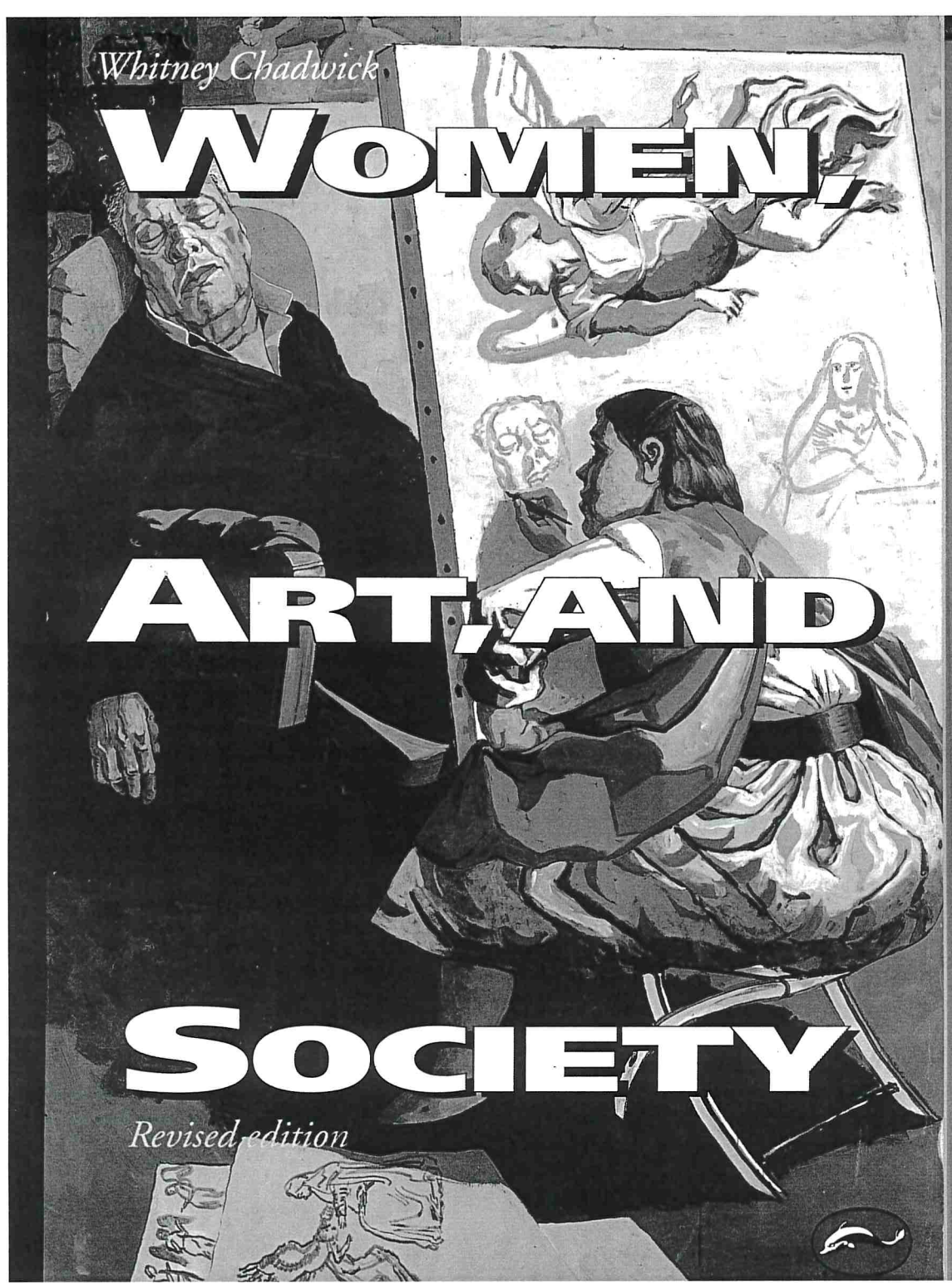
