

# **Women Artists - Seminar 1**

*Angelica Kaufman & Mary Moser*

Bernard Courtis - 21 January 2010

**WAHG**



**Angelica Kauffmann 1741-1807**



**Mary Moser, RA (1744-1819)**

## Lecture Notes N°1

### Angelica Kauffman & Mary Moser

These two female painters in 1768 were founder members of the Royal Academy. They took an active part in the Academy's affairs and frequently exhibited their works at its annual exhibition. But they were not allowed to its life classes<sup>i</sup>

#### Angelica Kauffmann 1741-1807

Her extraordinary career was an 18<sup>th</sup>C sensation. Despite her ordinary background, Kauffman rose to become famous; her portraits of notable contemporaries made her popular in Europe. Whilst her self-portraits testify to her self dramatization and which reveal a woman of high intelligence.

A Swiss, she was the daughter of the painter Johann Joseph Kauffman, who gave her an excellent education in the arts. Angelica was very gifted, demonstrating brilliant painting skills, a talent for music, a superb memory and an amazing capacity for languages. As a child, she could speak French, German, Italian and English.

A child prodigy producing commissioned portraits in her early teens, By the age of twelve Bishops and nobles sat for her to paint their portraits. During the early 1760's Angelica Kauffman travelled through Switzerland, Austria, and Italy, working as her father's assistant. Thus, she had the rare opportunity for a woman to

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<sup>i</sup> The next female to be so elected was **Annie Swynnerton** (1844 –1933) who was elected as an associate of the Royal Academy in 1922

see and copy many works of ancient and Renaissance masters and to meet leaders of the popular new movement known as neoclassicism.

Aged thirteen she first visited Italy in 1754; after helping to decorate a church at Schwarzenberg. She went to Italy again in 1760 and spent most of the next five years there, studying art in Florence, Rome and Naples, meeting British Grand Tourists and European intellectuals including the art historian Winckelmann, whose portrait she painted.

Whilst at Venice, she was induced by Lady Wentworth the wife of the English ambassador to accompany her to London, where she appeared in 1766. The rank of Lady Wentworth opened society to her. She was everywhere well received, the royal family especially showing her great favour

One of her first works painted in England was a portrait of David Garrick, exhibited in the year of her arrival at *Mr Moreing's great room in Maiden Lane*.

It was her range of genres - history painting, portraits and her work with the designer Robert Adam in providing painted roundels for his interior decoration of neoclassical houses that won her recognition in England as an outstanding painter. The seriousness of her capabilities was demonstrated by her ability in painting *histories*. Kauffman's Neo-classical style conformed to the theories advocated in Reynolds's Discourses except that Kauffmann's *histories* put women at the centre of events.

18<sup>th</sup>C neo-classicism was based on a set of classical stories that acted as the spur for artistic creation and as prototypes for artist's self identification. Within these antique discourses, 18<sup>th</sup>C male artists reaffirmed the status of the MAN as *artist/subject* and the WOMAN as *model/object*. This set a problem for female artists. By identifying too closely with the male artist and his creative potential, she ran the

risk of denying what was perhaps her most important attribute, her gender, and therefore opening herself to attack for being sexually transgressive. But identification with the passive female model would seem to deny the woman artist her independent status as interpreter of the subject. Angelica Kauffman solved this conundrum as she demonstrated in her painting of *Zeuxis Choosing His Models for His Painting of Helen of Troy*. The painting tells the story of Zeuxis, who, in order to portray the world's most beautiful woman, chooses five becoming models from whom to distil an ideal synthesis. Kauffman shows Zeuxis in the act of anatomical study, inspecting one of the models as three others prepare for the master's gaze. But one model set behind the artist and in the right background, defies the patriarchal conventions of representation encoded in the narrative and Zeuxis's attentive gaze. Stepping behind the male artist, she takes up the artist's brush and moves toward the empty canvas. The active model claims the canvas and in so doing seems to enact what Kauffman herself performs. The analogy is given substance by the inclusion on the fictive canvas of a signature: *Angelica Kauffman pinx*. By taking up the brush and transforming Zeuxis's studio into a "room of her own," Kauffman, moreover, literally creates space for female creativity, introducing a different "point of view" while also commenting on the gendered strictures of the system within which she operated.

