Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Johanna Amos

book review of

Working Against the Grain: Women Sculptors in Britain c. 1885–1950 by Pauline Rose

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 20, no. 3 (Autumn 2021)

Citation: Johanna Amos, book review of *Working Against the Grain: Women Sculptors in Britain c. 1885–1950* by Pauline Rose, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 20, no. 3 (Autumn 2021), <https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2021.20.3.9>.

Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).

Pauline Rose,

Working Against the Grain: Women Sculptors in Britain c. 1885–1950.

Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020.

336 pp.; 22 color and 99 b&w illus.; bibliography; notes; index.

\$59.95 (hardcover)

ISBN: 9781789621563

Working Against the Grain: Women Sculptors in Britain c. 1885–1950 traces the contributions of dozens of women sculptors over a long half century. Through a series of thematically-grouped vignettes, author Pauline Rose documents the professional successes of British female sculptors, both nationally and internationally, as well as the many barriers they faced. Some of these obstacles will be familiar from Linda Nochlin's groundbreaking essay on women artists, including the limited access to training opportunities and professional networks, as well as the social and cultural expectations that curtailed women's activities in the professional sphere.^[1] To this, however, Rose adds challenges unique to women who elected to cast and carve. Given the intensely masculine perception of the medium, women were not regarded as physically capable of producing sculpture, and this bias haunted those seeking formal education as well as established makers. Similarly, women often lacked direct access to property and consequently struggled to finance a practice that demanded significant studio space and large quantities of materials. Rose further points to the general marginalization of sculpture by art institutions of the period, a factor she sees echoed in the narrative biases of contemporary art historians, who tend to emphasize the modernist avant-garde—and therefore male artists and painting—in discussions of artistic practice during this period. Rose departs from this well-trodden path, while still highlighting the turn of the century as a moment of intense artistic and social debate. Within the field of sculpture, the nineteenth century's renewed interest in the decorative arts gave way to a preference for modernist abstraction; the fondness for modelling was overtaken by an interest in direct carving. Women's position within British society also shifted. Although Rose does not explicitly emphasize this in her text, her analysis begins at a moment when the ranks of female sculptors were gradually growing, and concludes at a time when they were broadly recognized within the field, thus alluding to a gradual acceptance of women's professionalism. The volume attempts to capture, for the first time, the activities of many of these makers—to chart how they worked across genres, styles, and mediums, and faced the pressure to bridge professional and domestic spheres.

Working Against the Grain is organized thematically, with the first two chapters describing the artistic context within which women's work was created, consumed, and circulated. Later chapters focus on particular types of sculpture produced by women, including figural works, and sculpture produced for domestic as well as public settings. Each of these chapters is further subdivided into sections that highlight specific elements of the broader theme—architectural sculpture, monuments, and ecclesiastical works, for instance, all fall under the scope of public practice. In the later chapters, these subsections are populated by short, almost encyclopedic descriptions that map out the education and career trajectories of numerous women, many of whom are unfamiliar but, as Rose makes clear, deserving of attention.

Chapter 2 sketches out the artistic context of the period and considers how critical debates, as well as opportunities for training and exhibition, shaped women's participation within the field. The tail end of the nineteenth century was marked by the Arts and Crafts and New Sculpture movements, both of which minimized distinctions between the fine and decorative arts, encouraging the use of sculptural elements in interior and architectural design, and heralding the shift to a more expressive style and renewed attention to materiality. This altered the British public's relationship to and appreciation of sculpture at the same time that women gained greater admittance to artistic institutions, including the Royal Academy and Slade School, and professional societies. The emergence of regional and specialized art societies and galleries, such as the Royal Society of British Sculptors (established 1904), helped to accelerate this transformation and raise the profile of sculpture nationally and internationally. However, despite some gains, opportunities for women were still limited. As Rose points out, in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, women were expected to focus on marriage and raising a family. As a result, many institutions nudged female practitioners toward the applied arts instead of encouraging a professional devotion to the medium. Throughout this discussion, Rose returns to the conditions of art historical scholarship, alluding to the ways in which current practice has magnified, rather than addressed, the biases of the past, as the "perception that women's creativity might be more suitably realized through craft rather than art objects, or through design rather than painting or sculpture" (40) took hold.

