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Sarah Sik

book review of

*Women Artists in Paris, 1850–1900* by Laurence Madeline, with Bridget Alsdorf, Richard Kendall, Jane R. Becker, Vibeke Waallann Hansen, and Joëlle Bolloch

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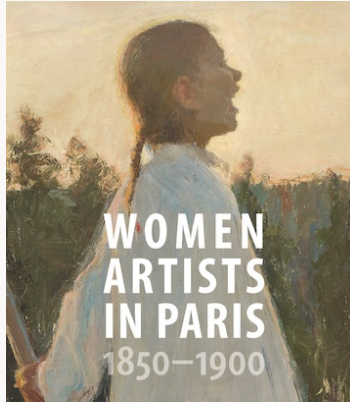
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Laurence Madeline, with Bridget Alsdorf, Richard Kendall, Jane R. Becker, Vibeke Waallann Hansen, and Joëlle Bolloch,  
*Women Artists in Paris, 1850–1900*.  
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*Her Paris: Women Artists in the Age of Impressionism*  
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*Women Artists in Paris, 1850–1900*  
Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA  
June 9–September 3, 2018

The exhibition catalogue *Women Artists in Paris, 1850–1900* opens and closes with the powerful rhetoric of the painter Marie Bashkirtseff, who in 1881 under the nom de plume Pauline Orell published an impassioned plea on behalf of “Les femmes artistes” (“Women Artists”) in *La citoyenne*. As one of the many women artists in Paris studying their craft in private academies and master’s studios, Bashkirtseff presented a fiery case for the right of women to gain admittance to the world’s most prestigious fine arts academy—the Ecole des Beaux-Arts (School of Fine Arts). Anticipating responses ranging from condescending dismissal to fierce resistance, Bashkirtseff summarized the smug misogynist rebuffs to which she and her female peers were accustomed: “We are asked with indulgent irony just how many great women artists there have been” (1). The parallel is striking to the titular question feminist art historian Linda Nochlin would pose nearly a century later in her seminal essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” Exhibition curator Laurence Madeline

dutifully draws this connection in the catalogue's introductory essay, "Into the Light: Women Artists, 1850–1900," crediting Nochlin with being "the first to publicly confront an assumption that had been latent for decades and demonstrate the enormous contributions of women to art history and art education" (1). The extent of Bashkirtseff's quote and the integration of Nochlin's uncompromisingly critical and self-evaluative method of feminist art history, however, is pursued no further in the introductory essay. In the closing essay "Female Painters at the Paris Salon," included in the catalogue's appendix, Joëlle Bolloch quotes Bashkirtseff at greater length, providing the artist's answer to the question to which she had so wearily grown accustomed: "We are asked with indulgent irony just how many great women artists there have been. There have been many, gentlemen! And it's surprising given the enormous difficulties that they have encountered" (264).

For many who are concerned with the representation of women in the arts, this is an enormously emotionally satisfying retort, and it is an evaluative tone that triumphantly resounds through the essays included in *Women Artists in Paris, 1850–1900*. It is instructive to consider, however, that this is *not* the same conclusion Nochlin reached in her essay published in *ARTnews* in 1971. "The fact of the matter is that there have been no supremely great women artists, as far as we know, although there have been many interesting and very good ones," Nochlin frankly opined: "That this should be the case is regrettable, but no amount of manipulating the historical or critical evidence will alter the situation; nor will accusations of male-chauvinist distortion of history. There *are* no women equivalents for Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Delacroix or Cézanne, Picasso or Matisse, or even, in very recent times, for de Kooning or Warhol. . . ." [1] Deeply involved in both the practice and self-reflexive critical analysis of feminist art history, Nochlin went on to co-curate the groundbreaking exhibition *Women Artists: 1550–1950* with Anne Sutherland Harris at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1976. This was followed in 2000 by the more focused exhibition *Overcoming All Obstacles: The Women of the Académie Julian* curated by Gabriel P. Weisberg at The Dahesh Museum, scholarship which provides generous foundational support for the current exhibition *Women Artists in Paris, 1850–1900*. Writing in 2017, curator Laurence Madeline does acknowledge that, "A true assessment is difficult, not least because the images we do still have provoke a certain discomfort. Many are mediocre, mawkish, or trivial works" (19). As Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock argued in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (1981), Madeline also concedes that, "when women were finally admitted to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1897 what they got was a long-coveted toy, but one that, ultimately, was worn out, broken, and no longer appealing" (13). Considering the history of gender-based exclusionism, Madeline briefly ponders, "Should this relentless struggle to enter a fortress in ruins be seen as evidence of women's conservatism, their atavistic tendency to imitate?" (14). It is a crucial question, one which Nochlin would have pursued with gusto, but which is left unexamined in the pages of *Women Artists in Paris, 1850–1900* that follow.