Kauffman's history painting can be seen as her journey through various stories drawn from Homer's epic. Much of her interpretation of the Odyssey is not presented through the roaming eyes of the adventuring Odysseus but from the static, contemplative, even melancholic perspective of his virtuous wife Penelope. She starts with Penelope at her loom and ends with the return of Odysseus.

Kauffman was invited to make her mark on the Royal Academy's first purpose built home in new Somerset House, when she was commissioned to paint four allegorical images of the '*Elements of Art*' for its Council Chamber ceiling. The works are now positioned in the Entrance Hall ceiling at Burlington House. They were painted in oils on canvas between 1778-1780 and they average, 130 X 150 cm

Many of Kauffman's works were widely distributed through prints. Kauffman had a considerable success with *Portraiture* including at Court. She won the approval of Reynolds by placing many of her sitters against a neo-classical background. Throughout her life she painted many *self-portraiture*. A somewhat unusual aspect was that she depicted several sitters wearing Turkish costumes. Most suggest that the represented women occupy domestic, interior spaces reminiscent of a seraglio<sup>ii</sup> The sitters are often shown with Greek statues reflecting the prevalent view that *modern* Turkey echoed ancient Greek culture Kauffman's Turkish paintings suggest privacy, a quiet sensual intimacy and withdrawal from the public world. They are also painted to reveal delicate light fabrics.

On November 1767, she was entrapped into a clandestine marriage with an adventurer who passed for a Swedish count (the Count de Horn). In 1781, after her first husband's death (she had been long separated from him), she married Antonio Zucchi (1728-1795), a Venetian artist then resident in England.

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<sup>ii</sup> *Seraglio* the sequestered living quarters used by wives and Concubines in a Turkish household

Kauffman in her time (and still is) criticised for her male depictions, especially in her history paintings as being too feminine in appearance. For example Henri Fuseli in the 1770's wrote: "*male and female characters of Angelica never vary in form, feature, or expression from the favourite ideal in her own mind.*"

Throughout her career Kauffman produced images of herself painting and drawing. They appear like documents of her being.

Kauffmann's strength was her work in history painting, the most elite and lucrative category in academic painting during the 18thC. Despite the popularity that Kauffmann enjoyed in English society and her success as an artist, she was disappointed by the relative apathy that the English had for history painting. Ultimately, she left England for the continent where history painting was better established, esteemed, and patronized. Despite living on the continent she continued at intervals to contribute to the Royal Academy; her last exhibit being in 1797. 1807 she died in Rome, being honoured by a splendid funeral under the direction of Canova. The entire Academy of St Luke, with numerous ecclesiastics and virtuosi, followed her to her tomb in San Andrea delle Fratte, and, as at the burial of Raphael two of her best pictures were carried in procession.

To day Angelica Kauffman is perhaps best known by the numerous engravings from her designs by Schiavonetti, Bartolozzi and others. Those by Bartolozzi especially still find considerable favour with collectors. Although many art galleries throughout the Western world have examples of her works no major exhibition have been mounted and some art historians criticise her work with the reflection that

*"She had a certain gift of grace, and considerable skill in composition. But her figures lack variety and expression; and her men are masculine women"* In my view though such remarks have

some validity she is underestimated both as an artist and for her championing through her depictions what was termed in the 20<sup>th</sup>C *feminist issues*.

