Monet's painting contains several boats with faint human silhouettes, whose identities are irrelevant because they are instruments to study how light plays with the atmosphere. *Impression: Sunrise* depicts the sky with wide brushstrokes that reveal the canvas underneath and the texture of the bristles. This contrasts the reflections of light depicted on water, with short almost abstract colorful lines that illustrate how the sunlight bounces off the water's ripples. Monet often depicts how he sees light in these environments, and this 'ingenuity' in his style of painting is one of the qualities that make him a

[10] Eisenman, "Manet and the Impressionists", 287-288.

recognized ‘great’ artist. But developing this lens and style requires the detachment from social roles, which is something women could not afford. In Cassatt’s painting, the boat is the structure in the foreground. Its diagonal edge divides the scene into two unequally sized spaces. As Griselda Pollock would argue, these spaces are also a representation of partitioned social spheres[11], where the women are constrained to the small corner occupied by the boat. The aristocratic young woman in the center of the image faces the viewer with clasped, gloved hands and rigid posture. She, similar to Cassatt’s women in *Le Loge*, exhibits a self-conscious expression and awareness of external gaze. The working-class woman chaperone has a relaxed posture as she turns to face the water. She places her hand on the boat’s edge – the threshold between them and the other space – to peer over at the ducks in the water. These women also sit in the foreground and are clearly the main subject of the painting, unlike the people in *Impression: Sunrise.* While Morisot’s painting also demonstrates colorful, distinct brushstrokes that depict how light interacts with water, it also carries the women’s weariness. Morisot’s painting therefore illustrates how social pressure on aristocratic women restricts movement and curiosity, despite their presumed economic privilege. With Monet, his painting received criticism, but because of the risk he took, the term *Impressionism* was coined. Many of the great male artists were celebrated because of this originality and pioneering of a new art style. Along with Monet, some examples include Picasso and Braque’s cubism, and Caravaggio’s tenebrism. Ingenuity however requires autonomy and freedom to take risks that women artists did not have. The patterns that recur in Impressionist women’s paintings are likely to do with such social barriers; they do not have the luxury of observing nature from afar because they must be involved heavily in the care of others. This is something Nochlin also discusses, as she mentions that 19th century etiquette manuals told women to “direct her major attention to the welfare of

[11] Pollock, “Spaces of Feminity”, 128.

others"[12]. By analyzing the differences between Impressionist painters, the social barriers that women face become clearer, and it explains why women artists were not recognized nearly as much as the men. It is difficult to deny the differences in men's and women's art the way Nochlin does to an extent, but it comes from a place of historical limitations, therefore highlighting them.

Nochlin's main point of social and institutional barriers against women in art is well supported by her diverse evidence and discussions. However, Nochlin largely ignores the existence and importance of often-apparent differences in subject matter, perspective, and audience of women's art. She cautions against arguing that there exists a universal feminine style to women's art by mentioning several artists and paintings with no underlying similarities. This is almost a moot point, because style and time period will always interfere with any notion of universality. Instead, the conversation should be turned towards similarities and differences within the same style, such as the Impressionists of the 19th century. By analyzing *Impression: Sunrise*, zoomed out perspectives and engagement with nature are evidence of the male flaneur's freedom in society. In contrast, Morisot's *A Summer's Day* features women in the foreground with a line that divides the painting into two social spaces. When comparing two paintings with the same subject matter and location, the interaction with the audience of a painting gives insight into why women artists struggle to receive the same recognition as men. Renoir's *Le Loge* exhibits an objectification of women that resonates better with a predominantly male audience. In comparison, Cassatt's *Le Loge* paints the uncomfortable, burning gaze women face in the one outside space they are allowed in. While it is important to not think of men's and women's art as inherently or categorically different, historical differences in their art are important to consider when analyzing disparities that can strengthen Nochlin's argument.

[12] Nochlin, "Women artists".

Works Cited

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Illustrations

Fig. 1. Pierre Renoir, *La Loge*, oil on canvas, 1874, Courtauld Gallery, London.

Fig. 2. Mary Cassatt, *La Loge,* oil on canvas, 1880, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

Fig. 3. Gustave Caillebotte, *Paris Street, Rainy Day,* oil on canvas,1877, Art Institute, Chicago.

Fig. 4. Mary Cassatt, *Mother and Child,* oil on canvas, 1890, Wichita Art Museum, Kansas.

Fig. 5. Edouard Manet, *Olympia,* oil on canvas, 1863, Musee d'Orsay, Paris.

Fig. 6. Berthe Morisot, *A Summer's Day*, oil on canvas, 1879, National Gallery, London.

Fig. 7. Claude Monet, *Impression: Sunrise*, oil on canvas, 1872, Musee Marmottan, Paris.