The third chapter deals with the presentation and reception of women's sculpture, with subsections on film and photography, artist interviews, and key historical narratives published during the period. Here again, Rose highlights how the writing of art history poses particular problems for female sculptors. Their work, lost to history or locked in private collections, for instance, is often only visible in the photographic record, which reduces three-dimensional objects to particular views and angles, and removes site-specific works from their original viewing context. Similarly, Rose's discussion of critics and authors demonstrates how the high regard for painting at the turn of the century limited conversations around sculpture, though some critics, including Edmund Gosse, Marion Spielmann, and Kineton Parkes, intervened in an attempt to recalibrate the British public's relationship to the medium. They regarded sculpture as expressive, accessible, and suitable for intimate, domestic settings as well as grand public or architectural ones. While this critique advanced the overall position of the medium, women sculptors were not necessarily included in these analyses and attitudes towards their work remained mixed. One section of the chapter focuses on a particular form for documenting and presenting the work of

women sculptors—the studio interview. Rose notes how the text of these interviews was often shaped by gender, with women’s work described using gender-infused language or as derivative when compared to the work of their male colleagues. Particularly interesting is her analysis of the accompanying imagery, which further underlined these concerns; rather than being depicted as active agents in relation to their work, as was typical for their male peers, female sculptors appear “passive and less commanding over their creations” (55) or even “slightly uncomfortable at being asked to pose with their works” (56). Thus, written and photographic records positioned women sculptors as marginal creators within an already marginalized artform.

Chapter 4 focuses on women’s contributions to domestic sculpture, including statuettes, decorative panels, household fixtures, and garden ornaments. In order to situate these works, Rose returns to the debates surrounding British sculpture in the period—the tension between the Arts and Crafts movement’s emphasis on applied art and the modernist dismissal of the decorative, and between the exclusive modern interior and the approachable sculpture promoted by the mid-century *Sculpture at Home* exhibitions. Statuettes in particular figured prominently in this conversation; their small scale suited perfectly the framing of sculpture as a domestic, “lifestyle” element and, along with the potential for mass-production, added to their attainability. Rose notes that women, including Margaret Giles, Ruby Levick, and Gwynneth Holt, found success in this form of practice, not only because the scale of the works enabled greater participation by those for whom the cost and space associated with large-scale works was prohibitive, but also because the size of the sculptures suited more directly the public’s perception of what women could achieve from a physical standpoint. She further considers how female makers’ compositions in this area were more effective. While men often scaled down grander works to create statuettes, women designed with the modest dimensions of the statuette in mind. These works, along with the domestic objects—door knockers, decorative panels, and garden fountains—explored in this chapter could also be exhibited and sold at a range of venues, including art exhibitions, applied arts displays, and in department stores. The publicity surrounding domestic sculpture championed the accessibility of this type of work; however, despite critics attempts to make sculpture palatable to a broad audience, the market for domestic sculpture remained somewhat limited. Nevertheless, Rose highlights these exhibitions as “good opportunities to exhibit at a time when this was not easy, especially for women” (151).

Chapter 5, “The Sculpted Body,” considers figural sculpture, including portrait busts, memorial statues, and nudes. Here, Rose charts the contributions of women such as Princess Louise, Kathleen Scott, and Dora Gordine. Some, like Louise and Scott, wife of the explorer Robert Scott, found success in the realm of portraiture and memorial sculpture, in part because of their familiarity with or access to celebrated subjects. Louise, for instance, completed a successful public monument to her mother at Kensington Gardens in 1893, while Scott captured several prominent writers, politicians, and public figures. However, few women limited themselves to one form or style and though Scott was well known for her portraits, she also specialized in sensual male nudes, which, Rose indicates, were often given an allegorical interpretation following their completion. Similar to Scott, Gordine worked with portraits and nudes and moved in wealthy social circles, but her work demonstrates the shift to modernist ideas and forms in the twentieth century. Unlike Scott’s delicate, expressive bronzes, Gordine’s work demonstrates control, clarity of line, and containment of

the human form in a manner that anticipates Barbara Hepworth's and Henry Moore's abstracted figural carvings. Rose points to the way these examples nullify claims that women's work was derivative; more than this, they demonstrate the array of styles and genres of sculpture generated in this period, and highlight the areas in which women found success—whether in commemorative portraiture or expressive, artistic works.

