

"Are male artists more talented than female artists?"

"Why have there been no great women artists?"

by **Victoria Sara Dazin**, February 22, 2023

The first known self-portrait painted by a woman.

Sofonisba Anguissola, Self-Portrait, 1528, Lancut Museum, Poland.



Statistics reveal the extent of the gender gap in the art world:

*A bestselling art book, often used as a textbook for students, Gombrich's *The Story of Art*, mentions just one female artist in its 688 pages, according to Mary Ann Sieghart, host of a BBC documentary on the gender gap in art. Last edition 1995.*

Researchers presented a computer-generated artwork to study participants and asked them to rate how much they liked the painting. Half of the participants saw a female name listed as the artist below the work, and half saw a male name. In both cases, the painting was the same, computer-generated painting. Participants who had an interest in art and visited museums gave higher ratings when a male artist was listed. This result clearly indicates that the preference for male artwork is a function of gender bias and not differing talent between men and women.

An analysis of 18 major U.S. art museums found their collections are 87% male and 85% white.

“When men sign a work of art, it increases in value compared to a painting that isn't signed. But when a woman signs a work of art, it decreases in value”. (Kim Elsesser, Forbes, Aug 30, 2022)

The question "Why have there been no great women artists?" leads us to the conclusion that art is not a free, autonomous activity "influenced" by previous artists and social forces. (Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", edition February 2021). In fact, the production of art, the development of the art creator, the nature and quality of the work of art itself are integral elements of the social structure and are mediated and determined by social institutions, be they art academies or patronage systems.

Generally, the experience and position of women in society and as artists are different from that of men. Art produced by a group of women intent on forming a group consciousness might indeed be stylistically identifiable as feminist art. Unfortunately, while this remains within the realm of possibility, it has not happened so far. There are no such common qualities of "femininity" that would seem to bind the styles of women artists in general, any more than such qualities can be said to bind women writers, a case brilliantly argued against the most devastating and mutually contradictory critical clichés masculine. (Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (Doubleday, 1970) and Mary Ellman's *Thinking About Women* (Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968)

No subtle essence of femininity would seem to bind the work of Artemisia Gentileschi, Mme. Vigee-Lebrun, Angelica Kauffmann, Rosa Bonheur, Berthe Morlsot, Suzanne Valadon, Kathe Kollwitz, Barbara Hepworth, Georgia O'Keeffe, Sophle Taeuber-Arp, Helen Frankenthaler, Bridget Riley, Lee Bontecou or Louise Nevelson, more than Sappho, Marle de France, Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, George Sand, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Anais Nin, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath and Susan Sontag.

The fact of the matter is that there have been no supremely great women artists, as far as we know, although there have been many interesting and very good ones, who remain insufficiently investigated or appreciated. That this should be the case is regrettable, but no manipulation of the historical or critical evidence will alter the situation; nor will accusations of male-chauvinist distortion of history." 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". ("Women Artists," Review of *Die Frauen in die Kunstgeschichte* by Ernst Guhl, *The Westminster Review* (American edition), LXX, July 1958, 91–104.)

The most important woman painter during the Renaissance was Sofonisba Anguissola. Although her name remained outside the books of art history for 350 years, during her lifetime she worked at the Royal Court of Spain and impressed Michelangelo and Van Dyck.

Sofonisba Anguissola (1532 - 1625) was an Italian painter of the Renaissance. After her initial training, she met Michelangelo while in Rome when she was 23. He recognized her talent and afterward informally trained her. She also apprenticed with other local painters, which set a precedent for women to be accepted as students of art in Italy.

Anguissola established a new style of portraiture, with subjects set in informal ways such as playing chess or holding animals since nude subjects were not allowed by women. She served the Spanish court as a court painter and lady-in-waiting to the new queen, Elizabeth of Valois.

"Self-portrait at an easel" by Sofonisba Anguissola, 1528.