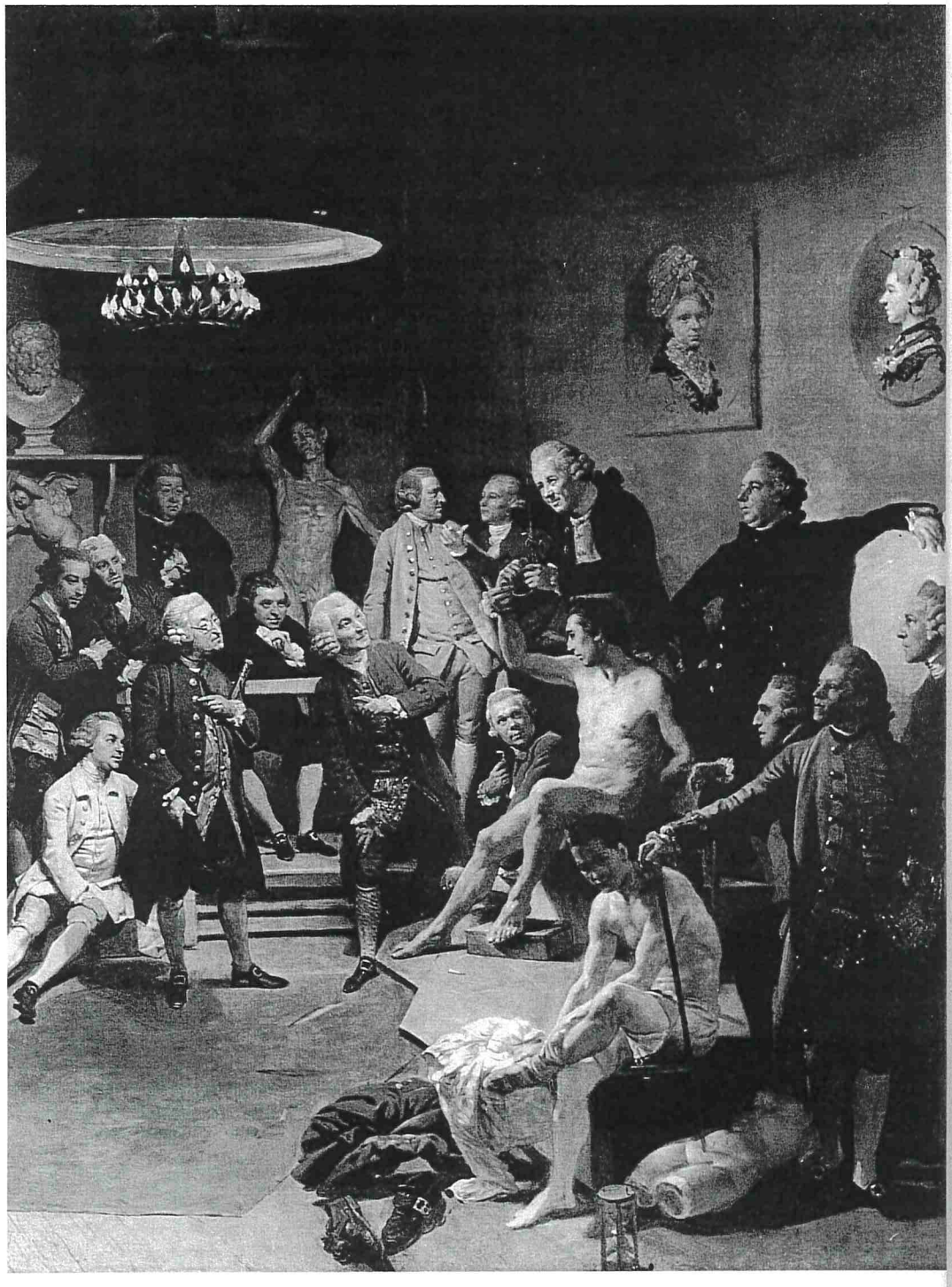