With a few fleeting moments of critical reflection aside, the essays in the catalogue largely default to calling out misogynist criticism, praising women for overcoming obstacles, and "lifting them to summits previously reserved for their male counterparts" (5). While acknowledging the decline of the Beaux-Arts tradition in general in relation to the advent of modernism, Madeline argues that for artists working in this conservative mode: "The proportion of interesting works is the same for the women and the men. Near equality seems to have reigned among those who followed the official avenues" (19). One has only to look at the formal and technical distance between Bashkirtseff's oil painting *Spring* of 1884 and Jules

Bastien-Lepage's oil painting *Hay Harvest* of 1877, a comparison illustrated in the catalogue, or to consider the thematic gulf between the puckish boys in Bashkirtseff's oil painting *A Meeting* of 1884 and Paul Legrand's devastating critique of the transmission of militant ideology to boys of similar age in the oil painting *In Front of Detaille's "The Dream"* of 1897 to doubt the persuasiveness of this conclusion. Madeline does concede, however, that:

Usually . . . the mistake that women artists made was to believe that what had been a male preserve was the most desirable thing. Independent, free, emancipated women such as Morisot, Cassatt, and Schjervebeck were able to create increasingly original, even brilliant works. The inequality lay rather in the realm of the exceptional, the genius. It was there that the weight of prohibitions, prejudices, and subjugation came to bear. A few years later, however, the example of the geniuses Gauguin and Cézanne would produce the genius of Paula Modersohn-Becker (19).

While the inclusion of four works by Modersohn-Becker is a stark stylistic shift from the academic and Impressionist canvases otherwise illustrated in the catalogue, the full rejection of the reigning representational modes of the nineteenth century by a woman artist at the dawn of the twentieth century is an apt conclusion to the story of the development of women's art in the first period of its full flourishing.

The catalogue's title *Women Artists in Paris, 1850–1900* is something of a misnomer and would be more accurately designated *Women Painters in Paris, 1850–1900*, as the exhibition solely focuses on paintings and the catalogue nearly exclusively focuses on the same medium. This is a particularly curious curatorial choice, as two of the three women Impressionists examined were highly active in media outside of painting—Mary Cassatt an important figure in the history of printmaking, and Marie Bracquemond credited by the critic Gustave Geffroy as a vital force in the decoration of porcelain and faience at Haviland and Company. In 1904, Clara Erskine Clement reported that Marie's uncompensated work at Haviland, where Marie's husband Félix was employed from 1873–80, was so popular that her "pieces were almost always sold from the atelier before being fired, so great was her success" (63). The curatorial choice to focus nearly exclusively on painting is further puzzling when turning to the historical record of exhibition activity by women artists at the Parisian salons. As Joëlle Bolloch reports, at the first Salon to be liberalized following the revolutionary establishment of the Second Republic in 1848, 15.8 percent of the overall artists exhibited were women, while that percentage rose to over 30 percent if examining only the category of graphic arts (denoting media ranging from watercolor and pastels to ceramics and enameling, and including miniatures and illustration) (260). Bolloch's research further concludes that in the period studied from 1848–1900, women continued to be disproportionately better represented at the annual salons in areas outside of painting, with participation by women artists in the graphic arts reaching 60 percent at times (260).

