A VERY CONDENSED HISTORY OF WOMEN PRINTMAKERS IN AMERICA

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In 1887, The Boston Museum of Art held the first comprehensive exhibition of women artists at an American art institution: "Women Etchers of America."[i] Unlike other mediums such as painting and sculpture, where gender hierarchies were already firmly in place, etching as a fine art medium was relatively young.[1] Since men were less concerned with relinquishing control and fighting for the highest level of regard, this worked to the advantage of women printmakers. Unthreatened by the potential success of women printers, the likelihood that women would be judged on the quality of their work rather than their gender increased immensely. This increase in equality, however, did not guarantee that women would be similarly recognized for their contributions. H.W. Janson's *History of Art*, which for more than thirty years was the standard art history text, did not include a single reference to women artists. Following in a similar tradition, women historically accounted for over a quarter of participants in print exhibitions, but many publications did not include their contributions, opting instead to focus on their male counterparts.[2]

i. The exhibition featured 388 etchings by 23 artists and a digital catalogue, archived from the collection of Harvard University, is available at https://archive.org/details/exhibitionworkw00artsgoog

Nearly fifty years after the exhibition “Women Etchers of America”, of the 800 artists in the United States who made prints through the Works Progress Administration, one in four were women.[3] Printmakers were expected to complete one print a month, and were able to develop and work on plates at the workshop or at home. This allowed a flexible schedule for women who often had many responsibilities outside of creating artwork.[4] Art Historian Helen Langa suggests that while the WPA created unprecedented access to art making for women, it also created an atmosphere where the unequal status of women in the real world was largely ignored in their work.[5] Rather than creating art that dealt with issues related to their experiences in the home, on the job, or in public places, many women emphasized and mimicked male concerns. In an effort to be taken seriously, many women created work depicting scenes of male unemployment or of men working in various industries with sordid factory conditions, such as coal mines and steel foundries. Many avoided any theme that could be associated with women, an issue that persists to this day and continues to affect all forms of existence, from corporate careers to art making.[ii] Motherhood was frequently depicted as a social condition of the Great Depression, rather than an issue of personal identity.[6] The sentimentality associated with motherhood made it an unattractive subject for many women artists, who were told that open maternal love was too closely associated with feminine emotions to be deemed professional.[7]

Similar to feminists in the 1960s and 1970s who confronted blatant and sometimes surprising sexism perpetrated by their male counterparts in the antiwar movement[iii], women in the 1930s, despite their active role in auxiliary organizations, were portrayed as helpless victims during labor strikes.[8] While the art of the interwar period is filled with male workers, women were usually portrayed in lesser jobs, such as tending chickens, picking fruit, or sewing. The image of a working person remained primarily male, and there are few instances of women portraying other women as wage workers.[9] Often, depictions of exhausted female workers, when

ii. For more information about women suppressing “feminine” characteristics in an attempt to participate in male dominated success, start with Carol Kleiman’s “Women Adopt ‘Manly’ Traits with Job Success” from the *Chicago Tribune* 15 May 2001. Also, Michael Casey’s “When Competing in a Male-Dominated Field, Women Should ‘Man’ Up” from *Fortune* 14 August 2014 highlights some recent research regarding the difficulties of women in male dominated fields.

iii. For first hand accounts, watch She’s Beautiful When She’s Angry. Dir. Mary Dore. International Film Circuit, 2014.

they were created, were used to support claims that if men were paid a living wage, women would not need to work outside the home in such vile conditions. This reinforced the idea that women remain solely in the domestic realm without challenging the ideal of masculine strength.[10]

For many public WPA projects, artists were forced to create art that fit with regional identities and corresponded to idealized heterosexual relationships where men and women carried out stereotypical roles. Printmakers, however, because their work was not enormous in scale or on display at public spaces like post offices, found more flexibility in both subject matter and aesthetic ideas. For example, Dorothy Rutka, based in Cleveland, and Lynd Ward and Werner Drewes in New York used this flexibility to create prints outside of the conservative norms.[11]

