
ESSAYS

An Illustrated Guide to Linda Nochlin's "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"

First published in *ARTnews* in 1971, Nochlin's essay is considered to be one of the first major works of feminist art history.

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Linda Nochlin's "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1971) is generally considered the first major work of feminist art history. Maura Reilly, a curator, writer, and collaborator of Nochlin's, described the work as "a dramatic feminist rallying cry." "This canonical essay precipitated a paradigm shift within the discipline of art history," Reilly states in her preface to [Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader](#) (2015), "and as such her name became inseparable from the phrase, 'feminist art,' on a global scale." A dryly humored analysis of the values by which artists are historicized and discussed, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" posited the first methodological approach for the discipline: that instead of bolstering the reputations of critically neglected or forgotten women artists, the feminist art historian should pick apart, analyze, and question the social and institutional structures that underpin artistic production, the art world, and art history.

In her own words, Nochlin grew up in “a secular, leftist, intellectual Jewish family” in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. In 1951, she graduated with a BA in philosophy and a minor in Greek and art history at [Vassar College](#). Vassar is one of the so-called “[Seven Sisters](#),” a group of historic women’s colleges along the Northeastern US (it became coeducational in 1969). “The good thing about a women’s college... was that women had a chance to do everything,” Nochlin stated in a 2015 interview with Reilly. “We were not pushed to the margins because there were no gendered margins...we were all there was.” In 1952, Nochlin obtained a masters in English literature at Columbia before undertaking her PhD in art history at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, where she wrote her doctorate on the work of Gustave Courbet. Aside from “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” Nochlin is perhaps best known for her 1971 book, [Realism](#), a landmark study on the 19th-century movement.

Shortly after she began teaching art history at Vassar, Nochlin had a conversation with an (unnamed) acquaintance that changed her life. She recalls the exchange in her 1994 essay, “Starting from Scratch”:

“Have you heard about Women’s Liberation?” she asked me. I already was, I said, a liberated woman and I knew enough about feminism — suffragettes and such — to realize that we, in 1969, were beyond such things. “Read these,” she said brusquely, “and you will change your mind.”

Nochlin’s friend handed her a stack of second-wave feminist literature. It included publications such as [Redstockings Newsletter](#) and *Everywoman*. “This was brilliant, furious, polemical stuff, written from the guts and the heart,” Nochlin wrote. “That night, reading until two a.m., making discovery after discovery, cartoonish light bulbs going off in my head at a frantic pace, my consciousness was indeed raised, as it was to be over and over again within the course of the next year or so.”

Nochlin amended the subject of her upcoming seminar (listed simply as “Art 364b”) to *The Image of Women in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. Together with her students, Nochlin combed through the visual tropes of art history. Among the

course's listed subjects were 'Woman as angel and devil in 19th-century art,' 'Pornography and sexual imagery,' and 'The theme of the prostitute.' "We were doing the spadework of feminist art history," Nochlin recalled, "and we knew it."

A year later, Nochlin attended a Vassar graduation ceremony where Gloria Steinem was the speaker. Steinem was invited by Brenda Feigen, a friend of Nochlin's, and the sister of art dealer Richard Feigen. Nochlin later cited her interaction with the art dealer as the catalyst for "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?":

Afterwards, Richard turned to me and said, "Linda, I would love to show women artists, but I can't find any good ones. Why are there no great women artists?" He actually asked me that question. I went home and thought about this issue for days. It haunted me. It made me think, because, first of all, it implied that there were no great women artists. Second, because it assumed this was a natural condition. It just lit up my mind. [It] stimulated me to do a great deal of further research in a variety of fields in order to "answer" the question and its implications.

Building upon the research she conducted with her students, Nochlin wrote the essay for inclusion in Vivian Gornick and Barbara Moran's *Women in Sexist Society* (1971), where it was originally titled "Why Are There No Great Women Artists?" However, the essay first appeared in the January 1971 edition of ArtNews, an issue specially dedicated to "Women's Liberation. Woman Artists, and Art History."