The geographic focus on Paris does not indicate a concern exclusively with French artists. Walter Benjamin famously described the city as "the capital of the nineteenth century," and Paris exerted an enormous cultural pull on artists and art lovers from around the world. The exhibition catalogue is by no means dominated by French women artists, and features an impressive roster of paintings by American, Austrian, British, Danish, Finnish, German, Norwegian, Swedish, Swiss, and Ukrainian women artists who lived, trained, and exhibited in Paris. Barred until 1897 from admission to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and generally prevented

from working from live nude models at art schools outside of Paris, many of these women studied in Paris within private studios or at private schools such as the Académie Julian and the Académie Colarossi. A surprising number of women were featured in the annual Parisian salons, by the turn of the century reaching approximately 30 percent of artists accepted for exhibition (260).

In the catalogue's opening essay, "Into the Light: Women Artists, 1850–1900," curator Laurence Madeline addresses the art historical context of the professionalization of women artists in Paris, the obstacles they faced in sexist exclusion from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and in meeting with critical reception that was often demonstrably gendered, and the strategies for success they adopted. Madeline outlines one of the goals of the catalogue as demonstrating the networks that developed amongst an international group of women artists in Paris through frequently shared living spaces, educational environments, and exhibition participation. Madeline addresses the criteria established for selecting paintings for inclusion as works that pointed to women's educational circumstances, successes at the annual Parisian salons, participation in breakaway groups such as the Impressionist exhibitions, and works demonstrating the "ability to transcend both genre and gender; the artist's desire to introduce something new into the art of the time, something that surpassed the pleasure, charm, and sentimentalism usually expected of a woman painter; and the artist's ability to sustain the long, arduous quest for a women's art" (20). Propriety dictated that women from bourgeois families not be seen unaccompanied in public or attend the more risqué bars and entertainment venues that became fodder for the modern flâneur. As Griselda Pollock has examined at length in *Vision & Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (1988), this naturally limited the subject matter of modern women painters.

Richard Kendall's essay "Women Artists and Impressionism" examines the work of Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt, and Marie Bracquemond as the three women artists who exhibited under their own names in various Impressionist exhibitions. Kendall addresses the critical reception with which these women artists were met, at times hostile, often politely indifferent, sometimes celebratory, along with the support offered by male colleagues such as Edgar Degas, who encouraged their contributions, supported their participation, and collected their work. Kendall also details the privileged class position of *la grande bourgeoisie* into which both Cassatt and Morisot were born. This familial wealth enabled Berthe Morisot to train privately alongside her sister Edma under both Camille Corot and a student of Jean-August-Dominique Ingres. Similarly, Mary Cassatt was afforded the opportunity to study at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts prior to moving to Paris to pursue advanced training with accomplished academic artists including Jean-Léon Gérôme and Charles Chaplin. This training led to early successes at the Parisian salons for both Cassatt and the Morisot sisters, and their supportive families both provided generous financial resources for their daughters to travel to further their study of European art. The background of familial wealth is a common circumstance for many of the women artists in the exhibition, but it is not exclusively the case, nor was it an indispensable requirement for success. Marie Bracquemond, who participated in only three of the Impressionist exhibitions, came from a much less privileged background.