In contrast to other mediums, the collaborative nature of printmaking often necessitated assistance and cooperation at the press, which led to more conductive exchanges between genders. Unlike the solitary nature of many art practices, a sense of community is inherent in printmaking often based on the amount of equipment one needs to create work. Forced to work closely with others, printers are often dependent on the other artists that they share a working space with. Though not remembered by history with the same esteem as their male counterparts, women played an important and vital role in the investigation and dissemination of printmaking techniques. As is frequently still the case, the need to perform multiple roles as wives, mothers, and rulers of the domestic domain, made it substantially more difficult to maintain an artistic career in a culture that still identified creativity with masculinity. [12]

Even as their work was increasingly being viewed with professional equality, women were still expected to express themselves in clearly defined ways, dressing and acting as was deemed appropriate for their gender. Women making art were under further stress to constantly assure everyone around them that they were also providing for their families and not neglecting their domestic responsibilities. Many women printmakers sacrificed their own careers, succumbing to societal pressures to conform to traditional gender roles and devoted more energy to promoting their husband's career than their own.[13] Even in instances where relationships were founded on shared artistic ideals, women found themselves, as family responsibilities increased and their male partner's career made greater demands, sacrificing their own work and career. Linda Nochlin has said that to succeed, a woman must exhibit "a good strong streak of rebellion to make her way in the world of art at all, rather than submitting to the so-

cially approved role of wife and mother."[iv] Partnerships with male printers, whether romantic or professional relationships, initially provided many women entrance into printmaking and the professional art world. Once familiar with the medium, women worked as capably as their male counterparts, often actually exceeding them in the breadth and scope of their knowledge and continued the proliferation of printmaking through teaching others.[14]

Opportunities for instruction in printmaking were limited well into the twentieth century, and many women taught themselves through the writing of other printmakers. Once print instruction was established, women began taking classes, and eventually became instructors themselves.[15] Teaching was a profession open to women and seen as appropriate. In many cases, women held the necessary information to continue the practice and played an integral role in the education and opening of print shops after the government-sponsored shops of the WPA closed in 1942. After learning etching through the WPA, Vera Berdich created the etching department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1947. In 1952 Margaret Lowengrund started Contemporaries Graphic Art Center, and a year later, Ellen Lanyon founded Chicago Graphic Workshop. Tatyana Grosman, with her husband Maurice, opened Universal Limited Art Editions in 1957, and June Wayne founded the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in 1960. Judith Solodkin, the first woman graduate of the master printer program at Tamarind, started Solo Press in 1975. Though in theory printmaking and teaching both provide a more equal base for participation, all of these women faced rather severe challenges while trying to establish their place in the printmaking community. Many women instructors still frequently run into issues with students and other faculty members who think it is acceptable to make demeaning comments, or treat them differently than their male instructors simply because of their gender.

In 1940 Eleanor Roosevelt said, "women must become more conscious of themselves as women and of their ability to function as a group. At the same time they must try to wipe from men's consciousness the need to consider them as a group or as women in their everyday activities, especially as workers in industry or the professions."[16] Women continue to exist in a complicated situation, where they must insist they not be viewed as a separate category (or the other, less valuable by comparison)

iv. The essay, in its entirety can be read at www.writing.upenn.edu/library/Nochlin-Linda_Why-Have-There-Been-No-Great-Women-Artists.pdf

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but must also work together to further a feminist world. Feminist artists of the 1960s and 1970s often took issue with their foremother's emphasis on work that addressed distinctly female modes of expression and experiences and contemporary feminist artists continue to weigh the costs and benefits of women only exhibitions and galleries.[17] Many women, keenly aware of the disparities that exist in the art world, are not always convinced that isolating women and creating shows with no conceptual thread aside from gender is helpful in any way.

