

Art Herstory: Female perspectives in the European Parliament's Contemporary Art Collection

Temporary visibility and history

For centuries, women have been systematically left out of the world of art: from its history, documentation and study. Indeed, the best-selling art history survey of all time, Ernst Gombrich's *A Story of Art*, features only one female artist, Käthe Kollwitz (and this is only in the German version; the English version features none). Unfortunately, this is not an isolated event. Giorgio Vasari's seminal book *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* includes only one woman in its first 1550 edition, and just four in the 1558 revision. More recently, H.W. Janson's survey *Basic History of Western Art* featured no women in its first edition of 1980, while the later 2013 edition features only 27 women out of 318 artists. Thankfully, historical exceptions exist, such as Antonio Palomino's *Museo pictórico y escala óptica* from 1715 where 44 of 251 artists are women, a remarkable number for the time. Nevertheless, this general narrative of female exclusion has consistently shaped the way art history is written and recorded, regardless of historical or contemporary reality.

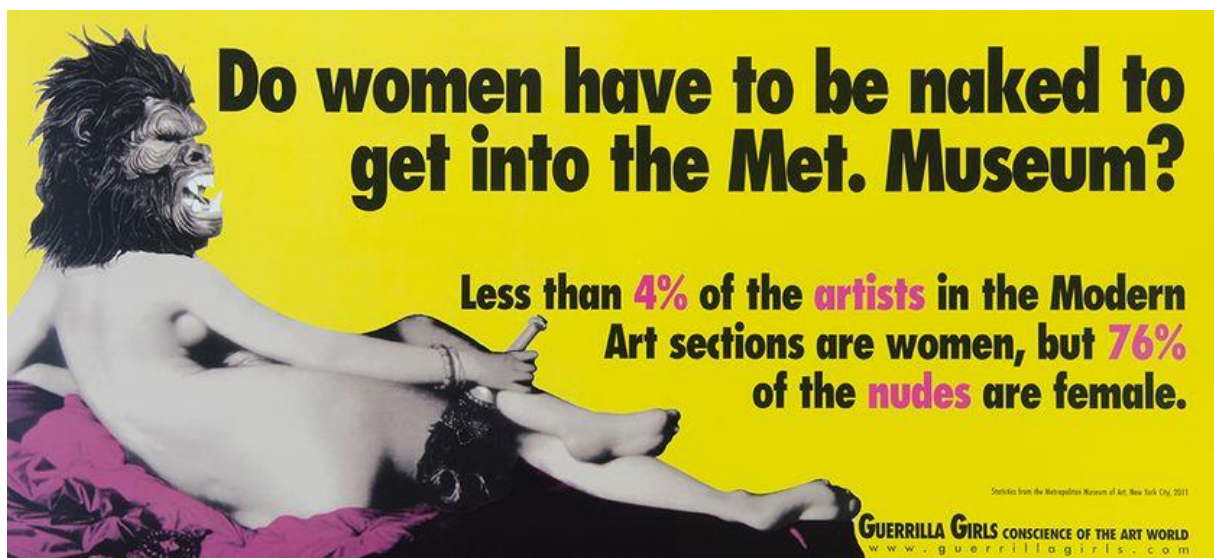
The story continues into the present day, where this representative disparity is as divorced from the truth as ever. According to a 2021 European Parliament survey, women make up 60% of present-day art 'amateur' practitioners and/or students in Europe; however, women's works account for only 3 to 5% of permanent art collections across Europe and the US. Female perspectives need to be brought back into collections, exhibition spaces and wider art history through systemic change. This is the thinking behind the European Parliament's *Art Herstory* exhibition and the decision to shine a light on female artists, cementing them in art history through lasting curatorial decisions.

But surely the situation today is different? It is true that in recent years, female artists have repeatedly been in the spotlight, whether it's through discourse, publications or more overarching cultural trends. With every female-centred exhibition, boundaries are pushed and mentalities challenged. From historic and foundational exhibitions such as *Les femmes artistes d'Europe exposent au Jeu de Paume* held in Paris in 1937 to numerous other recent examples of female-centred exhibitions across the world, art made by female artists has today gained unprecedented visibility. Unfortunately, this visibility has not evolved into lasting historic and curatorial integration. At least, not yet.