The issue's cover reproduced an 1801 portrait of "Marie Joséphine Charlotte du Val d'Ognes" from the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection, which was once thought to have been painted by Jacques-Louis David. The choice of this painting was pertinent, not only because it depicted a woman drawing, but because it had recently been reattributed to a woman, Constance Marie Charpentier (1767–1849). An *ArtNews* editorial note describes the portrait as "perhaps the greatest picture ever painted by a woman." Nine years later, the painting was reattributed to another artist, Marie Denise Villers (1774–1821). The Met Museum also clarified its stance on the painting's subject, retitling the work more cautiously as "Young Woman Drawing."

The painting's shaky attribution underlines the fact that feminist art history should not be understood as just a necessary corrective — or to use Nochlin's words, as something to be “*grafted* on to a serious, established discipline” — but as an ongoing project. A feminist art history, as Nochlin views it, would not only entail a more thorough investigation of the painting's provenance and history, but would necessitate an investigation into why the painting was misattributed as well as the reasons for its art historical and critical neglect. The women's question, Nochlin argues, “can become a catalyst, an intellectual instrument, probing basic and ‘natural’ assumptions, providing a paradigm for other kinds of internal questioning, and in turn providing links with paradigms established by radical approaches in other fields.”

The first half of “Why Are There No Great Women Artists?” is devoted to Nochlin's methodological thesis. She argues that Women's Liberation has been “chiefly emotional — personal, psychological, and subjective — centered,” but she asserts that in order to be effective it also “must come to grips with the intellectual and ideological basis of various intellectual [and] scholarly disciplines.” In this regard, she refers to John Stuart Mill's observation that we tend to accept whatever is commonplace as “natural.”

“Those who have privileges invariably hold on to them,” wrote Nochlin. “In reality the white-male-position-accepted-as-natural, or the hidden ‘he’ as the subject of all scholarly predicates — is a decided advantage, rather than merely a hindrance or a subjective distortion.” In art history, the white, Western male viewpoint is “unconsciously accepted as *the* viewpoint of the art historian.” Nochlin's stated mission is to prove that this perspective is not only objectionable “on moral and ethical grounds, or because it is elitist” but because it is *intellectually* inadequate.

The question in “Why Are There No Great Women Artists?” is implicitly biased. It insidiously assumes that there aren't any — that unlike men, women aren't capable of achieving artistic greatness. “The feminist's first reaction is to swallow the bait,” wrote Nochlin. “That is, to dig up examples of worthy or insufficiently appreciated women artists throughout history.” Though Nochlin affirmed that such work is “certainly worth the effort,” she rejected the approach on the basis that it does

“nothing to question the assumptions lying behind the question.” “On the contrary, by attempting to answer it, they tacitly reinforce its negative implications,” Nochlin concluded.

This passage remains the most controversial section of Nochlin’s essay, in part because she went on to curate high-profile exhibitions of work by women artists; for instance, *Women Artists: 1550–1950* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (1976) and *Global Feminisms* at the Brooklyn Museum (2007). As Nochlin surmised in “Starting from Scratch,” such exhibition work “directly contradicted” her earlier stance. “I said that I thought that simply looking into woman artists of the past would not really change our estimation of their value,” Nochlin states in her interview with Reilly. “Nevertheless, I went on to look into some women artists of the past and I found that my own estimations and values had in fact changed.” That this criticism has been leveled at Nochlin is not entirely fair. She clearly didn’t denigrate the rehabilitation of neglected artists. Rather, her point was that the approach does nothing to address art history’s patriarchal value system. How is art history structured? Who is asking the questions, how are they framed, and what assumptions do they carry? Why are male artists such as Michelangelo or Picasso typically described as “geniuses,” while women such as Berthe Morisot or Rosa Bonheur are not? Most importantly, how is art historical value conferred?

In what is perhaps the most quoted passage of the essay, Nochlin writes:

There are no women equivalents for Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Delacroix or Cézanne, Picasso or Matisse, or even in very recent times, for de Kooning or Warhol, any more than there are black American equivalents for the same. If there actually were large numbers of “hidden” great women artists, or if there really should be different standards for women’s art as opposed to men’s — and one can’t have it both ways — then what are feminists fighting for? If women have in fact achieved the same status as men in the arts, then the status quo is fine as it is.

But in actuality, as we all know, things as they are and as they have been, in the arts as in a hundred other areas, are stultifying, oppressive, and discouraging to all those, women among them, who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class and above all, male. The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education.