### Mary Moser, RA - 1744-1819

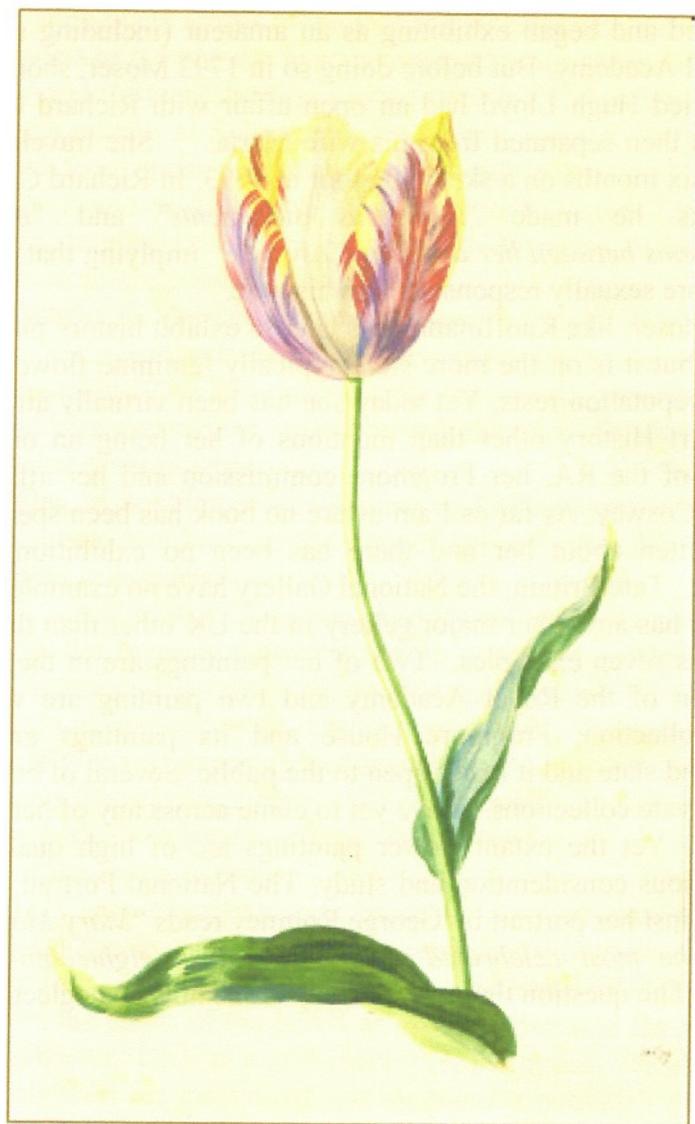
London-born she was trained by her Swiss-born artist and enameller father George Michael Moser (1706-1783). Her talents were evident at an early age; she won her first Society of Arts medal for flower paintings in water colours and gouache at 14. She regularly exhibited flower pieces, and occasional history paintings, at this Society before she became an inaugural member of the Royal Academy. She did so ten years later when, her thirst for professional recognition led her to join with 35 other artists (including her father) in forming the Royal Academy. She took an active role in its proceedings.

Seven of her paintings are owned by the Victoria and Albert Museum. All her flower paintings are based on closer observation. They are also influenced by Dutch 17<sup>th</sup>C art in colouring but are broader in effect and decorative. They do not have the symbolic overtones present in so many of Dutch flower paintings. She had the tendency to use dark backgrounds and tones that became her style and signature

In the 1790's, Moser received a prestigious commission from Queen Charlotte to complete a floral decorative scheme for Frogmore House in Windsor. For this "*prestigious and lucrative oommission*" Moser was paid £900 and made Moser "*the envy of her male colleagues.*" Queen Charlotte was passionate and knowledgeable about flowers and they became a major theme at Frogmore house. This commission was to prove one of her last professional works. Following marriage to a Mr. Hugh Lloyd in 1793

she retired and began exhibiting as an amateur (including works at the Royal Academy. But before doing so in 1793 Moser, shortly after she married Hugh Lloyd had an open affair with Richard Cosway, who was then separated from his wife Maria. . She travelled with him for six months on a sketching tour in 1793. In Richard Cosway's notebooks he made "*lascivious statements*" and "*invidious comparisons between her and Mrs Cosway*", implying that she was much more sexually responsive than his wife.