The final chapter focuses on public works, and Rose expands the scope beyond collective memorials and monuments to include architectural and ecclesiastical sculpture. This integration of work more typically categorized as interior design creates an expanded narrative of sculptural history and provides Rose greater scope to address the work of women. As she points out, while makers such as Emmeline Halse and Frances Darlington contributed to the decorative programs of churches as part of a movement to reinvigorate ecclesiastical taste at the end of the nineteenth century, this type of work has often been neglected by contemporary historians because it does not conform to current perceptions of what constitutes “public” art. Women were, however, also active in the field of memorial commissions, especially as the demand for commemorative monuments increased following the First and Second World Wars. Given that much of this work was concerned with ideals of masculinity, male sculptors were sometimes considered more equipped to address the subject matter of memorial commissions. Nevertheless, commemorative works were often publicly financed, and therefore tended to be more conservatively designed, a circumstance that offered women an opportunity, as women's practical and financial concerns often dictated a more guarded approach to sculptural inventiveness and artistry.

The account of Violet Pinwill, featured in chapter 6, exemplifies many of the issues facing female sculptors identified within the volume as a whole. A specialist in ecclesiastical wood carving, Pinwill advanced to operating her own workshop in Plymouth, where she trained and employed several men. She was prolific—her carving appears in hundreds of English churches—and she was celebrated for her creativity, organization, and attention to the architectural scheme in which her work was situated. Her success, Rose suggests, may have been enabled by her medium—at the time, woodcarving was regarded as a suitable ladies' accomplishment—and her remote location. While this kept her from forging the professional relationships possible in urban centers, it also may have protected her from the competition of her male peers. Despite her achievements, Pinwill's career has been overlooked. Fire and a subsequent bombing largely destroyed her business archives, leaving little but her work for historians to assess. Here, Rose argues that scholars have further minimized Pinwill's contributions, insinuating the majority of her designs could not have been her own: “observers seem to have been too quick to suggest that female sculptors had necessarily needed significant male assistance” (255).

It is in these detailed vignettes that Rose's book is at its strongest. Through them she not only illuminates the career and creativity of figures long neglected, but also details the ways in which gender had a real and practical impact on women's prospects in the field of sculpture. The other, more fragmentary accounts that make up the bulk of chapters 4 through 6 are somewhat overwhelming. Certainly their presence, though list-like at times, alludes to the multitudes of women whose work warrants further attention, but who may never get the critical reception they deserve due to the nature of the archive and the biases of art history. These accounts thus help to make Rose's overall point about the extent of women's

involvement in sculptural practice at the turn of the twentieth century; however, at the same time, they remain frustrating in their brevity. A stronger organizational structure might have helped. While the focus of each chapter and sub-section is clear, there is little framing throughout (there is no overview of chapters in the introduction, for instance), leaving the reader to guess why particular figures and works have been grouped together, and why certain threads have been highlighted.

Working Against the Grain is a thoroughly researched and superbly illustrated volume that reflects Rose's deep familiarity with the material qualities and history of British sculpture.^[2] Part recovery project, part analysis, Rose balances documentation with critique of the institutional and social structures that limited women's participation in this artistic sphere—though one cannot help but feel she was torn somewhat between these two tasks. The only comprehensive survey of British female sculptors to date, the book also complements recent analyses of sculpture in the British Isles more broadly, including the collaborative digital project *Mapping the Practice and Profession of Sculpture in Britain and Ireland 1851–1951*, the Henry Moore Institute's two-volume survey *Sculpture in 20th-century Britain*, and Alan Windsor's dictionary *British Sculptors of the Twentieth Century*.^[3] Like these projects, Rose's volume expands our understanding beyond the oft-celebrated work of Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth. Ultimately, Rose has prepared the ground for further research on this topic, and the women and objects included in her study. Half a century on from Nochlin's clarion call to art historians, Rose's text is a powerful and necessary reminder of how much work is yet to be done.

Johanna Amos

Art History & Art Conservation, Queen's University
johanna.amos[at]queensu.ca

Notes

[1] Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1971), in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 145–78.

[2] Rose's earlier work includes *Henry Moore in America: Art, Business and the Special Relationship* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

[3] *Mapping the Practice and Profession of Sculpture in Britain and Ireland 1851–1951*, University of Glasgow History of Art and HATII, 2011, <https://sculpture.gla.ac.uk/>; Henry Moore Institute, *Sculpture in 20th-century Britain*, 2 vols (Leeds: Henry Moore Foundation, 2003); Alan Windsor, ed., *British Sculptors of the Twentieth Century*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 2017).