Women Artists of the 17th and 18th Centuries

Background Notes

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Clara Peeters, *Self Portrait,* 1618, Private Collection

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Women Artists of the Seventeenth Century:

Many of the obstacles that women artists faced in the seventeenth century were a legacy of the Renaissance. They included the privileging of painting and sculpture at the expense of crafts such as embroidery and needlework that had traditionally been produced by women. This was exacerbated by the creation of guilds and later academies, which were nominally open to women but were dominated by men. In Italy women became the objects rather than the creators of art through the association of the nude with an ideal of standard of beauty. They also suffered from the division of society into public and private realms, in which men and women were thought to dominate respectively. As Leon Alberti remarked in his treatise *On the Family* of 1450 *'it would hardly bring us honour if our wives busied themselves in the market place among men out in the public eye'*.

During the seventeenth century these developments were reinforced by the rise of capitalism, the contact with the New World and the ongoing effects of the Reformation and the invention of printing. In the Catholic south the Italian painter, Barbara Longhi, the Portuguese painter, Josefa de Ayala, and the Spanish sculptor, Luisa Ignacia Roldan, worked with religious themes which associated women with the traditional virtues of the Virgin Mary. The printing of albums such as Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* of 1640 reinforced such stereotypes by identifying women with modesty, chastity or obedience. Significantly, the two most important women painters in Italy, Artemisia Gentileschi and Elisabetta Sirani, were

both exploited by male artists: the first through her notorious rape by Agostino Tassi and the latter through the pressure put upon her by her painter father, which contributed to her early death. Historians have associated Artemisia's assault with her frequent depiction of *Judith and Holofernes.* In fact men had increasingly portrayed women in violent and sexualised roles since they had first entered public workplaces at the beginning of capitalism.

In the Calvinist Netherlands artists such as Vermeer and Rembrandt appear to have been less preoccupied with the nude and to have had a greater respect for and empathy with women. Yet the huge wealth that Holland brought back from the New World increased the pressure on women to conform to the domestic virtues of industry and thrift. This can be seen in Vermeer's stereotypical image of the lace-maker, which associated women with diligent, mechanical and detailed activities in contrast to the grander and more intellectual activities of men. Judith Leyster's painting, *The Proposition,* provides an interesting variation on this theme. Yet Clara Peeters' *vanitas* still-lives are equally typical in their preoccupation with costly manufactured items and exotic fruits as a reminder of mortality. Her counterpart is Rachel Rusch whose flower-paintings evoke the excesses of Dutch financial speculation at the time of the tulip craze when imported tulips had been traded for small fortunes. The artist herself became court painter to the Elector of Palatine when her canvases sold for twice the value of Rembrandt's works. Maria van Oosterwyck's flower pieces are even more symbolic since their colour scheme - in which white denotes innocence, yellow indicates divinity and red symbolizes martyrdom - are a

reminder of her own intense religious beliefs. In contrast Maria Sybilla Merian's paintings of plants reveal her botanical interest in moths and butterflies and are associated with a spirit of scientific enquiry that looks forward to the taxonomy of the Enlightenment. Her decision to divorce her husband and later to spend two years in an alternative religious community in the Dutch colony of Suriname were typical of her extraordinary bravery and self-confidence. For some critics her importance rivals that of the better known Artemisia Gentileschi.

Women Artists of the Eighteenth Century:

Whitney Chadwick in her classic study *Women and Society* has argued that during the eighteenth century *'beauty, gracefulness and modesty'* became the prerequisites of women's art and that during the nineteenth century these same characteristics led to its trivialisation and dismissal. This is probably the case since the century saw an increased interest in defining 'femininity' among philosophers, painters, novelists and dramatists. In part this was a product of the increased wealth and leisure time that women had as a result of the industrial revolution and of Europe's new commercial empires. As social mobility increased, women became the bargaining chips in marriages between the landed aristocracy and the new urban middle classes. They were expected not just to appreciate art as part of their portfolio of lady-like accomplishments but to draw and make designs using quills, shells and paper collage. The availability of new materials such as watercolours and water-resistant paper made sketching popular. So too did the employment of

governesses and the fashion for the picturesque. The development of country houses, clothes and entertaining helped to identify 'taste' as the path to a successful marriage. Social networks such as spas, salons and societies reinforced the cult of self-improvement while the popularity of portrait painters such as Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun and Angelika Kauffmann appeared to usher in a new era of equality for women artists. However, although women artists were sometimes admitted to academies, their exclusion from life classes made their full participation impossible. In 1770 the *Academie Française* decreed that women members were to be limited to four. In 1771 the *Academie* even petitioned to close the *Academie de St Luc,* which comprised about 3% of women members as well as frame-makers, varnishers and art dealers. Like its counterpart in England, it guaranteed that 'serious' art continued to be the province of male intellectuals rather than the sphere of a decorative tradition.

Rosalba Carriera, the daughter of a minor Venetian court official, seems typical of her contemporaries. She was an accomplished musician whose first designs were for lace patterns and snuff boxes. She was one of the first artists to use the less formal medium of pastels. Like Vigée Le Brun and Adelaide Labille Guiard, she encouraged other women artists and lived to a great age. No doubt the social skills which she shared with Le Brun were put to the test during an early commission to paint the young Louis XV. As she noted in her diary, his gun fell over, his parrot died and his dog became ill. Le Brun herself, like

her most famous subject Marie Antoinette, became the victim of malicious gossip and was forced to leave Paris in 1789 because of an alleged affair with an unpopular finance minister. As a beautiful and vivacious woman, she was disparagingly compared to her supposed 'rival', Adelaide Labille-Guiard, whose character and works were presented as belonging to a more serious and less decadent tradition. However, just as it was said that the painter Menageot helped Vigée Le Brun with her work, so too it was alleged that Labille-Guiard passed off the paintings of her second husband as her own. Ironically, Germaine Greer once dismissed Le Brun's genius as *'all communication and sociability'* and compared her character unfavourably to that of Angelika Kauffmann. The latter was a Swiss-born artist who attracted the championship of Sir Joshua Reynolds but paid the price for it by being caricatured with him in a satire by Nathaniel Hone. Even more scandalous was the success of Lady Hamilton, the actress and lover of Lord Nelson. Le Brun, like Romney, painted her posing in a series of emotive 'attitudes'. Wedgwood reproduced her image and turned her into a celebrity. Hence it is tempting to see her performances as precursors of what artists such as Frida Kahlo and Cindy Sherman were later to achieve.

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Elisabeth Vigee Le Brun, *Emma, Lady Hamilton en Bacchante,* c.1790-2