Whitney Chadwick

WOMEN, ART, AND SOCIETY

Revised edition



Preface

Among the founding members of the British Royal Academy in 1768 were two women: the painters Angelica Kauffmann and Mary Moser. Both were the daughters of foreigners and active in the group of male painters instrumental in forming the Royal Academy, which no doubt facilitated their membership. Kauffmann, elected to the prestigious Academy of Saint Luke in Rome in 1765, was hailed as the successor to Van Dyck on her arrival in London in 1766. The foremost painter associated with the decorative and romantic strain of classicism, she was largely responsible for the spread of the Abbé Winckelmann's aesthetic theories in England and was credited, along with the Scotsman Gavin Hamilton and American Benjamin West, with popularizing Neoclassicism there. Moser, whose reputation at the time rivaled that of Kauffmann, was the daughter of George Moser, a Swiss enameler who was the first Keeper of the Royal Academy. A fashionable flower painter patronized by Queen Charlotte, she was one of only two floral painters accepted into the Academy. Yet when Johann Zoffany's group portrait celebrating the newly founded Royal Academy, *The Academicians of the Royal Academy* (1771–72) appeared, Kauffmann and Moser were not included among the artists casually grouped around the male models. There is clearly no place for the two female academicians in the discussion about art which is taking place here. Women were barred from the study of the nude model which formed the basis for academic training and representation from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. After Kauffmann and Moser, no woman was allowed membership in the British Royal Academy itself until Annie Louise Swynnerton became an Associate Member in 1922 and Laura Knight was elected to full membership in 1936.

Zoffany, whose painting is as much about the ideal of the academic artist as it is about the Royal Academicians, has included painted busts of the two women on the wall behind the model's platform. Kauffmann and Moser have become the objects of art rather than its producers; their place is with the bas reliefs and plaster casts that are the objects of contemplation and inspiration for the male artists. They

1 Johann Zoffany *The Academicians of the Royal Academy* 1771–72 (detail)

have become *representations*, a term used today to denote not just painting and sculpture, but a wide range of imagery drawn from popular culture, media, and photography, as well as the so-called fine arts.

Zoffany's painting, like many other works of art, conforms to widely held cultural assumptions that have subsumed women's interests with those of men and structured women's access to education and public life in accordance with popular, though often erroneous, beliefs about women's "natural" roles and capabilities. Its composition and figural groupings reinforce assumptions about art and art history that are not unique to eighteenth-century England: artists are male and white, and art a learned discourse; the sources of artistic themes and styles lie in the classical past; women are objects of representation rather than producers in a history commonly traced through "Old Masters" and "masterpieces."

The striking paradox of Zoffany's painting focuses attention on the dissimilar positioning of men and women in art history. It also points to what has become one of the central focuses of feminist art histories: the question of how categories often understood as mutually exclusive—like "woman" and "art"—can intersect. In the early 1970s, feminist artists, critics, and historians began to question the apparently systematic exclusion of women from mainstream art. They challenged the values of a masculinist history of heroic art which happened to be produced by men and which had so powerfully transformed the image of woman into one of possession and consumption.

Modeled on the civil rights and anti-war movements of the late 1960s, the contemporary feminist movement in the arts emphasized political activism, group collaboration, and an art practice centered around the personal and collective experiences of women. Feminist art historians and critics explored the ways that art historical institutions and discourses have shaped the dynamics that continually subordinate female artists to male. They examined women's lives as artists in the context of debates about the relationship between gender, culture, and creativity. Why had art historians chosen to ignore the work of almost all women artists? Were the successful ones exceptional (perhaps to the point of deviance) or merely the tip of a hidden iceberg, submerged by a society demanding that women produce children, not art, and confine their activities to the domestic, not the public, sphere? Could, and should, women artists lay claim to "essential" gender differences that might be linked to the production of certain kinds of imagery? Could the creative process, and its results, be viewed as

androgynous or genderless? Finally, what was the relationship between the "craft" and "fine art" traditions for women?