Marie Bracquemond was also subjected to a much more difficult domestic life than was Berthe Morisot, who married the painter Eugène Manet, or Cassatt, who remained

unmarried throughout her life. In the essay “Marie Bracquemond, Impressionist Innovator: Escaping the Fury,” Jane R. Becker scrutinizes the artistic and domestic relationship of Marie Bracquemond and her temperamental and opinionated artist husband, Félix. Born into humble circumstances, Marie independently cultivated her artistic talents until a fateful encounter with Ingres, who took her under his wing. At the tender age of sixteen, Marie exhibited two drawings at the 1857 salon. She listed herself in the salon catalogue as a student of Ingres, although she would soon reject the master artist’s tutelage due to the limited faith he exhibited in the full potential of women students. Like Cassatt and the Morisot sisters, Marie Bracquemond executed copies from master paintings at the Louvre, where she first encountered Félix, who studied as a painter prior to devoting himself to printmaking, which he taught himself and Marie. While both Félix and Marie participated in Impressionist exhibitions, they differed starkly in their views of the Impressionistic mode of painting led by Claude Monet, with whom Marie was acquainted and whom she cherished for “open[ing] my eyes and mak[ing] me see better” (60). In the face of withering criticism, much from her own husband, Marie forged a progressive technique in paintings such as *Three Women with Parasols (The Three Graces)* that anticipates the application of color in Divisionism several years later. Drawing from the observations of Gustave Geffroy, who was a family friend, and the account of the Bracquemond’s son, Pierre, Becker paints a picture of a volatile home life that led Marie to almost entirely withdraw from artistic practice by 1890. We have some measure of what was lost when examining her late paintings such as *Under the Lamp*, a remarkably sophisticated and sensitive portrait of Alfred and Eugénie Sisley at the Bracquemond’s table, painted with masterful Impressionistic brushstrokes over a rough canvas that bears the mark of Paul Gauguin’s direct influence. This extraordinary painting was executed just three years before Marie’s virtual retirement from art.

In the essay “Painting the *Femme Peintre*,” Bridget Alsdorf examines the record of paintings not merely by women artists but of women artists. Alsdorf’s interest in the subject stems from the relative rarity of women artists depicted in a laudatory professional light by their male colleagues. Alsdorf points out that women were largely excluded from artistic group portraits, such as is the case in the numerous group portraits by Henri Fantin-Latour, who chose not to include his eventual wife, the painter Victoria Dubourg Fantin-Latour or other women artists in their circle. She argues that furthermore when women painters were depicted by men, they were typically portrayed either not at work or as less than “a serious artist,” as Alsdorf cites Tamar Garb’s interpretation of Edouard Manet’s 1870 portrait of Eva Gonzalez. As examples of women artists seizing control of their representation, Alsdorf points to the alternative group portraiture of and by women artists that celebrate “the bonds of friendship essential to their careers” (33) such as the marvelous painting *The Friends* by Louise Catherine Breslau, the first foreign woman to be awarded the Légion d’honneur. Alsdorf also points to the execution of self-portraits such as those that Mary Cassatt undertook on two occasions, and the intriguing cases of Rosa Bonheur practicing collaborative paintings of her image at the height of her career, with Edouard Louis Dubufe, and again nearing the conclusion of her career, with Consuelo Fould.

While Rosa Bonheur and women painters associated with the Impressionists have been studied exhaustively since the 1980s, Vibeke Waallann Hansen’s essay “Female Artists in the Nordic Countries: Training and Professionalization” is a revelation. Although not an entirely new art historical field of study, it is a subject far less familiar to English-language readers than the many books available on academic and Impressionist art in France. Hansen traces

accounts of women who studied in various art academies and private schools in their native Scandinavian countries and traveled to Paris for advanced training, during which they frequently developed close bonds. While these Scandinavian women artists met with success in the Parisian salons, were selected to represent their homelands at international expositions, and at times saw their work enter the French state's collection, Hansen reports that they were rarely elevated to positions of power and prestige in their home countries and often gave up their artistic careers after marriage. Other women, such as Marie Luplau, however, returned to Scandinavia as active artists who were devoted to increasing opportunities for aspiring women artists through founding schools and arts organizations that sought to increase opportunities for women in the face of exclusionary exhibition practices.