Still on the outside looking in

It is clear there is today a strong societal effort to reintegrate female artists in art histories and museum collections. Nevertheless, curatorial policies and institutional investments – which have been on the decline since 2008 – indicate a slowing of this long-term trend. Although EU-specific data is still scarce, it is clear that temporary exhibitions do not necessarily translate into permanent acquisitions. Of the Prado's 1700-piece permanent collection, only 10 are attributed to women; the Louvre displays only roughly 30 artworks created by women; and the Musée d'Orsay's collection contains less than 7% of female artists (296 out of 4,463 total artworks) according to 2019 surveys. Obviously exhibitions, as important and encouraging as they are, create only a temporary effect of hyper-visibility - lulling the general public into thinking systemic change is underway, when reality reveals otherwise. Despite dedicated exhibitions, female artists are still on the outskirts of art history.

The fringe status of female artists is best embodied by the collective Guerrilla Girls, active since 1985, which uses strategies outside of traditional systems and channels to comment on this situation. The collective's members express their frustration towards cultural institutions and their poorly justified passivity through public interventions and interpretation of famous artworks using stencil or spray paint, all the time remaining anonymous thanks to plastic gorilla masks. The group's best-known image challenges the art world's view of 'women as muses', a narrative contemporary female artists are still fighting against.



Guerrilla Girls, *Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into The Met. Museum?*, 1989 © Guerrilla Girls

For female perspectives to have an active role in shaping art history, they need to be brought back into the discipline's communal spaces, including collections, exhibition spaces and books. Tokens do little for systemic change; permanent collections, on the other hand, shape the public's opinion and appreciation of art. This means that in order for female artists to get visibility and claim their rightful space in art history, female agency and presence is needed.

Institutional Change

Recent years have proven to the art world that the accumulation of ephemeral gestures, although necessary and useful in educating the public, are simply a veneer applied on deeply rooted unbalanced policies. To fix this issue, it is clear more radical change is required. Yet another problem is that this transitory focus only serves to highlight women in isolation, rather than integrating them as self-sufficient artists in larger bodies of work. This runs the long-term risk of equating 'women' or 'female' qualifiers of art with a harmful and discriminatory distinction: Georgia O'Keeffe, for example, stipulated that her works are never to be involved in gender-based initiatives, as she not a 'female artist' but simply an 'artist'. Striking the balance between temporary visibility and perennial relevance, between undoing historical erasure and reaching historical integration and (re)assimilation is an arduous task, but one worth undertaking. There is no real consensus on how best to proceed, no convenient blueprint, but, thankfully, a few institutions are paving a more transparent way forward.

One such example is the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, which has sold some of its best-known work by white male artists (which constitute the overwhelming majority of their collection) to fund more diverse acquisitions and reshape their corpus. In 2013, the institution

used funds from marquee sales to purchase works by female artists and introduce them to their permanent collection. Another trailblazer is the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, which in 2018 demonstrated a tangible illustration of why representation matters through the exhibition of under-appreciated female Swedish artist Hilma af Klint, a mystic and abstract. The event, seen as huge gamble by the art world at the time, has gone on to be the one of the most successful in the institution's history, breaking the museum's records for highest attendance, youngest demographic and catalogue sales and resulting in a 34% membership increase. Meanwhile, both the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and New York's Dia Art Foundation are shaping their purchases around the ambition to grow increasingly gender balanced. For the latter, purchases of female artists' creations have risen from only 11 between 2008 to 2015 to 177 between 2015 to 2019 under the new direction of Jessica Morgan.

The European Parliament and the contemporary art world

The European Parliament's Contemporary Art Collection is dedicated to ongoing development in addition to temporary highlights such as this exhibition. Founded in 1980 by the institution's first democratically elected president, Simone Veil, the collection strives to embody the values and aspirations of the European Union. This means that it is not restrained by the hurdles of market comparisons or ticket sales, reasons often invoked by cultural institutions to justify their limited support for female artists. The Contemporary Art Collection endeavours to represent and inspire European citizens. To that end, it has profoundly adapted its acquisition strategy in order to reach a gender-balanced contemporary art collection in the near future - indeed, it is one of the few collections with an explicit pledge towards parity. Because the pledge goes beyond mere visibility, these acquisitions are complemented by gathering documentation, research and texts about these artists in order to ensure that their perspectives are recorded, their histories written and their voices heard.

Art produced by women is not a genre, a niche nor a style: it is simply art made by artists. Unfortunately, this message is not yet mainstream across the art world, and means that a focus on gender – in response to decades of erasure – is currently necessary to transcend the distinction altogether.

The artists featured in this exhibition, which combines the collection's recent acquisitions with a selection of older contributions, highlight the clear importance and relevance of female perspectives in every aspect of society. Unique and subjective in their creation, the multiple voices behind these artworks echo stories, moments, and emotions; elements the Contemporary Art Collection will continue to build on in the future. Addition by addition, acquisition by acquisition, the European Parliament's Contemporary Art Collection is witnessing female artists write their stories back into the chapters of art history, where they have always belonged.