Early feminist analyses focused new attention on the work of remarkable women artists *and* on unequaled traditions of domestic and utilitarian production by women. They also revealed the way that the work of women has been presented in a negative relation to creativity and high culture. Feminist analyses pointed to the ways that the binary oppositions of Western thought—man/woman, nature/culture, analysis/intuition—have been replicated within art history and used to reinforce sexual difference as a basis for aesthetic valuations. Qualities associated with "femininity," such as "decorative," "precious," "miniature," "sentimental," "amateur," etc., have provided a set of negative characteristics against which to measure "high art."

During the 1970s, American feminism expressed itself in a generally celebratory attitude towards the female body and female experience, and an embrace of personal and collaborative approaches to artmaking. Some artists and critics explored the notion of a "female imagery" as a positive way of representing the female body, reclaiming it from its construction as a passive object of male desire. Others, however, challenged existing hierarchies of production and representation. The wish to reclaim women's histories, and to resituate women within the history of cultural production led to an important focus on female creativity. It also directed attention to the categories "art" and "artist" through which the discipline of art history has structured knowledge. Originating in the description and classification of objects, and the identifying of a class of individuals known as "artists," art history has emphasized style, attribution, dating, authenticity, and the rediscovery of forgotten artists. Revering the individual artist as hero, it has maintained a conception of art as individual expression or as a reflection of reality, often divorced from the contemporary social conditions of production and circulation.

Art history concerns itself with the analysis of works of art; sexual difference has been shown to be inscribed in both the objects of its inquiry and in the terms in which they are interpreted and discussed. If, as Lisa Tickner and others have argued, the production of meaning is inseparable from the production of power, "then feminism (a political ideology addressed to relations of power) and art history (or any discourse productive of knowledge) are more intimately connected than is popularly supposed." Early feminist investigations challenged art history's constructed categories of human production and its

reverence for the individual (male) artist as hero. And they raised important questions about the categories within which cultural objects are organized.

Some feminist art historians began to question ahistorical writing about women artists that used gender as a more binding point of connection between women than class, race, and historical context. Others found the isolation in which many women artists have worked, and their exclusion from the major movements through which the course of Western art has been plotted by historians, insurmountable barriers to reinscribing them into art history as it is conventionally understood. Again and again, attempts to re-evaluate the work of women artists, and to reassess the actual historical conditions under which they worked, have come into conflict with the fundamental construction—by and for men—of traditional art history: an identification of art with the wealth, power, and privilege of the individuals and groups who commissioned or purchased it.

After more than two decades of feminist writing about women in the arts, there remains a relatively small body of work in the history of Western art between the Middle Ages and the twentieth century that can, with some certainty, be firmly identified with specific women artists. Whenever, for example, the painters Sofonisba Anguissola, Artemisia Gentileschi, and Judith Leyster have been admitted to the canon, they have been forced into linguistic categories defined by traditional notions of male genius, and isolated as exceptions: *Sofonisba Anguissola: The First Great Woman Artist of the Renaissance* (1992); *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (1989); and *Judith Leyster: A Dutch Master and Her World* (1993). "Greatness," "Hero," and "Master," however, are terms that return us to notions of originality, intentionality, and transcendence as defined by male creativity. Excluded from the patterns of artistic lineage that secure "greatness" as a male prerogative, often isolated from the centers of artistic theory and from roles as teachers, few women have been able directly to bequeath their talent and experience to subsequent generations. The category "woman artist" remains an unstable one, its meanings fixed only in relation to dominant male paradigms of art and femininity.