There are a couple of key points to unpack in this passage. The first is that Nochlin is not an essentialist. She does not believe that there is such a thing as an innate “feminine” style (this sets her apart from other feminists such as the artist [Judy Chicago](#), who has argued the opposite). “In every instance, women artists and writers would seem to be closer to other artists and writers of their own period and outlook than they are to each other,” Nochlin observed. Patterns in subject matter, such as the scenes of motherhood and child-rearing depicted by artists such as Berthe Morisot or Mary Cassatt, can be attributed to sociological factors, artistic expectations, or personal predilection, not to gender. “If women have turned to scenes of domestic life, or of children, so did Jan Steen, Chardin, and the Impressionists — Renoir and Monet as well as Morisot and Cassatt. The mere choice of a certain realm of subject matter, or the restriction to certain subjects, is not to be equated with a style, much less with some sort of quintessentially feminine style,” Nochlin wrote.

Nochlin argued that terms such as “great” and “genius” are loaded with “unquestioned, often unconscious, meta-historical premises.” These premises are then compounded by art history’s “romantic, elitist, individual-glorifying, and

monograph-producing substructure.” She demonstrates this fact by outlining certain patterns in art historical biographies — namely the discovery of certain “geniuses.” As told by the Renaissance artist and biographer, Giorgio Vasari, Giotto’s talent was discovered, when, as a young shepherd boy, he was observed drawing sheep on a stone. Other artists such as Mantegna, Zurbarán, and Goya “were all discovered in similar pastoral circumstances,” Nochlin jokingly observes. She doesn’t dispute the truth of such stories, but notes that they “tend both to reflect and perpetuate the attitudes they subsume.” Picasso’s completion of all his required art school examinations in a single day is a modern variant of what is effectively the same story, a highly fetishized and mythologized moment of talent and discovery.

Leonardo da Vinci, Pablo Picasso, and Julian Schnabel

Nochlin rejects the values of greatness and genius, not only because they are demonstrably patriarchal, but because their application typically involves a complete disregard for historical or sociological context. Today, the vast majority of contemporary art historians tend to avoid the use of such terminology and consider “genius” to be a facile concept. However, the notion of the masterful individual continues to retain a powerful allure over art-going audiences. The “romantic, elitist, individual-glorifying, and monograph-producing substructure” that Nochlin described, remains the stock-in-trade of the art industry, especially in regards to the marketing of artists and exhibitions.

This brings us to Nochlin’s final field of inquiry: the exclusion of women from art education. Discouraged from the arts (and indeed the majority of intellectual pursuits), talented women have not had their artistic origins or moments of genius documented or discussed. This exclusion, combined with the intellectually impoverished and patriarchal values of “genius” or “greatness,” explains why there are “no women equivalents for Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Delacroix.” The playing field and system of values are simply not the same.

The latter half of Nochlin’s essay examines the institutional exclusion and treatment of women artists. It is divided into four sections — ‘The Question of the Nude,’ ‘The Lady’s Accomplishment,’ ‘Successes,’ and ‘Rosa Bonheur’ — the first of which focuses on the institutionalization of life drawing.

From the Renaissance through to the 19th century, the drawing of the nude was considered an essential artistic skill. The exact parameters of this belief changed over time, but by the 18th century it had coalesced into a highly codified and hierarchical structure. Different genres of painting were ranked. History painting (i.e. historical and mythological scenes) was considered the highest artistic form. It was followed respectively by portraiture, genre, landscape, and still life painting. History painting could not seriously be attempted or lauded unless an artist had demonstrably perfected the male nude. This meant copying from other works, sculptures, and eventually from live models. But it was considered improper for women to attend life drawing classes until the late 19th century. When women were eventually admitted, they were usually supervised by men and their models were often purposefully (and counter-productively) draped. As Nochlin surmised, “to be deprived of this ultimate stage of training meant, in effect, to be deprived of the possibility of creating major art works.”

Nochlin provides a brief historic overview of life drawing, while also examining depictions of artistic pedagogy. She notes with a wry sense of humor that Angelica Kaufmann (1741–1807) could not be represented in person in Johann Zoffany’s 1771–1772 group portrait, “The Academicians of the Royal Academy,” since the scene depicted includes a nude male model. Instead, she is represented in the form of an effigy on the back wall.