Hansen not only surveys a broad range of artists from Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland, but also provides the most comprehensive contextual backdrop of the larger struggle for women's rights in these countries. In Sweden Hansen examines the role of artists such as the writer Fredrika Bremer, whose 1856 novel *Hertha* helped pave the way to the Swedish parliament's recognition of the right of unmarried Swedish women over twenty-five years of age to obtain full standing under the law. Hansen recognizes clearly the distinction between artists who happen to be women and individuals who fought to advance feminist goals, both women and men. Hansen recounts the visit of Mary Wollstonecraft to Sweden, Norway, and Denmark in 1795 and the impact of John Stuart Mill's 1869 essay *The Subjection of Women*, which was translated nearly immediately into Danish, accompanied by a fiery preface from the critic and feminist Georg Brandes, who militated against the view that men and women were innately unequal in potential. Brandes was directly connected to artists at the progressive Danish artists' colony at Skagen, where the painters Anna and Michael Ancher were central figures. In addition to several paintings by Anna, the catalogue includes a touching canvas entitled *Judgement of a Day's Work*, collaboratively painted by the couple who depicted themselves as artistic equals.

Divergent attitudes of women artists towards the broader struggle for women's rights as well as varying positions regarding the desirability of participating in women's art organizations are both crucial issues that are touched upon from time to time in the catalogue's essays but not directly confronted in relation to Paris and French feminist activism in the second half of the nineteenth century. It is instructive in this regard to examine the divergent attitudes of a number of the most prominent and successful women artists included in the exhibition. Rosa Bonheur, for example, was enormously successful as a painter and was the first woman to receive the Légion d'honneur in 1865. As Alsdorf notes, Bonheur famously obtained permission from the *préfet de police* to dress in men's clothing while sketching at Parisian horse fairs and abattoirs. Less famously, however, Bonheur was remarkably gender compliant and defensive of conventional modes of dress when pressed. According to her biographer and final companion, the painter Anna Klumpke, Bonheur insisted when interviewed:

I strongly blame women who renounce their customary attire in the desire to make themselves pass for men. If I had found that trousers suited my sex, I would have completely gotten rid of my skirts, but this is not the case, nor have I ever advised my sisters of the palette to wear men's clothes in the ordinary course of life. If, then, you see me dressed as I am, it is not at all with the aim of making myself interesting, as all



too many women have tried, but simply in order to facilitate my work . . . but if you are even the slightest bit put off, I am completely prepared to put on a skirt, especially since all I have to do is to open a closet to find a whole assortment of feminine outfits.  
[2]

It is challenging to thus wholeheartedly accept Alsdorf's conclusion that "Bashkirtseff's forthright brand of feminism owed a tremendous debt to Rosa Bonheur, the matriarch and role model for all women artists from the mid-nineteenth century forward" as more than a heroicizing generalization (35). The second woman to receive the Légion d'honneur in 1894 was the painter Virginie Demont-Breton, who went on to lead the Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs (Union of Female Painters and Sculptors) from 1895–1901. The Union had been founded in 1881 by the sculptor Hélène Bertaux, following the reorganization of the Salon under the authority of the Société des Artistes Français, which included no women among the jury members or on the board of directors. Notably not all prominent women artists wished to participate. For example, Louise Abbéma, an artist famous for her paintings of, and rumored romantic relationship with, the actress Sarah Bernhardt, declined to show artwork in the Union's exhibitions, and Becker points out that Morisot, Cassatt, and Bracquemond similarly refrained from supporting women artist's associations or participating in their exhibitions. There is similarly a gulf separating the feminist painter and suffragette Marie Luplau's celebration of women and men who fought for Danish women's rights in *From the Early Days of the Women's Suffrage Movement* and Marie Bashkirtseff's description of the anti-women's liberation attitudes of fellow women painters at the Académie Julian. Writing under the pen name Orell, Bashkirtseff reported in the pages of the French feminist Hubertine Auclert's newspaper *La citoyenne*, "Just imagine, of the fifteen women at the Académie Julian, there is not one who would not laugh or cross herself at the idea of women's emancipation, some out of ignorance, others because it is not *comme il faut* [proper]" (14). It is contextually noteworthy that France was decades behind Scandinavian countries in extending universal suffrage, and little information is provided in the catalogue's essays to set the experiences and commitments of women artists in Paris within the context of the larger struggle for women's rights in France.

