

Can You Name Five Women Artists?



Double Blue Barbra (The Jewish Jackie Series), by Deborah Kass, American, born 1952, Silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 1992. Photo credit: Lisa Marder

By Lisa Marder

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Can you name five women artists? This month, for National Women's History Month, the National Museum of Women in the Arts is challenging everyone through a social media campaign to name five women artists. Should be easy, right? After all, you can probably rattle off at least ten male artists without much thought. Naming half that number of women should be no problem. And yet, for many, it is.

You can join the NMWA and several other institutions in the conversation by sharing stories of women artists using the hashtag #5womenartists on Twitter and Instagram. Find out more about the initiative on the National Museum of Women in the Arts' blog, Broadstrokes.

Brief Overview of History of Women in Art

According to Did You Know, a list of collected facts about women in art on the NMWA website, "Less than 4% of the artists in the Modern Art section of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art are women, but 76% of the nudes are female."⁽¹⁾ (From the Guerrilla Girls, anonymous activists exposing sexual and racial discrimination in art.)

Women have always been involved in art, either in making it, inspiring it, collecting it, or critiquing and writing about it, but they have more often been perceived as muse rather than as artist. Until the last few decades, their voices and visions, other than those of a few "exceptional" women whose work has become widely acclaimed, have been marginalized and subjugated, relatively invisible in the history of art.

Women had many obstacles to face in terms of recognition: their artwork was often relegated to merely "craft" or "handiwork" status; they had difficulty getting the schooling and training they needed for fine art training; they often did not receive credit for the work they did, with much of it attributed to their husbands or male counterparts, as in the case of Judith Leyster; and there were social restrictions as to what was accepted as women's subject matter. Worth mentioning, too, is the fact that women would sometimes change their names, assuming male names or using only their initials in hopes of having their work taken seriously, or would have their work lost if they signed it with their maiden name, only to take on their husband's name when they married, often at very young ages.

Even those women painters whose work was sought after and admired had their critics. For example, in 18th century France, where women painters were quite popular in Paris, there were still some critics who thought that women shouldn't be showing their work in public, as Laura Auricchio's essay, *Eighteenth Century Women Painters in France*, describes: "Although many critics applauded their new prominence, others lamented the immodesty of women who would display their skills so publicly. Indeed, pamphleteers frequently conflated the exhibition of these women's paintings with the display of their bodies, and they were hounded by salacious rumors."(2)

Women were largely excluded from art history textbooks such as the widely-used H. W. Janson's *History of Art*, first published in 1962, until the 1980's when a few women artists were finally included. According to Kathleen K. Desmond in her book, *Ideas About Art*, "Even in the 1986, revised edition only 19 illustrations of women's art (in black and white) appeared along with the 1,060 reproductions of work by men. These exclusions were a catalyst for studying the history and ideas of women artists and for a new approach to art history."(3) A new edition of Janson's textbook came out in 2006 that now includes twenty-seven women as well as decorative arts. At last female students are seeing in their art textbooks role models with whom they can identify.

Read *Revising Art History's Big Book: Who's In and Who Comes Out?* to find out more about the latest edition of Janson's *History of Art: The Western Tradition Reissued Edition (8th Edition)* (Buy from Amazon).

In their interview *The Guerrilla Girls Talk The History of Art vs. The History Of Power on The Late Show With Steven Colbert* (January 14, 2016), Colbert points out that in 1985, the Guggenheim, Metropolitan Museum, and Whitney Museum had zero solo shows by women, and the Museum of Modern Art had only one solo show. Thirty years later the numbers had not changed dramatically: the Guggenheim, Metropolitan, and Whitney Museum each had one solo show by women, the Museum of Modern Art had two solo shows by women.(4) That incremental change illustrates why the Guerrilla Girls are still active today.

The problem today lies in how to address the omission of female artists in history books. Do you rewrite the history books, inserting the female artists where they belong, or do you write new books about women artists, perhaps reinforcing a marginalized status? The debate continues, but the fact that women are speaking out, that men are not the only ones writing the history books, and that there are more voices in the conversation is a good thing.

Who are five women artists that you know or that have inspired you? Join the conversation at #5womenartists.

Further Reading and Viewing

A Brief History of Women in Art, Khan Academy: an essay outlining in brief the history of women in art

Jemima Kirke: *Where Are the Women - Unlock Art*: a short entertaining video of the history of women in art

Women's History Month Exhibits and Collections: online resources about women from various national museums and organizations

Where Are All the Famous Women Artists?: an open letter from an artist to younger sisters

REFERENCES

1. Did You Know, Get the Facts: National Museum of Women in the Arts, <http://nmwa.org/advocate/get-facts>
2. Auricchio, Laura, Eighteenth Century Women Painters in France, Heilbronn Timeline of Art History, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Oct. 2004, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/18wa/hd_18wa.htm
3. Desmond, Kathleen K, Ideas About Art, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, U.K., 2011, p. 123.
4. Guerrilla Girls Talk The History Of Art vs. The History Of Power, The Late Show With Steven Colbert, January 14, 2016 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FxBQB2fUI_g

RESOURCES

Women's History Month, Can You Name #5womenartists?, Broad Strokes: The National Museum of Women in the Arts' Blog, Feb. 29, 2016, <http://broadstrokes.org/2016/02/29/womens-history-month-can-you-name-5womenartists/>

A Brief History of Women in Art, Khan Academy, Tate, 2015, <https://www.khanacademy.org/partner-content/tate/women-in-art/history-of-women-in-art/a/a-brief-history-of-women-in-art>