Kauffmann was an extraordinarily rare example of a successful woman artist from the period. In France, the best-known women artists were Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun (1755–1842) and Adélaïde Labille-Guiard (1749–1803). The two artists were pitted as rivals and were subject to salacious and unfounded rumors regarding their integrity and conduct, particularly Le Brun, whose association with Marie Antoinette made her an active target of pamphleteers and letter writers. Nochlin suggests that the rare and unique “successes” of artists such as Le Brun and Kaufmann were due, in part, to family ties. “They all, almost without exception, were either the daughters of artist fathers, or, generally later, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, had a close personal connection with a stronger or more dominant male artistic personality,” Nochlin wrote. She also observes, but does not delve into, the connection between women artists and “the roles of benign, if not outright encouraging fathers.” Although this section of the essay is less rigorously argued, Nochlin’s theory that familial connections enabled some women to

circumnavigate the institutional strictures placed on them, is convincing. Aside from Kaufmann and Le Brun, she also cites Marietta Robusti, Artemisia Gentileschi, Lavinia Fontana, and Elizabeth Chéron as examples.

As the restrictions placed on artistic practice began to wane over the course of the 19th century, women began to “strike out on their own.” The glacial breakdown of these strictures was accompanied by the rise and establishment of a particular stereotype, that of “the lady painter.” In “The Lady’s Accomplishment,” Nochlin attributes this trope to 19th-century etiquette guides and literature. By way of example, she quotes a number of passages from [Mrs. \[Sarah Stickney\] Ellis’s *The Family Monitor and Domestic Guide*](#):

To be able to do a great many things tolerably well, is of infinitely more value to a woman, than to be able to excel in any one.

Drawing is, of all other occupations, the one most calculated to keep the mind from brooding upon self, and to maintain that general cheerfulness which is part of social and domestic duty... [it can also] be laid down and resumed, as circumstance or inclination may direct, and that without any serious loss.

In works such as these, Nochlin argued, “the insistence upon a modest, proficient level of amateurism...transforms serious commitment into frivolous, self-indulgence, busy work, or occupational therapy.” These attitudes perpetuated certain patriarchal advantages:

Such an outlook helps guard men from unwanted competition in their “serious” professional activities and assures them of “well-rounded” assistance on the home front, so that they can have sex and family in addition to the fulfillment of their own specialized talents at the same time.

Such attitudes persist today, particularly in regards to the tension between family life and work. For instance, the lack of institutional support for both maternity and paternity leave and the absence of universal child care makes it exceptionally difficult, if not impossible, for many women to resume their professions and

creative passions. “The choice for women seems always to be marriage *or* a career,” wrote Nochlin. “I.e., solitude as the price of success *or* sex and companionship at the price of professional renunciation.”

Nochlin’s essay ends with an extended profile of [Rosa Bonheur](#) (1822–1899), “one of the most successful and accomplished women painters of all time.” Bonheur specialized in equine and bovine scenes and was awarded numerous accolades, including a first medal at the Paris Salon. Consistent with her methodological mission, Nochlin is less interested in the specifics of Bonheur’s work than she is in analyzing how the artist navigated the artistic and institutional strictures of her time. Bonheur functions as the ultimate exemplar for Nochlin’s essay, as her circumstances chimed with many of the art historian’s observations and conclusions about women in the arts. For instance, like Le Brun and Kaufmann, Bonheur was born into an artistic family. Furthermore, her father had been a member of the Saint-Simonian community, a political movement dedicated to “true equality,” whose female members made a point of their emancipation by wearing trousers. “My father...reiterated to me that woman’s mission was to elevate the human race, that she was the Messiah of future centuries,” Bonheur told an interviewer. “It is to his doctrines that I owe the great noble ambition I have conceived for the sex which I proudly affirm to be mine.”

