

Wall texts

The extensive rules of the painters' guilds in the early-modern period are largely silent with respect to female artists -- they were simply not on the agenda. Even so, many women circumvented prevailing social norms to become accomplished and successful artists in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries.

Heritage often played a very important role in the careers of female artists. Many of them came from families of artists and were trained and sponsored by their fathers or brothers. In only a small number of instances were they instructed by a teacher outside the family circle. Their subsequent career paths varied considerably: some succeeded in establishing themselves and working independently, and some even became famous.

Because their personal circumstances were so important, this exhibition juxtaposes the works of around 20 female European artists [OR artists working in Europe] with works by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and teachers. We can see the stylistic milieus in which the women were trained, what aspects of those styles they adopted or rejected, and how they ultimately found their own paths. This exhibition also makes clear that the conditions under which women made art in France, Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Germany were very different and changed over time.

Even more so than female artists laboring in the painter's studio, those collaborating in engravers' and printers' workshops produced their works as parts of larger, often family-run operations, where many hands were needed to realise the finished products. The relative anonymity of those shops made it somewhat easier for women to become a part of them. In the Small Cabinets of the Printroom on the 1st floor, we present three important female practitioners of the art of printmaking from the 16th to the 18th century: they are Diana Mantuana (Italy), Magdalena de Passe (the Netherlands), and Maria Katharina Prestel (Germany).

Women artists in Italy

Italy played a pioneering role for female artists: already by the sixteenth century both their numbers and their positive reception were exceptional by contemporary European standards. This may have had something to do with the fine-arts-academy system, which originated in Italy at that time. That male Italian painters themselves happily trained their daughters if they showed promise also played a role.

The most famous example is Tintoretto (Jacopo Robusti), who was assisted in his Venice studio by his daughter Marietta. That the arrangement suited her is made clear by the fact that she turned down attractive appointments as a court painter to stay by his side. Sofonisba Anguissola's father Amilcare, on the other hand, sought just such a position for his daughter. He had arranged for Sofonisba to be taught in their native Cremona by local artist Bernardino Campi and then skillfully marketed her talents until she became a success at the Spanish royal court.

Lavinia Fontana's father Prospero chose her to take over his studio in Bologna. A strategically advantageous marriage into the nobility helped Lavinia to expand her sphere of influence. Elisabetta Sirani was a great inspiration to other female artists in Bologna as a teacher and member of the Academy. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Bolognese writers on the arts even exploited the presence of an unusually large number of female artists in the city for what we would today call a 'city marketing' campaign.

Still-life painting in Italy and France

Women were generally considered to be less inventive in early modern Europe, which is why female artists were left to practice the lesser genres of still life and portraiture. That said, women were regularly praised for their achievements in these genres, which depended on an exacting imitation of nature. By contrast, history paintings, whose creation required more than pure observation, are rarely found from female hands.

In the 16th century, Fede Galizia of Milan was one of the first to experiment with the still relatively new genre of still life. Two centuries later, the exceptional skills of her Parisian colleague Anne Vallayer-Coster, a member of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, were praised thusly: even if, as a woman, she was limited to painting still lifes, she executed them with the excellence of a history painter. Louise Moillon was one of the earliest female still-life painters in France and, with her sensual renderings of fruit and vegetables, unfailingly ensured that those "choses muettes" in her "natures mortes" by no means remained silent and dead.

Dutch women artists

Female painters were making their mark in the Low Countries already by the sixteenth century. Katharina van Hemessen, for example, specialized in portraiture in her father Jan Sanders' Antwerp studio. Such subtle inventions as the pair of portraits of herself and her sister exhibited here even earned her the patronage of the Regent of the Netherlands. It is also the earliest surviving depiction of an artist working at an easel.

Three generations later, the Bruxellois Michaelina Wautier created not only portraits but also histories and allegories, genres that were widely thought to be the provinces of male artists at the time. As a genre painter, Judith Leyster even managed to join the Guild of St. Luke in Haarlem, where she ran her own workshop for several years, training apprentices and successfully asserting herself in a largely male space.