No matter what theoretical model or methodology we select to shape our investigation into the problematic position of the "woman artist," formidable problems present themselves. Questions relating to attribution, the determination of authorship and *oeuvre*, or the size and significance of a body of work, remain unresolved for many

women artists. Attempts to juggle domestic responsibilities with artistic production have often resulted in smaller bodies of work, and often works smaller in scale, than those produced by male contemporaries. Yet art history continues to privilege prodigious output and monumental scale or conception over the selective and the intimate. Finally, the historical and critical evaluation of women's art has proved inseparable from ideologies which define their place in Western culture generally.

From its beginnings, feminist art and criticism confronted inherent contradictions. Feminists of color and lesbian feminists challenged attempts to identify an inclusive "female imagery" or female experience, arguing that such attempts collapsed female identity into a universalized category that was, in reality, heterosexual and white, not to mention middle class. Moreover, a desire to see the work of women exhibited, discussed, published, and preserved within existing discourses of high art often conflicted with a recognition of the need to critique and deconstruct those same discourses in order to expose ideological assumptions based in systems of domination and difference.

As part of the attempt to address these problems and contradictions, feminist scholars working within academic institutions have turned to structuralism, psychoanalysis, semiology, and cultural studies for theoretical models that challenge the humanist notion of a unified, rational, and autonomous subject that has dominated study in the arts and humanities since the Renaissance. They have also emphasized that since the "real" nature of male and female cannot be determined, we are left with representations of gender (understood as the socially created and historically specific difference between men and women). Griselda Pollock has argued that "feminism signifies a set of positions, not an essence; a critical practice, not a dogma; a dynamic and self-critical response and intervention, not a platform. It is the precarious product of a paradox. Seeming to speak in the name of women, feminist analysis perpetually deconstructs the very term around which it is politically organized."

The body of writings that inform Pollock's insistence on the instability of the position "woman" draws on the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure and Emile Benveniste, the Marxist analysis of Karl Marx and Louis Althusser, the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, the theories of discourse and power associated with Michel Foucault, the analyses of culture and society provided by Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, and Jacques Derrida's critique

of metaphysics. All forms of poststructuralism assume that meaning is constituted within language and is not the guaranteed expression of the subject who speaks it, and that there is no biologically determined set of emotional and psychological characteristics which are "essentially" masculine or feminine. Poststructuralist texts expose the role of language in deferring meaning and in constructing a subjectivity which is not fixed but is constantly negotiated through a whole range of forces—economic, cultural, and political. They have undermined long-cherished views of the writer or artist as a unique individual creating in the image of divine creation (in an unbroken chain that links father and son as in Michelangelo's God reaching toward Adam in the Sistine Chapel frescoes), and the work of art as reducible to a single "true" meaning. And, not least, they have demonstrated how patriarchy is structured through men's control over the power of seeing women. As a result, new attitudes toward the relation between artist and work have begun to emerge, many of which have important implications for feminist analysis. Now artistic intention can be seen more clearly as just one of many often overlapping strands—ideological, economic, social, political—that make up the work of art, whether literary text, painting, or sculpture.

One result has been changes in the ways many feminist art historians think about art history itself. As an academic discipline, it has categorized cultural artifacts, privileging some forms of production over others and continually returning the focus to certain kinds of objects and the individuals who have produced them. The terms of art history's analysis are neither "neutral" nor "universal"; instead they reinforce widely held social values and beliefs and they inform a huge range of activities from teaching to publishing and to the buying and selling of works of art.

The connection between meaning and power, and the attendant sexual and cultural differences, have secured and corroborated the relations of domination and subordination around which Western culture is organized. This has been a preoccupation of recent thinkers from Michel Foucault and Stuart Hall to Cornel West and bell hooks. Foucault's analysis of how power is exercised—not through open coercion, but through its investment in particular institutions and discourses, and the forms of knowledge that they produce—has raised many questions about the function of visual culture as a defining and regulating practice, and the place of women in history. His distinction between "total" and "general" history in his *Archeology of Knowledge* (1972) seems applicable to the feminist problematic of formulating a

history that is responsive to women's specific experiences without positing a parallel history uniquely feminine and existing outside the dominant culture.

