

Art History: Where are all the women artists?

Key Idea

Flicking through the tomes of Western art history you could be forgiven for thinking that there have not been any 'great' women artists. Artworks by male artists – from Titian, Michelangelo and Rubens to da Vinci, Caravaggio and Rembrandt – tend to dominate art history books. While there are plenty of women depicted in historical artworks, artworks by women are largely absent. The lack of documented contributions by women artists (and by extension, women art historian and critics) to the canon of art history raises the question... *where are all the women?*

"History is written by the victors."

The provenance of the above utterance remains widely debated but is often attributed to Winston Churchill, a British army officer, writer and wartime UK Prime Minister. It is generally assumed that the past is authored by those members of society that have the most power – the so called 'winners'. Correspondingly, art history, can be thought of as a record of events that have been shaped by specific groups of people. Throughout art history men have held the balance of power and, in order to maintain their status and position, have presented a past that has moulded assumptions about how the art world works – that art is a male dominated field of culture.

"Those who have privileges invariably hold on to them, and hold tight, no matter how marginal the advantage involved, until compelled to bow to superior power of one sort or another." – Linda Nochlin

In 1971, art historian Linda Nochlin outlined some of the social and economic factors preventing talented women from achieving the same status in the arts as their male counterparts in her important essay, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*² Nochlin noted that while, of course, there have always been women artists, the oppression experienced by women assured their omission from the Western history of art.³ In other words, the unequal relationships already embedded in society, are also reflected in Western art history.⁴

Thankfully, things are continuing to change. Feminist movements and waves have helped tip the balance – shifting the emphasis away from long standing positions of power – and have given voice to women, people of colour, trans and genderqueer people.

Australian women contemporary artists exhibit their work in many large scale exhibitions, both in Australia and overseas, but historically, this hasn't always been the case.

The Venice Biennale or 'La Biennale', staged every two years and spread across the Italian city of Venice, was first held in 1895 and is widely regarded as one of the most important art exhibitions in the world. La Biennale remains a highly anticipated exhibition event in which new artworks sit alongside more historical artworks, for consideration in contemporary social and political contexts.⁵ Many countries have their own National Pavilion, a specially designed architectural space, in the Venice Giardini – a large area of parkland in the historic city. Australia first participated in La Biennale in 1954 but it would take another 28 years until a woman, artist Rosalie Gascoigne, was selected to represent Australia (in 1982, alongside another artist, Peter Booth), and a further 11 years until a major solo exhibition by a woman artist was presented at the Australian Pavilion (Jenny Watson, 1993).⁶ Significantly, the three most recent exhibitions at the Australian Pavilion in Venice have been by artists who are women; Simryn Gill (2013), Fiona Hall (2015) and Tracey Moffatt (2017).

Key Definitions

Canon of Art History: The conventional timeline of artists who are sometimes considered as 'Old Masters' or 'Great Artists'. Today's art history attempts to question these rules of 'greatness', considering issues of gender, race, class and geography amongst others.⁷

Exhibition Case Studies

Sadie Chandler, *The Weight of Images* 2017

For *The Weight of Images* 2017, Chandler presents hundreds of original drawings pasted across the back wall of the gallery space, forming a wallpaper-like installation. Using a quick sketch technique in thick black marker and ink, the images she has drawn are mostly figurative works of art – ranging from classical Greek sculpture, to painted reclining nudes, to iconic modern artworks. *The Weight of Images* reveals a glimpse into a dense archive of portraits, landscapes and still-lives chosen and briefly scrutinised by the artist. While Chandler has seen some of these artworks in galleries and museums around the world, many she has only ever viewed online. Many females' bodies are represented in Chandler's artwork. However, there are only a small number of artworks that this installation draws from that have been originally created by women artists. Acknowledging that as an artist she cannot escape the weight of the history of images, Chandler offers a feminist critique of art history and museology. The way that the images are plastered on top of one another in *The Weight of Images* evokes the way that, in the digital age, we are inundated with imagery available through the internet – further reminding us of the impossibility of processing huge amounts of visual information that exists all around us.