Unlike van Hemessen, Wautier and Leyster did not come from artist families. However, it was financially possible for their respective parents to foster their daughters' talents at an early age. The relatively liberal Dutch society of the early modern period offered all three women sufficient room to pursue their muses.

Painting and drawing from nature

Some women turned the assumption that the female sex lacked imagination into a virtue: they specialized in the accurate and aesthetic reproduction of nature and thereby became pioneers of scientific illustration.

As the granddaughter of Theodor de Bry, publisher of travelogues and flower books, and stepdaughter of the still life painter Jacob Marrel, Maria Sibylla Merian was born into a German family that emphasized the exact rendering of flowers and animals. Alida Withoos also grew up in a household that appreciated the melding of nature and art: her father Matthias was a still-life painter. Alida made a name for herself as a botanical artist and documented plants for important collections. Rachel Ruysch was the daughter of the director of the Botanical Gardens in Amsterdam and thus was also introduced to the scientific study of nature at an early age. Fellow Dutchwoman Maria van Oosterwijk discovered this genre through her teacher, the still-life painter Jan Davidsz. de Heem.

Zurich native Anna Waser did not portray plants, but rather people -- in miniature formats. She was sent templates from all over Europe so that she could transform them into particularly lively miniature portraits using silverpoint or pen and ink.

Women artists in Germany and Switzerland

Anna Barbara Abesch and Anna Waser are solitary phenomena in Switzerland; each of them worked mainly in a specific artistic niche. Abesch was the first female Swiss artist to practise reverse-glass painting professionally, and with great success. Anna Waser was in great demand as a miniature painter in her home town of Zurich and beyond Switzerland's borders. This achievement was the result of studying painting under two teachers of very different standing: Johann Sulzer in Winterthur and Joseph Werner the Younger in Bern.

In Germany, Anna Dorothea Therbusch and Katharina Treu stand out because of their academic successes: Treu became Germany's first female professor of art in Düsseldorf and Therbusch was admitted to the Académie Royale in Paris despite being both a woman and a foreigner.

The Swisswoman Angelika Kauffmann was even appointed a founding member of the Royal Academy in London and was also a member of several academies in various countries. Well-connected throughout Europe, her international fame made her an exceptional phenomenon at the time.

Ingenious women in printmaking I

Early modern women were also active as printmakers. Most of them came from families of artists. Their situation was therefore quite similar to that of female painters (see part 1 of the exhibition on the ground floor).

Diana Mantuana (around 1547-1612) was the first female engraver to immortalize her name on a printing plate. Even the famous biographer of artists, Giorgio Vasari, admired her work. Diana was trained in Mantua by her father Giovanni Battista Scultori. Her brother Adamo also became an engraver. Diana went to Rome with her husband, an architect, where she worked successfully for many years. In 1575, she even received a papal "privilege" that protected her engravings from being imitated.

The Dutchwoman Magdalena de Passe (1600-1638) also came from a family of engravers. She worked with her father Crispijn de Passe and her brothers Crispijn the Younger, Simon, and Willem. Together they created an enormous oeuvre with thousands of engravings of all kinds. Magdalena's specialty was landscapes with biblical and mythological staffage.

Ingenious women in printmaking II

A large proportion of early modern European prints were reproductions of works by other artists. In an era before the invention of photography, they were used to make famous compositions accessible to the public. Women were active in this genre, too.

Maria Katharina Prestel (1747-1794) did not come from a family of artists, but was the daughter of a Nuremberg merchant. In 1772, she married Johann Gottlieb Prestel, her former teacher. From then on, Maria Katharina worked alongside her husband.

The family business, which gave rise to the Prestel publishing house that still exists today, specialized in reproductions of drawings and paintings in aquatint and line etching. The highlights of important collections were published in this way in large portfolios. If there is no inscription, it is sometimes difficult to assign the works to one of the spouses. The couple created over 200 prints altogether.

Maria Katharina moved to London in 1786, while Johann Gottlieb remained in Frankfurt with their four children. In London, the artist found her work in high demand and worked successfully for various publishers.