European, particularly French, psychoanalytic writings have focused attention on women, not as producers of culture, but as signifiers of male privilege and power. Jacques Lacan's rereading of Freud stresses the linguistic structure of the unconscious and the acquisition of subjectivity (at the point where the individual becomes the speaking subject) into the symbolic order of language, laws, social processes, and institutions. The writings of Lacan and his followers have been concerned with a psychoanalytic explanation about how the subject is constructed in language and, by extension, in representation. The place assigned woman by Lacan is one of absence, of "otherness." Lacking the penis, which signifies phallic power in patriarchal society and provides a speaking position for the male child, woman also lacks access to the symbolic order that structures language and meaning. In Lacan's view, she is destined "to be spoken" rather than to speak. This position of otherness in relation to language and power poses serious challenges to the woman artist who wishes to assume the role of speaking subject rather than accept that of object. Yet Lacan's views have proved important for feminists interested in clarifying the positioning of woman in relation to dominant discourses and have provided the theoretical base for the work of a number of contemporary women artists, several of whom are discussed in the last chapter of this book. Moreover, the psychoanalytically oriented writings of Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva, for example, have posed the issue of woman's "otherness" from radically different perspectives.

As a result of these and other theoretical developments, much recent scholarly writing has shifted attention away from the categories "art" and "artist" to broader issues. These include race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, as well as gender. Within the dominant paradigms of Western culture, it is not only biological difference that constitutes "otherness." The lesbian feminist artist Harmony Hammond has summed up this dynamic with the words, "I see art-making, especially that which comes from the margins of the mainstream, as a site of resistance, a way of interrupting and intervening in those historical and cultural fields that continually exclude me, a sort of gathering of forces on the borders. For the dominant hegemonic stance that has worked to silence and subdue gender and ethnic difference has also silenced difference based on sexual preference."

A radical rethinking of the forces that have worked to exclude difference from artistic, cultural, and historical debate characterizes both Queer Theory and cultural studies. Like feminism, both have combined theory and practice in order to create new languages, rupture disciplinary boundaries, decenter authority, and develop strategies that reassert the relationship between agency, power, and struggle. Both have viewed representation as a site of struggle in enabling decolonization and diversity; both have addressed issues of sexism and racism. "The fierce willingness to repudiate domination in a holistic manner is the starting point for progressive cultural revolution," critic bell hooks has written.

Within feminism, there are now multiple approaches. They are mediated by the requirements of academic and institutional discourses on the one hand, and by the demands of activist politics on the other. And they are shaped by issues of social, cultural, and sexual difference. Some feminists remain committed to identifying the ways that femininity is evidenced in representation, others to producing a critical practice that resists positioning women as spectacle, or object of the male gaze. Still others are concentrating on critiquing and/or transforming coercive, hierarchical structures of domination.

Cultural theory, cultural politics, and cultural activism inform much contemporary feminism. The gradual integration of women's historical production with recent theoretical developments has been aided by a growing body of literature concerned with the construction and intersection of gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. As a result, a reexamination has occurred of the woman artist's relationship to dominant modes of production and representation. Issues of women's desire and sexual pleasure, and the situating of the feminine as mythic *and* historically specific, are now beginning to be explored, as is the defining of female pleasures that are not exclusively dependent on the positioning of woman as visual spectacle.

This book is intended to provide a general introduction to the history of women's involvement in the visual arts. It discusses women who have chosen to work professionally in painting, sculpture, or related media, and the ideologies that have shaped production and representation for women. It seeks also to identify major issues and new directions in research that might enrich the historical study of women artists and to summarize the work which has been done to date. The focus on the intersection between women as producers of art and women in representation helps to unravel the discourses that construct and naturalize ideas about women and femininity at specific

historical moments. It is also at the crossover of production and representation that we can become most aware of what is *not* represented or spoken, the omissions and silences that reveal the power of cultural ideology.

