

# WOMEN IN ART AND ART HISTORY

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"If only Mrs. Seton and her mother and her mother before her had learnt the great art of making money and had left their money, like their fathers and their grandfathers before them, to found fellowships and lectureships and prizes and scholarships appropriated to the use of their own sex, we might have dined very tolerably up here alone off a bird and a bottle of wine. . . ."

Virginia Woolf  
A Room of One's Own

Women are conspicuous in their absence among most studies of art history. Janson's (1971) History of Art, widely used in North American universities

and colleges, does not give prominence to a single woman artist. Hauser's (1968) The Social History of Art lists 450 artists and among them is but one woman. Last year Time Canada sponsored a travelling exhibit and printed an elegant catalogue titled The Canadian Canvas (1974) but only a few of the works in the exhibit were done by women.(1) Established chronicles of art, however broad in scope, tend not to include women. Why?

## Women Forgotten

One response to this question is that "great women artists" have existed but they have been consistently overlooked and forgotten by art historians who are usually male. While a number of "forgotten" women artists have been



SAINT JOHN MARKET BY MOLLY LAMB BOBAK

found by women art historians like Eleanor Tufts (1974), the case of the Hayllar family serves as a useful example. (2)

The Hayllars were an artistic family of Victorian times. Virtually all that is known about them comes through an article in two parts by Christopher Wood (1974). James Hayllar painted scenes of village and family life which were received well enough in Victorian England that he was able to earn a comfortable living. He and his wife had nine children, five of whom were girls. As the children left residential school and returned home the father set out to educate them himself. The girls worked from ten in the morning to four in the afternoon each day learning drawing and perspective. Later they graduated to painting. While the girls adjusted to this rigid apprenticeship the boys, by Wood's account, resorted to emigration in their effort to escape it.

The industriousness and discipline of Hayllar and his daughters--Jessica, Edith, Mary and Kate--were rewarded during the late 1880's and 1890's. Each had at least one picture hung at the Royal Academy--a distinctive accomplishment. According to Wood (1974), the most talented of the four were the eldest girls, Jessica and Edith, but all four had an active market for their work and exhibited at the Royal Academy and galleries such as the Walker Art

Gallery in Liverpool. Kate's first exhibited painting was bought by no less a person than the Princess of Wales. With the eventual decline of family-imposed discipline, the Hayllar women turned from art. According to Wood (1974:6): "The house seems to have put a spell on them all, which was broken when they left." What may have been the force of male-dominated social control is misconstrued as the power inherent in an enchanted house. This has the effect of making women's accomplishments seem more romantic and less real. Further, Wood (1974:8) describes the Hayllar women as "talented amateurs." These women who received such acclaim when productive are referred to as "amateurs" and the fact that other historians have ignored them attests that this classification is accepted. While James Hayllar, formally trained and male, is not so classified, his daughters, schooled at home, but otherwise just as "professional" as their father, are relegated to the category of charming dilettantes. By the usual standards of "professionalism"--marketability, public display and approval, involvement in artistic work as a primary occupation--these women qualified.

If the case of the Hayllar family can be taken as being in some way typical, there are two points which can be drawn out. First, the point made more emphatic by Tufts (1974) in Our Hidden Heritage: in the past women have attained prominence, perhaps even "great-

ness," but male art historians do not now accord them recognition. The second point to be drawn from the Hayllar example is, when women artists of the past are "rediscovered," the interpretation of their circumstances may bear a peculiar stamp. Their situation may be distorted by romantic notions of creativity and influence. As well, their work may be "devalued" in a way that subtly and thus insidiously maintains the ideology of male superiority. Tufts has made a significant contribution to remedying such distortion in her book when she tries to "dispel some of the amusing and fallacious myths that have sprung up concerning women artists, such as that of the characteristic 'female touch' and 'female theme.'" (Tufts, 1974:xvi).

