

Aide Memoire L12

Brief Overview - Women Artists

Women have been involved in painting in most times and places, despite difficulties of training, gaining recognition and trading their work

One of the first record of women's involvement in painting occurred in the northern Indian state of Mithila. The painting was traditionally done on freshly plastered mud wall of huts and later also on cloth, hand-made paper and canvas. These paintings mostly depicted nature and Hindu religious motifs, and the themes generally revolve around Hindu deities. Natural objects such as the sun, the moon, and religious medicinal plants like tulsi were also widely painted, along with scenes from the royal court and social events like weddings. Generally no space is left empty; the gaps are filled by paintings of flowers, animals, birds, and geometric designs. Objects depicted in the walls of *kohabar ghar* (where newly wed couple first see each other in their first night) are symbols of sexual pleasure and procreation. The custom was not known to many outside the region. After paper was brought to the area, women began to sell their artwork and expand their subjects to popular and local Hindu deities as well as to the depiction of everyday events.

In China some wives and daughters of professional artists painted but only a few attracted the attention of leading collectors and connoisseurs. Most of the Chinese women painters known through textual accounts and by their extant works either belonged to the *literati* – the Chinese gentry or were courtesans of that class. They were counterparts to the male *literati* scholars whose theories and

practices came to dominate Chinese painting during the Ming (1368 - 1644) and Qing (1644-1912) dynasties. . But Chinese women had previously come to prominence. Madame Wei (1272-1349) was an early teacher of the most celebrated calligraphic master Wang Xizhi and during the Song period a number of women painters came to prominence including the foremost female poets Li Qingzhao (1084-c1151) and Zhu Shuzhen (12thC) who also painted

In the earliest records of western cultures, few individuals are mentioned, although women are depicted in all of the arts, some depicting their labours as painters. Ancient references by Homer, Cicero and Virgil mention the roles of prominent women and men in textiles, poetry, and music and other cultural activities, without discussion of individual artists.. Among the earliest historical records of Europe concerning individual artists, Pliny the Elder wrote about a number of Greek women who were painters, including Timarete, (daughter of the painter Micon the Younger of Athens). Eirene, Kalypso, Aristarete ,Jaia, and Olympias. None of their work has survived,

In the early Medieval period, women often worked alongside men. Manuscript illuminations, embroideries, and carved capitals from the period clearly demonstrate examples of women at work in these arts. Documents show that they also were brewers, butchers, wool merchants, and iron mongers. Artists of this time period, including women were from a small subset of society whose status allowed them freedom from these more strenuous types of work. Women, who were artists, often were of two literate classes, either wealthy aristocratic women or nuns. Women in the former category often created embroideries and textiles. Those in the later category often produced illuminations. Nevertheless there were a number of embroidery workshops in England at the time, particularly at

Canterbury and Winchester; *Opus Anglicanum* or English embroidery was famous across Europe - a 13th century Papal inventory counted over two hundred pieces. It is presumed that women were almost entirely responsible for this production probably under the direction of high born women. One of the most famous embroideries of the Medieval period is the Bayeux Tapestry, the 230 feet long piece of cloth embroidered with wool. The Bayeux Tapestry may have been created in either a commercial workshop, by a royal or aristocratic lady and her retinue, or a workshop in a nunnery. In the 14th century, a royal workshop is documented as based at the Tower of London, and there may have been other earlier arrangements.

Manuscript illumination include many of the named artists of the Medieval Period including Eude, a tenth century Spanish nun; Guda, a twelfth century German nun¹; Claricia, twelfth century laywoman in a Bavarian scriptorium. These women, and many more unnamed illuminators, benefited from the nature of convents as the major loci of learning for women in the period and the most tenable option for intellectuals among them.

In many parts of Europe, with the Gregorian Reforms of the eleventh century and the rise in feudalism, women faced many strictures that they did not face in the Early Medieval period. With these changes in society, the status of the convent changed. In the British Isles, the Norman Conquest marked the beginning of the gradual decline of the convent as a seat of learning and a place where women could gain power. Convents were made subsidiary to male

¹ She created a self-portrait in an initial letter in a Homeliary (now in the Frankfurt am main Staatsbibliothek). Along with her self-portrait, she wrote an inscription, "*Guda, a sinner, wrote and painted this book.*"

abbots, rather than being headed by an abbess, as they had previously been.

With the advent of the Renaissance and its emphasis on male human proportions and classical motifs it became more difficult for women to become painters because for reasons of decorum they were excluded from seeing male models. This coincided with the conception by members of the upper classes that they should not be involved in making money from crafts or trades although they could profit from those who undertook such activities on their behalf. Nevertheless painting, singing, and embroidery were encouraged as suitable leisure activities. The rise in women artists during this period may be attributed to major cultural shifts. One such shift was a move toward humanism, a philosophy affirming the dignity of all people that became central to Renaissance thinking and helped raise the status of women. In addition, the identity of the individual artist in general was regarded as important thus significant artists whose identity is unknown virtually ceased from this period.

Female artists from the Renaissance era include: Caterina dei Vigri, Maria Ormani, Sofonisba Anguissola, Lucia Anguissola, Lavinia Fontana, Barbara Longhi, Fede Galizia, Diana Scultori Ghisi, Esther Inglis, Marietta Robusti (daughter of Tintoretto), Properzia de' Rossi, Mayken Verhulst, Levina Teerlinc, Catarina van Hemessen, Judith Leyster. Most were the daughters of male painters and were taught by their fathers. Otherwise it was virtually impossible for females to work in an artist studio or gain an apprenticeship.

By the eighteenth century in many countries of Europe, the Academies were the arbiters of style. The Academies also were responsible for training artists, exhibiting artwork, and, inadvertently or not, promoting the sale of art. Most Academies were not open to women.