The limitations of art history as a discipline have been articulated by many other feminist art historians. Nevertheless, after almost two decades of feminist art historical writing, it is clear that critical issues of women's historical production remain unanswered. While many women artists have rejected feminism, and others have worked in media other than painting and sculpture, none has worked outside history. Although I am aware of the difficulty of organizing a book such as this in a way that avoids positing an alternative canon of "great" women artists, or a "herstory" based on assumptions and values which many of us have come to distrust, we must keep in mind the fact that it is the discipline of art history itself that has structured our access to women's contributions in specific ways. As a feminist art historian, I remain deeply critical of notions like "genius" and "hero." Yet at the same time, in choosing to discuss women's productions within established historical frameworks, and in adhering to the survey format simply because this approach provides the majority of university students their primary introduction to the history of Western art, I recognize that I shall end up privileging specific female artists and works along the path of the complicated history I am presenting here.

Given the tremendous range of women's activities in the visual arts, it has been necessary to limit the scope of the present investigation. I have focused on painting and sculpture because it is here that issues of production and representation are most often in conflict for the woman artist. Rather than attempting an inclusive survey of *all* women artists now known to us, I have organized the book around a series of specific historical conditions which have led women to negotiate new relationships to issues of representation, patronage, and ideology.

As an introductory text, this book provides neither new biographical nor archival facts about women artists. Instead, it is entirely dependent on the research of others and seeks primarily to "reframe" the many issues raised by feminist research in the arts. Sources are acknowledged in the bibliographical section at the end of the text.

Among the many problems confronting such a study is the question of how to "name" women artists. Although many writers have chosen to designate women by their given names rather than their patronyms, the use of familiar names has also been used to diminish women artists in relation to their male contemporaries. Thus I have adopted the

more historically common form of address by patronym. The fathers of artist daughters are identified by full name while the daughters are most often referred to by family name; for example, Gentileschi refers to Artemisia Gentileschi, while her father is called Orazio Gentileschi. The problem of naming is only the first of a complex set of issues to do with women and language, the first of which is explored in an introductory chapter on the writing of art history and women artists.

Art History and the Woman Artist

The origins of art history's focus on the personalities and work of exceptional individuals can be traced back to the early Renaissance desire to celebrate Italian cities and the achievements of their more remarkable male citizens. The new ideal of the artist as a learned man and the work of art as the unique expression of a gifted individual first appears in Leon Battista Alberti's treatise, *On Painting*, published in 1435. The emphasis of modern art historical scholarship, beginning in the late eighteenth century and profoundly influenced by idealist philosophy, on the autonomy of the art object has closely identified with this view of the artist as a solitary genius, his creativity mapped and given value in monographs and catalogues. Since the nineteenth century, art history has also been closely aligned with the establishing of authorship, which forms the basis of the economic valuing of Western art. Our language and expectations about art have tended to rank that produced by women as below that produced by men in "quality," resulting in lesser monetary value. This has profoundly influenced our knowledge and understanding of the contributions made by women to painting and sculpture. The number of women artists, well known in their own day, but whose work apparently no longer exists, is a tantalizing indication of the vagaries of artistic attribution.

Any study of women artists must examine how art history is written and the assumptions that underlie its hierarchies, especially if the numerous cases of attributions to male artists of works by women are to be reviewed. Let us consider three paradigmatic cases from three centuries: Marietta Robusti, the sixteenth-century Venetian painter; Judith Leyster, the seventeenth-century Dutch painter; a group of women artists prominent in the circle of Jacques-Louis David, the eighteenth-century French painter; and Edmonia Lewis, the black nineteenth-century American sculptor. Their stories elucidate the way art history's emphasis on individual genius has distorted our understanding of workshop procedures and the nature of collaborative artistic production. They also illustrate the extent to which art history's close alliance with art market economics has affected the