In the opening essay Madeline celebrates the perceived progress that has been made for women in the arts since 1850. While Madeline assesses that "we have seen female artists conquer, one after another, formerly male-dominated bastions: they are now routinely represented in international contemporary art exhibitions and biennials, and are the beneficiaries of major commissions and sales," Joëlle Bolloch's statistical analysis paints a more sober picture of relative progress (1). Bolloch traces the proportional representation of women artists in the Parisian salons from 1848 to 1900 as averaging 19 percent, with salons near the end of the nineteenth century seeing women as approximately 30 percent of included artists. While that percentage is far from equitable, it is extremely illuminating when Bolloch compares it to the percentage of women artists included in the 2015 Foire Internationale d'Art Contemporain (International Contemporary Art Fair) in Paris, in which women represented a meager 23.7 percent of exhibited artists (264).

Building upon nearly half a century of feminist art historical scholarship on modern art, *Women Artists in Paris, 1850–1900* as an exhibition offered the opportunity to assess the quality and variety of paintings produced during the first flourishing of relatively widespread activity by trained women artists. The art historical approach is one of



“expanding the canon,” and the catalogue both points to further areas for scholarly examination as well as pauses to mourn the sheer volume of work by women artists that has fallen beyond the reach of historians. Madeline notes in the catalogue’s opening essay the startling statistic that “of the sixty-four paintings that the state purchased from women painters at the Salon between 1869 and 1900, there are identifiable photographs of only six. In all the other cases, the location of the painting is unknown, or the work is in poor condition, or the work has not been photographed since it was exhibited in one of the various Salons of the late nineteenth century” (19). In the excellent and thorough artist biographies included in the catalogue’s appendix, Joëlle Bolloch also notes areas for further research, including the intriguing Swiss artist Annie Hopf, who painted the unusual canvas *Autopsy (Professor Poirier, Paris)* and was romantically linked to the first woman to become a surgeon in Germany, Elisabeth Winterhalter, as well as the Manchester Society of Women Painters, with which Annie Swynnerton, the first woman artist to be elected to the Royal Academy of Arts, was affiliated.

As a permanent record of the exhibition, *Women Artists in Paris, 1850–1900* provides valuable documentation of the wide variety of paintings produced by an international group of women who lived and worked in Paris during the formative years of modernism. While the catalogue’s essays provide rich art historical context, there are missed opportunities to examine the complex ways in which the experiences and strategies of these women artists played out within the context of the larger struggle for women’s rights in France. The artworks discussed are largely held up as emblems of victory over adversity, and the dominant art historical methodology employed is one that some feminists critique as merely adding women and stirring. Work remains to be undertaken in developing a critical framework to assess the artworks assembled in this exhibition, an approach that would extend Linda Nochlin’s resolve not to undertake special pleading on behalf of women artists or to insulate their art from aesthetic and ideological critique. As the legacy of Nochlin’s scholarship powerfully demonstrates, however, compelling critical analysis is always necessarily grounded in extensive knowledge of the broad historical context of the issues examined, and *Women Artists in Paris, 1850–1900* offers much to scholars in laying out the art historical record of a crucial epoch in the history of women artists.

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## Notes

[1] Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” republished in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 149, 150.

[2] Anna Klumpke, *Rosa Bonheur: Sa vie, son œuvre* (Paris: Flammarion, 1908), 311, as cited in Nochlin, 173–74.