#### Forgotten or Excluded?

Tufts' (1974) extensive re-examination of art history may, however, fall into a category described in a previously published article by Linda Nochlin (1973) titled "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" In Nochlin's terms, Tufts' work may be an effort "to dig up examples of insufficiently appreciated women artists throughout history; to rehabilitate modest, if interesting and productive, careers; to 'rediscover' forgotten flower-painters . . . and make a case for them." (Nochlin, 1973:3) Nochlin observed that virtually all successful women artists of the past were, like the Hayllar women, daughters or close relatives of male artists. This suggested

to her that women until recently have been excluded from formal opportunities for developing their artistic talents. Even when women were admitted to art academies, Nochlin (1973:24-27) discovered it was not on a basis equal to male students. Initially they were deprived of such essential training components as life drawing classes. When later they were admitted to classes with female models, the models were partially draped. Before this great advance, "lady" students often used cows as their models. If women apprentices were not prevented by externally enforced, male-determined rules of propriety, they may have been, like Emily Carr, prevented by internalized inhibitions from attending classes where nude models were provided.(3)

#### Art and Institutions

Basic to Nochlin's answer to the question of why there have been no great women artists is a sociological analysis of the production of art. There is a tendency to look at artists as being individuals whose "greatness," if present, exists relatively independently of social and historical forces. "Great art," Nochlin (1973:7) suggests, is erroneously held "to have manifested itself very early, independent of external encouragement." Quite to the contrary, and in keeping with contemporary social psychology, she insists, "The making of art involves a self-consistent language of form . . . which has to be learned or worked out,

through study, apprenticeship, or a long period of individual experimentation." (Nochlin, 1973:5) Becoming an artist requires access to institutionalized opportunities and "Nochlin showed that, because of the oppression of the prevailing social conditions, a woman born with the inherent talent or potential of a Picasso would probably have ended up as a wife and a mother rather than as a successful artist." (Orenstein, 1975:506)

Social institutions are, in Marxist terms, the artist's "means of production" and exclusion from key institutions can make "doing art" virtually impossible. While access to training is of key importance, the "art world" in our society involves a number of inter-related institutions. Access to one and the demonstration of competence will not insure access to others and "success" in terms of contemporary standards. To illustrate this point we will turn next to another "case study." This one involves the experience of Molly Lamb Bobak, a Canadian woman now living in New Brunswick.(4)

Molly Lamb graduated from the Vancouver School of Art in 1942 where she worked as a student under Jack Shadbolt. At the age of twenty Lamb enlisted in the army while Canada was at war. During her basic training she did a number of drawings depicting her misadventures in the military. She had occasion to show them to A.Y. Jackson

who suggested she see the editor of New World. Taking Jackson's advice, Lamb received a commission by the magazine to do a series of drawings on the theme, "A Day in the Life of a C.W.A.C." The drawings were reproduced in New World and were later obtained by the National and Toronto galleries. An exhibition of the work of the Armed Forces was held in Ottawa. The first prize went to Sapper Bruno Bobak, later to become Lamb's husband, and the second prize went to Pte. Molly Lamb. As a direct result of success at this exhibition, Bruno Bobak was transferred to War Records to become an "Official War Artist." Appointments to the position of "O.W.A." were scarce and coveted. In an attempt to be fair in the distribution of this reward, a system of competition was devised for their choosing. Exhibitions such as the one in which Lamb won second prize were the basis for appointment. In all, there were thirty-one commissioned war artists who worked for the War Records Department. All of them were men. Lamb's commission did not immediately follow her winning of a prize as it should have. War Records made it clear that it did not want women. Lamb protested, but her protest was not successful until late in the war when, according to official sources (Wodehouse, 1968:7):

A scheme was evolved for the National Art Gallery to make use of the talents of certain senior established artists who could not meet the medical standards set by



MOLLY LAMB BOBAK AT WORK

the services for artists in theatres of operations.

It seems fairly clear that "medical standards" had included possession of a penis. The "scheme" consisted of the employment of two women artists to record the activities of women in the Armed Services. One was a civilian and the other was Molly Lamb who served from May 1945 to May 1946.

Lamb's case carries us further into the analysis of what women artists are up against. If one develops competence what struggles must follow? Dorothy E. Smith (1975) in her article "An Analysis of Ideological Structures and How Women are Excluded" asserts that the

production of "(i)mages, vocabularies, concepts, knowledge of and methods of knowing the world are integral to the practice of power." (Smith, 1975:354) The "practice of power" is to a great extent in our society the practice of a few elite men.(5) Smith (1975:354) says, "Men attend to and treat as significant only what men say." When women are admitted to the circle of significance, "They have been admitted to it only by special licence and as individuals, not as representatives of their sex." (Smith, 1975:354)

The "means of production" in art include a series of interlocking institutions including art training centres, universities, art galleries,

art journals, (6) magazines and newspapers where critics publish, governments and large corporations who have become the major art consumers. Not only are these institutions or "means of production" almost exclusive male preserves, but, as has been demonstrated for Canadian society by Porter (1965) and Clement (1975), they are in fact dominated by a small and exclusive ruling elite. Before entering into a discussion of what tactics the women's movement should use to assert the right of women to do art, we must first examine what effect the entry of a few women into positions of prominence in the art world would have.

