

- 4 Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Diacritics 17 (2, 1987), 80; bell hooks, Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism (Boston, 1981); hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics (Boston, 1990).
- 5 See Dirks, note 1; Michel de Certeau, The Writing of History (New York, 1988); Johannes Fabian, Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object (New York, 1983); Trinh T. Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality Feminism (Bloomington, 1989).
- 6 Examples of interrupted readings include: Gayatri Chakravory Spivak, "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman's Text from the Third World," in In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics (Routledge, 1987), pp. 241-268; Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohany, "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do With It?" in Feminist Studies/Critical Studies, ed. by Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington, 1986), pp. 191-212; Donna Haraway, "Reading Buchi Emecheta: Contests for Women's Experience in Women's Studies," in Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature, (Routledge, 1991), pp. 106-126.
- 7 Shoshana Felman, "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching," American Imago, 48 (1, 1991), 13-73.

THE MEDIEVAL FEMINIST ART HISTORY PROJECT



(Based on a talk delivered at the Twenty-sixth International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, Michigan, May 1991, in a session sponsored by MFN and organized by Paula Gerson and Pamela Sheingorn.)

Art is one of the most important sources we have for understanding the roles of women in medieval culture. Yet in discussion at sessions sponsored by the Medieval Feminist Newsletter a year ago, and with some justice, questions arose as to whether there was any medieval feminist art history and if so, where was it? Paula Gerson and I organized this session as an answer to those questions.



The "first wave" of feminist art history might be said to have begun with Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" But it is symptomatic of the relationship between feminism and medieval art history that Nochlin focused on the modern period and that the earliest century covered in Eleanor Tuft's 1974 survey, Our Hidden Heritage: Five Centuries of Women Artists, is the sixteenth. From the very beginning, feminist art history has concentrated on the modern and contemporary scenes.

There was a flurry of feminist activity in medieval art history in the 1970s, which consisted largely of the important work of recovery: identifying and documenting female

artists. Thus we now have “Guda, who wrote and painted,” and the charming Claricia, and we have to thank Dorothy Miner and Annemarie Weyl Carr for bringing them to our attention. But pursuing the named artist was not going to get us very far when most medieval artists remain forever anonymous and are assigned titles such as “The Master of the Leaping Figures.” The paradigm of the artist as genius—the master—dominated art history and, as Christine Battersby has shown so convincingly, the definition of genius has repeatedly been manipulated to coincide with masculine qualities. Feminist art history made remarkable gains in other areas, almost entirely in post-medieval Western art, changes that are discussed in an excellent review article entitled “The Feminist Critique of Art History,” by Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Matthews, published in Art Bulletin in 1987.

But through most of the 1980s, feminist art history and medieval art history followed largely separate paths, as can be deduced from Herbert Kessler’s review article, “On the State of Medieval Art History.” Kessler’s short paragraph acknowledging that “Many artists were women” (180), indicates that relatively little had happened since the “first wave” of the seventies. Though some of us had stopped making some of the misogynistic moves we had been taught to make, the conservative nature of our training stood in the way when we tried to find ways to begin making feminist moves. We instead spent the 1980s learning from other disciplines, in my case medieval literary studies, where openness to change offered the possibility of new ways of thinking. There we found a dazzling array of theoretical options, which a number of medieval art historians, among whom I would especially want to mention Linda Seidel, began to explore.

Meanwhile back in art history a growing sense was developing that the discipline needed change, a sense articulated in an issue of Art Journal for 1982 entitled, “The Crisis in the Discipline,” which pointed out that it was time to question many of the assumptions on which the discipline of art history rested and that there was a need for new, integrative methodologies. Critics deplored the hermetic nature of art history as well as its reluctance to consider the social milieu of art. Out of this crisis was born “The New Art History,” described in a collection of essays with that title edited by A. L. Rees and Frances Borzello and in a special issue of History of the Human Sciences edited by Stephen Bann. Important components of the New Art History include “interest in the social aspects of art and . . . stress on theory,” including literary theory, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and feminism (Rees and Borzello, 8).

Thus although there is relatively little medieval feminist art history in print as yet, the eighties were not a time when the project stalled, because out of the ferment of that decade have come theories and methodologies that provide the firm ground on which we can move decisively forward.

Let me first describe theoretical approaches that I think can be of the most help to us and then some more specific directions in which I see the medieval feminist art history project moving in the 1990s.

In my own view, cultural criticism, which breaks down boundaries between disciplines in order to study the nature of cultural constructions, offers us the best framework from within which to analyze medieval visual culture. Cultural criticism encourages us to view medieval civilization as composed of many sub-cultures, each with its own ideology. Cultural activities and products, such as artifacts, public celebrations,

and other ritual events, serve to articulate these ideologies. Sub-cultures sometimes borrow symbols from a dominant culture, often reinterpret such symbols, and may even subvert their original meaning. Two recent books, one edited by Kathleen M. Ashley and the other by Susan Sheridan, offer excellent overviews of cultural criticism, the latter in relation to feminism. And the essays of Janet Wolff, collected in her Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture, relate the cultural approach to feminist art history. In describing "the project of a feminist art history," Wolff argues that "Art history, like literary criticism, is obliged to incorporate the best of the sociology of culture, which will enable the necessary attention to social process and cultural institutions" (112-13).

The medieval feminist art history project can use cultural approaches to analyze subjects such as the body, gender, and sexuality. Within this theoretical framework we can situate art associated with sub-groups like the female mystics, or the Beguines (Ziegler), we can understand how objects such as the reliquary-stature of Ste. Foy participate in social processes (Ashley and Sheingorn, "Unsentimental"), and we can recuperate artifacts that have been devalued as crafts, such as medieval embroidery (Parker), as well as those that have been placed on the wrong side of the high art/low art divide, such as woodcuts (Moxey). And we can contextualize objects that have been classified as high art based on aesthetic values and thereby severed from the culture in which they were embedded.