Linda Marrinon, *What I must bear* 1982

What I must bear 1982 speaks to the burdening legacies of the male dominated, or patriarchal, histories of art. In this painting Marrinon portrays a young girl weighed down by a large cross she carries on her back. The cross is emblazoned with the words 'prejudice' and 'misunderstanding'. While the figure can be read as a self-portrait of the artist, the work could also represent the burden felt by many women artists whose work continues to be ignored by the corollaries of art history – art criticism, museum collections and exhibitions – whilst highlighting in plain text, the cause of this exclusion.

Acknowledgements

Unfinished Business: Perspectives on art and Feminism Education Resources written and compiled by ACCA Education, January 2018.

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Historical Touchpoints

- Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes* 1614
- Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party* 1974-79

Questions

- Drawing from your memory, make a list of all of the artists that you can think of. Are there many women on your list of artists? Think about your answer, and note down why you think this may be.
- Research a woman artist from art history. Find out when they were making artwork, who/what they were influenced by and where their artworks may be now. Prepare a short presentation on your chosen artist – you can talk about their life and their artwork.
- Counting gender representation is a fundamental tool of feminist research methodology today. Research the CoUNTess Report compiled by artist Elvis Richardson in 2014. How might galleries and museums work to ensure that there is equity in gender representation within their exhibitions or collections?

- 1 'Is history always written by the victors?', Stack Exchange History beta. <https://history.stackexchange.com/questions/5597/is-history-always-written-by-the-victors>
- 2 'Feminist Art', Tate. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/f/feminist-art>
- 3 Extract from Linda Nochlin's essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*: http://www.thinker.com/files/whynogreatwomenartists_4.pdf
- 4 "'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?': A Case Study", How To Talk About Art History. <http://www.howtotalkaboutarthistory.com/art-history-101/5-female-artists-left-history/>
- 5 'Biennale Arte History', La Biennale de Venezia. <http://www.labiennale.org/en/history-biennale-arte>
- 6 'Australian Representation at the Venice Biennale Since 1954', Australia Council for the Arts. <http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/venice-biennale-timeline/>
- 7 'The Canon of Art History', The National Gallery. <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/glossary/canon-of-art-history>

Images

- a. Sadie Chandler, *The weight of images* 2017 (detail). Courtesy the artist and Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne. Photograph: Andrew Curtis
- b. Linda Marrinon, *What I must bear* 1982; *Sorry!* 1982. Installation view, *Unfinished Business: Perspectives on art and feminism*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art 2017. Courtesy Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, University of Western Australia. Photograph: Andrew Curtis
- c. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes* 1614
- d. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party* 1974-79 © Judy Chicago. Photograph: Donald Woodman

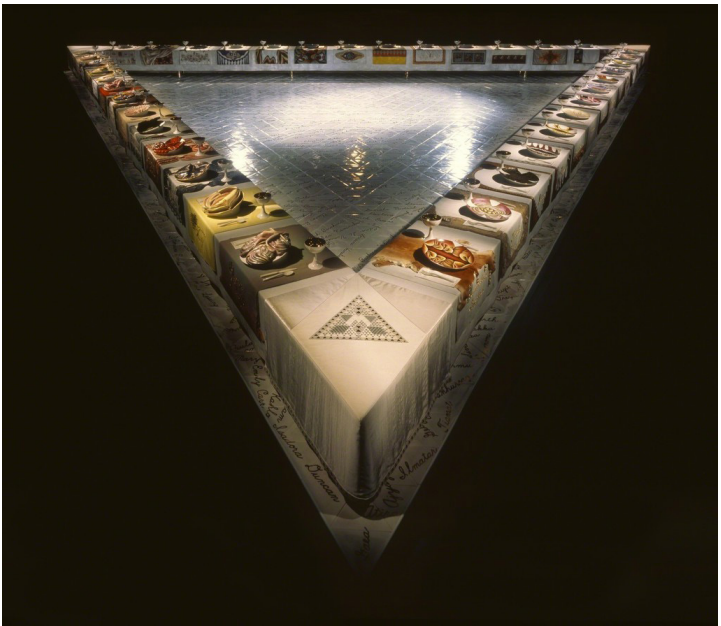




b.



c.



d.