#### Women, Art, and Capitalism

Tufts (1974) has claimed that women's art, though not insignificant, has been forgotten. Nochlin (1973), on the other hand, suggests that women's contribution was insignificant because the male-dominated social order denied them access to the institutions necessary for the development of artistic talent. A kernel of truth lies in both of these arguments but both approaches imply that blame lies with men collectively and that the solution for women lies with the struggle for equality within the existing system. It is possible that solutions should be oriented toward a challenge of the political-economic system itself rather than a fight for equal status.

Some have argued that capitalism necessitates the collective repression of

women. (7) If this assumption can be accepted, the fight for "equal status" for women without insisting upon radical changes in the system itself is bound to be futile. But, let us assume that the capitalist system is flexible enough to include greater participation of women in positions of prominence and power. Could the few women who "make it" in the terms of the existing system be expected to act in the collective interest of women and other excluded social categories, or would they see themselves as "individuals" and act in keeping with the interests of ruling elites? We turn next to an exploration of that question with particular reference to women in art.

#### Art and Individualism

Throughout this paper we have relied on the argument that art, though requiring "talent" or potential, also requires institutional access. Art as a relatively independent, individual product is a conception which developed along with capitalism. Until the foundations of capitalism were developed with the extension of commerce, trade and banking, artists often did not sign their works. The emphasis on individualism in art developed along with a philosophy of individualism which became one of the major ideological components of the capitalist system. The idea that art is primarily an individual manifestation and that social institutions are only secondary is, as we have argued, a false one. But, it is a useful concept to those seeking to maintain the ex-

clusion of women. If a woman wishes to become an artist and has the talent to do so, and if she does not "make it" as an artist, she is led by the ideology of capitalism--individualism--to see her failure as personal inadequacy or the failure of "chance" to single her out for recognition. She is not, by this ideology, encouraged to analyze the social mechanisms by which women are collectively repressed. However, if she becomes an exception and does "make it" as an artist the same ideology may keep her similarly "falsely conscious." She is encouraged to interpret her success as being due to unique personal qualities and to conclude therefore that she has no obligation to unite with other women in fighting their common oppression. She may conclude that anyone can "make it" if she "has what it takes."

Therefore, to fight for "equal status" for women artists may have very limited value. The white, male-dominated capitalist system maintains the privilege of a few at the expense of the oppression of non-whites, working class people generally and women. But, enough exemptions from a general servitude are permitted to prevent people from perceiving their collective interest in opposing the system. There is every reason to believe that more of those now excluded could be accommodated without serious disruption of the status quo. In other words, it is possible for women artists to gain "equal status" within a general

system of inequality. Is that a valid goal for women's art?

According to Lord (1974) and Tax (1972), "mainstream" art is devoid of "meanings" which relate to and enlighten the critical concerns of most people. This art serves elite interests and reflects the alienation of artists and artistic production in a capitalist context. Therefore simply gaining "equal rights" for women artists would reward few who do little to alter the situation of most. "Separate but equal" status, a status seemingly sought by a number of women in the feminist art movement, may have similarly limited results. The challenge for women artists, as it is perhaps for all women, is to find ways of benefitting from the experience of their oppression, allying themselves with people who share a similar experience, and devising ways of entering the struggle for the liberation of people.

#### NOTES

1. A group of women faculty and students from the University of Manitoba's School of Art protested the under-representation of women artists at the opening of the Time Canada exhibit in Winnipeg. They criticized both the low percentage of women in the exhibit (11%) and the distribution of women in the School of Art (72% third year students, 27% lecturers, 9% assistant professors and 0% tenured professors. Another criticism of the exhibit was that all works tended to bear the stamp of New York legitimacy whether they were by Canadians or ex-patriate Americans. The issue of imperialism in art is one which overlaps in some respect the topic of this paper. For left critiques see Barry Lord's (1974) The History of Painting in Canada: Toward a People's Art and Greg Curnoe's (1976) "Feet of Clay Planted Firmly in USA."
2. A more extensive examination of the circumstances of the Hayllar women from a feminist perspective is found in a paper, "Male Historians and Women Artists" (Bawden, 1976a). The paper demonstrates that the artists are "devalued" and romanticized although the evidence supports more generous interpretations.
3. This information comes from a CBC television documentary in two parts done on this important artist and only female associated with the group of Seven.