Moser, like Kauffmann, was later to exhibit history pictures at the RA, but it is on the more stereotypically feminine flower pieces that her reputation rests. Yet today she has been virtually airbrushed out of Art History other than mentions of her being an originally member of the RA, her Frogmore commission and her affair with Richard Cosway. As far as I am aware no book has been specifically written about her and there has been no exhibition of her paintings. Tate Britain, the National Gallery have no examples of her work nor has any other major gallery in the UK other than the V&A which has seven examples. Two of her paintings are in the reserve Collection of the Royal Academy and two painting are with the Royal collection; Frogmore House and its paintings are in a dilapidated state and it is not open to the public. Several of her works are in private collections. I have yet to come across any of her history paintings. Yet the extant flower paintings are of high quality and merit serious consideration and study. The National Portrait Gallery entry against her portrait by George Romney reads "*Mary Moser was one of the most celebrated women artists in eighteenth-century Britain*". The question that arises is why is she now so neglected?





***Hector Taking Leave of Andromache, A Kauffman 1768.***

Oil on canvas, 134 X 176 cm The National Trust Saltram House,

- ▶ He turns his face lovingly towards his wife, who leans yearningly on his shoulder, her right arm thrown around his neck.
- ▶ Her other trembling hand submits to her husband, who takes it in his firm grasp.
- ▶ His lack of gravity and the balletic, mincing quality of his stance should not be read as moral weakness but as strong affection towards his wife displayed by *dextrarum junctio gesture* and for his child, cradled in the arms of an attending nurse.

- ▶ In this work Kauffman studies a man who is dependent on, yet asserting independence from, a woman
- ▶ It depicts the warrior setting out to fight in the Trojan War
- ▶ At his wife's entreaty he halts the last step which would have carried him without, and turns towards her.
- ▶ His left foot is loosely drawn back towards the right, and he leans on his lance, which is planted on the spot where his foot has been

- ▶ The depiction of the *dextrarum iunctio* was highly popular in Roman art. In the Roman world, the right hand was sacred to *Fides*, the deity of fidelity.
- ▶ Kauffman's art corresponded not to biologically determined essences but to culturally informed ideals
- ▶ The androgynous male corporeal ideal visible in Kauffman's painting emerged from the aesthetic thinking associated with the circle of Winckelmann and Mengs in Rome.
- ▶ Rather than following in her art the sensual voluptuousness of bacchanalian androgyny, Kauffman curbs eroticism into a "*graceful style*," emphasizing the softening influence of femininity on men and the emotional bonds between the sexes

*Penelope at her Loom*  
Angelica Kauffman  
1764



## Penelope at her Loom

- ▶ These images of Odysseus' wife are presented as a meditation upon women's historical position and feminine narrative forms.
- ▶ Penelope is here not merely the woman who sat at home in Ithaca, waiting dutifully for the hero to return.
- ▶ Kauffman highlights that Penelope's home is a site of power and that she shows a cunning to match that of her spouse.

*When Odysseus failed to return from the Trojan War (he was delayed for ten years on his way home), Penelope was beset by suitors who wanted her to remarry. In order to delay them, she insisted that she could not remarry until she had finished weaving a shroud for Odysseus' father, Laertes. She worked each day at her loom, and then unravelled the cloth each night. After three years of successful delay, one of her servants revealed her deception, and the impatient suitors angrily demanded that she choose one of them for her husband immediately. At the prompting of Athene, Penelope said that she would marry the man who could string Odysseus' bow and shoot an arrow through twelve axes. By this time, Odysseus himself had secretly returned, disguised as a beggar; he passed the test of the bow, and then proceeded to slaughter the suitors who had tormented his wife.*

### **Rosenthal's comments**

- ▶ Kauffman's paintings of Penelope spanning more than two decades highlights her (*the female artist's*) narrative abilities
- ▶ She argues that Kauffman through the figure of Penelope positively engages with female spectators; proffers an alternative to works such as Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe*; that these images were a means by which Kauffman could explore her own role as a storyteller and her creation of a sense of '*monumental time*'