But, lest this sound as if I am advocating that art history be subsumed into cultural history, let me turn to the New Art History, which has made an interesting countermove by asserting the independent status and unique nature of the visual. The New Art History insists that art plays an active role in the continuing process of shaping culture. This is especially true of the Middle Ages, for medieval Christian cultures were visual cultures. In such cultures, art shapes and changes with the society that produces it. Art is not separate from history, not just a record of what was thought and done, but a powerful agent in its own right (see Camille). This means, of course, that we must study many aspects of a culture in order to grasp the roles of art in its shaping. Our approach must be interdisciplinary.

Further, feminist art history itself has developed a body of theory with which we can engage, whether we modify, adopt, or finally reject specific aspects as not applicable to the Middle Ages. I speak here especially of the work of Griselda Pollock and Lisa Tickner, two of the leading theorists in feminist art history. Feminist film theory can be especially valuable here, especially for its theorizing of the gaze (see Gamman and Marshment, Kaplan, Mulvey, Pribram), which medieval literary scholars such as Maureen Quilligan have begun to apply to works of art. Such approaches enable us to move beyond an account of women artists and their work and to analyze representations of women as cultural constructions. The Middle Ages can also serve as a testing ground for feminist theory developed to analyze contemporary culture, since the construction and therefore the representation of gender is not the same in all times and places.

Now I want to be specific about directions I see for the Medieval Feminist Art History Project in the 1990s. Placing artifacts in cultural context means continued interest in patronage and a new interest in reception. Female patronage played a larger role than we have realized in the shaping of medieval culture. For example, Madeleine

Caviness has recovered a major female patron in Agnes of Braine, whose endeavors had been wrongly attributed to her husband. Patronage of convents is an area in which a great deal of work could be done, for example, in studying a work like the Resurrection altar by the Master of Liesborn that shows two abbesses as patrons.

We also need ways of getting at the responses of women as beholders of works of art. Such studies will require social history to situate audiences as precisely as possible, but should also make use of reception theory and reader response theory. In addition, cultural anthropology has provided us with the concept of the polysemous or the multiple meaningful symbol, a particularly helpful way of discussing imagery with a range of meanings. It has also encouraged synchronic readings, to catch the full range of meanings of a symbol, which will get us closer to women's responses than the diachronic narratives preferred by traditional art history, in which the meaning of symbol shifts as a reflection of historical change. Taking this approach in our study of Saint Anne, Kathleen Ashley and I conclude that "the figure of Saint Anne functioned symbolically for a wide range of social groups in their cultural practices" (2).

Another major direction would make use of the current work being done in the history of literacy. New evidence about female literacy can be used in connection with reception theory to analyze the imagery in books owned and used by women, which survive in much greater numbers than we might have thought. This approach will provide us material for juxtaposing the culture's constructions of women with women's constructions of themselves as revealed in the imagery they preferred.

We also need to ask how women used and shaped architectural spaces. Such work has begun: historians such as Jane Tibbetts Schulenberg are making available materials documenting the attempts of the Church to control female access to sacred space, and art historians Ann M. Roberts and Joanna Ziegler are chairing a panel entitled "Functions of Art and Architecture in Women's Religious Communities, 1300-1600" at the 1992 meeting of the College Art Association.

And, to come full circle, we need to continue our project of recuperation, of learning more about historical women. One way is to exploit new sources, such as the seals studied by Brigitte Bedos-Rezak, or old sources in new ways, such as the Index of Christian Art, in whose files Adelaide Bennett is finding considerable visual documentation of historical women.

When Paula Gerson and I gave a title to this session, we included an element at its end that disappeared somewhere on the way to the printer: a question mark. We meant to indicate the tentative nature of the endeavor. Yet the disappearance of the question mark was, I believe, prophetic, for by the end of the session there should be no doubt in your minds as to the existence of the medieval feminist art history project.

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MEDIEVAL WOMEN ARTISTS AND MODERN HISTORIANS



WOMEN HAVE a lot in common with art. In the history of art, women have often been portrayed as pretty pictures that excite men to brilliance or as statues whose motionless grace arouses the male genius and compels it to create. Elizabeth Ellet asserts in her Women Artists (1859) that "woman is the type of the ornamental part of our life, and lends to existence the charm which inspires the artist."¹ Women, we infer, are archetypes, rather than makers, of art. In the history of women, moreover, women's status has frequently been treated as a fine gauge of cultural sophistication, a role commonly assigned to painting and sculpture. As Eileen Power once observed, "The position of women has been called the test point by which the civilization of a country or of an age may be judged."² In much historical thought, women and art do indeed have a lot in common: both are static sources of inspiration; both are luxuries cultivated by the truly civilized.

How have medievalists responded, then, to women who produced art, to allegedly passive, beautiful, nonessential objects that fashioned others and thus created the stuff of civilization? In what ways, for example, have historians tried to determine the extent to which medieval European women participated in artistic production? How have they conceptualized the effects of gender on what (and how) female artists painted, sculpted, or embroidered? How, furthermore, have they interpreted the relationships of women's artistic activities to medieval economics, religion, politics, and other domains of power? This essay considers these issues in relation to art produced by women in Western Europe between the fifth and fifteenth centuries after Christ.

Rediscovering the names of medieval artists of either sex is a tricky business. Among extant medieval works, signed pieces are rare, and biographical information about their makers is even rarer. Europe in the Middle Ages seems to have had no parallel for the cult of personality that surrounded image-makers from Michelangelo to Mapplethorpe. The picture is further complicated by our imperfect knowledge of