The sense of community that exists in both printmaking and feminist communities can serve as a rallying and protective force, while simultaneously making that universe sometimes inaccessible to outsiders when it's taken to the extreme. Both printmakers and feminists also occupy a territory that is often relegated to insignificance. To many in the arts, printmaking is still considered a less valuable medium, just as women are frequently still viewed by some as less capable than men in certain situations. Just as printmakers commonly congregate in likeminded groups, sometimes simply knowing that women are not alone in these situations – as depressing as it is to realize so many other women have similar experiences – gives them confidence in their frustration and actions. Engagement with these issues and attempts to call out negative behaviors often empower women to work together and stand up for their rights. Because the WPA created a new market for prints, which were previously thought of as solely commercial in nature, and allowed for prints to become "Art for the People", we must hold printmaking to a higher standard. To quote the Guerrilla Girls, "It's not really a History of Art - it's a History of Power" [v] and printmaking must continue to fight against the ingrained hierarchies that are so prevalent in other mediums and the larger art world. Exhibitions like "Printing Women: Three Centuries of Female Printmakers, 1570–1900", which is on view at the New York Public Library until May 27th of 2016, are a step in the right direction, but printmakers, regardless of gender, must reflect on and honor printmaking's history of inclusivity and egalitarian principles and take a more active role in disseminating all forms of equality.

v. The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, Jan 14, 2016

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2. Seaton, Elizabeth G. “Connecting Paths: American Women Printmakers, 1910-1960.” Paths to the Press. University of Washington Press, 2006. Pg 11.

3. Seaton, Elizabeth G. “Connecting Paths: American Women Printmakers, 1910-1960.” Paths to the Press. University of Washington Press, 2006. Pg 15.

4. Pohlad, Mark B. “Workmates and Soulmates: American Women Printmakers and their Relationships with Men.” Paths to the Press. University of Washington Press, 2006. Pg 38.

5. Pohlad, Mark B. “Workmates and Soulmates: American Women Printmakers and their Relationships with Men.” Paths to the Press. University of Washington Press, 2006. Pg 38.

6. Langa, Helen, “Bold Gazes; Lively Differences: Women Printmakers’ Images of Women.” Paths to the Press. University of Washington Press, 2006. Pg 55.

7. Langa, Helen, “Bold Gazes; Lively Differences: Women Printmakers’ Images of Women.” Paths to the Press. University of Washington Press, 2006. Pg 57.

8. Langa, Helen, “Bold Gazes; Lively Differences: Women Printmakers’ Images of Women.” Paths to the Press. University of Washington Press, 2006. Pg 55.

9. Langa, Helen, “Bold Gazes; Lively Differences: Women Printmakers’ Images of Women.” Paths to the Press. University of Washington Press, 2006. Pg 58.

10. Langa, Helen, “Bold Gazes; Lively Differences: Women Printmakers’ Images of Women.” Paths to the Press. University of Washington Press, 2006. Pg 58.

11. Langa, Helen, “Bold Gazes; Lively Differences: Women Printmakers’ Images of Women.” Paths to the Press. University of Washington Press, 2006. Pg 57.

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13. Pohlad, Mark B. “Workmates and Soulmates: American Women Printmakers and their Relationships with Men.” Paths to the Press. University of Washington Press, 2006. Pg 45.

14. Pohlad, Mark B. “Workmates and Soulmates: American Women Printmakers and their Relationships with Men.” Paths to the Press. University of Washington Press, 2006. Pg 47.

15. Pohlad, Mark B. “Workmates and Soulmates: American Women Printmakers and their Relationships with Men.” Paths to the Press. University of Washington Press, 2006. Pg 36.

16. Roosevelt, Eleanor. “Women in Politics.” Good Housekeeping 110, April 1940, pgs 45 and 203.

17. Hansen, Trudy Victoria and Eleanor Heartney. Presswork: The Art of Women Printmakers. Lang Communications, 1991.