Rosa Bonheur

Bonheur’s career coincided with the decline of history painting and the rise of middle-class patronage. By combining her artistic naturalism with a focused specialty,

Bonheur was able to stand out in the nascent art market. As Nochlin surmised, Bonheur’s success “firmly establishes the role of institutions, and institutional change, as a necessary, if not a sufficient cause of achievement in art.” However, despite her enlightened roots, Bonheur continually felt the need to justify her unconventional artistic standing. She maintained that she wore trousers because she needed to study animals at fairs. Referring to her shorn head at the age of 16 — a look she briefly adopted following her mother’s death — Bonheur retorted, “who would have taken care of my curls?” The expectation to explain away so-called “masculine” needs and behaviors led Bonheur to police herself and her public image.

In examining and scrutinizing Bonheur's attitudes, Nochlin effectively signposted a psychoanalytic approach to art history. In addition to yielding a great deal of information about institutional structures and customs, the study of Bonheur's career also provides a case study of the internalized pressures and contradictory attitudes that women are continually forced to navigate. Perhaps the most extraordinary feature of Nochlin's essay is its presaging and active encouragement of a multi-disciplinary approach to art history. Aside from psychoanalytic enquiries (vis-à-vis Bonheur's statements and biography), Nochlin also delved into semiotics ('genius' and 'greatness') and social art history (institutions and academic structures).

"Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" was written during a watershed year for the Women's Liberation movement. 1970 marked the 50th anniversary of the passing of the 19th amendment. In the same year both *Sisterhood is Powerful* (an anthology of feminist writings) and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* were published, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) passed the US House, the Ad Hoc Women Artist's Committee was founded in New York, and Judy Chicago established the first ever feminist art program at Fresno State College, California (Nochlin later visited *Womanhouse*, a pioneering installation work created by Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's students at CalArts). The publication of Nochlin's essay in *ArtNews* was hugely significant in that it catalyzed the art world to confront the so-called "women's issue," as well as the historic and contemporaneous treatment of women artists.

The immediate reaction to Nochlin's article was decidedly mixed. The January '71 issue of *ArtNews* featured a number of responses to Nochlin's essay, including a dialogue between artists Elaine de Kooning and Rosalyn Drexler, who had markedly different reactions to the essay. When de Kooning posits that "the status quo in the arts is fine as it is," Drexler dissents:

What this woman who wrote the article may mean is there are people who manipulate the art world — who can decide by tumeling up business, by talking, by maybe buying articles, by collecting, by publishing — that they can build a reputation, and the people who do this may feel subliminally — no matter what they say — that they wouldn't do this for a woman, or, at least, not for many women."

Later in the exchange, when de Kooning rejects the notion of including women in exhibitions “on the basis of some democratic procedure or statistics” as

“ridiculous,” Drexler replies that “you have to start somewhere.” Their conversation, as well as the contributions by artists such as Rosemarie Castoro, Marjorie Strider, and Lynda Benglis, demonstrate that the renewed and growing discourse on structural and systemic discrimination was still very much nascent in the art world, despite the activism of marginalized groups and factions such as the Art Workers Coalition (AWC), Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC), and the Ad Hoc Women Artist’s Committee.

Although Nochlin’s essay did not provide a comprehensive or systematic model for a feminist art history, it did posit a clear methodological approach, which she keenly reiterates in her conclusion:

By stressing the *institutional*, rather than the *individual*, or private, preconditions for achievement or the lack of it in the arts, I have tried to provide a paradigm for the investigations of other areas in the field [...] I have suggested that 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.

As one of the first major works of the field, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” inspired countless artists and scholars to embark on their own fields of inquiry. Indeed, the essay is best understood as part of a larger post-structuralist rejection of perceived binary oppositions (men/women, black/white, heterosexual/homosexual, cisgender/transgender) and the inherently unequal and unjust dichotomies that they perpetuate. “Nochlin nailed the problem four decades ago,” wrote Eleanor Heartney in a [2015 tribute](#) to the art historian. “That her thinking is still so current says some sad things about contemporary culture.”

Though its proponents may share the same basic values, not all feminist art historians adhere to the same conclusions or concerns. Feminist art history, like feminism itself, is not a monolithic methodology. Opinions regarding gender, race, essentialism, and the canon vary greatly throughout the discipline. One of the few maxims generally held to be true is that there is no such thing as a feminist art

history. Rather, there are feminist art *histories*. Linda Nochlin's "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" stands as one of the first major strides into a rich, ongoing, and utterly essential discipline.