

# **MAKING HER MARK**

## **A History of Women Artists in Europe, 1400–1800**

“Why have there been no great women artists?”

Art historian Linda Nochlin posed this provocative question in 1971 to foreground her critique of the sexist structures that excluded women from art history. Over 50 years later, *Making Her Mark* explores what happens when we dismantle the gendered hierarchy of Western visual art altogether. Furthermore, how do we address the women whose creative labour has gone unacknowledged?

With over 230 works made by European women between 1400 and 1800, this exhibition highlights the contributions of both celebrated and anonymous women makers. Paintings, drawings, and sculptures by women artists who maintained successful careers are presented alongside works by unsung makers, including illuminated manuscripts, private devotional objects, ceramics, textiles, and furniture.

This diverse presentation of women's creativity aims to reframe our understanding of how women in pre-modern Europe made their marks on the history of art.

## **Inside the Exhibition**

### **Multisensory Moments**

This exhibition includes two multisensory experiences intended to conjure a different time and place—specifically pre-modern Europe (defined here as 1400 to 1800).

Look out for these symbols as you move through the space:

### **Scent Stations**

Scent has the power to recall memories, evoke moods, and even improve learning. In collaboration with Dr. Melanie McBride—Toronto-based researcher and founder of the Aroma Inquiry Lab at Toronto Metropolitan University—we have designed four scent stations to accompany works and themes in the exhibition.

The scents—some containing up to 20 individual ingredients—are a combination of absolutes (highly concentrated liquid essences of organic materials) and notes (like “earth” or “damp stone”) composed from isolated molecules. Given the volume of natural materials, these scents will change and evolve over time, offering a different experience to visitors over the course of the exhibition.

For more information on Dr. McBride's practice and the scents she made for *Making Her Mark*, visit the exhibition webpage:

## **Tactile Labels**

The artists and makers in this exhibition used a unique range of materials. Like scent, touch can evoke memories, improve learning, and help us understand the skill required to work with unusual materials. There are four tactile labels located throughout the exhibition.

## **POWERFUL PATRONS**

Before the 1800s, the majority of celebrated women artists in Europe worked for two influential entities: noble courts and the Catholic Church. Several artists featured in this section achieved success in their lifetimes under these powerful patrons.

Within these spheres, women such as Sofonisba Anguissola, Josefa Ayala, and Suzanne de Court were taught by established practitioners—often members of their own family. Patrons commissioned altarpieces, religious objects, paintings, and sculptures that depicted subject matter ranging from ruling-class sitters to historical and religious figures.

Also on view here are luxury items—such as tapestry, lace, silver, and ceramics—that would frequently appear in the homes of the wealthy. Women made these pieces and often led the workshops in which they were produced. Together, these works reveal how women harnessed power through creation.

## **PRIVATE DEVOTION**

The artists in this section made objects for personal devotion. These objects—including prints, small paintings, and sculptural works like an intimately scaled cross by Spanish artist María Josefa Sánchez—reflected the lives and beliefs of their owners.

Catholicism was entrenched within much of European society during this period. The objects on view convey religious subjects meant to appeal to women. Maternal imagery, like the Virgin Mary and Child, functioned as models for devout women who were expected to raise children. Mainly found in moderately wealthy households, these religious objects would have been an integral part of daily life.

## **PERSONAL WORLDS**

In the pre-modern period, artisan-class women and ladies of means could enjoy rich intellectual and creative networks within and beyond the home. This section features work made by both professionals and amateurs, including painting, calligraphy, knife-cut paperwork, engraving, and silverwork.

These works convey themes of family, friendship, education, and self-promotion, and were often created for acquaintances. Although modest in scale, these objects speak volumes about the ways women engaged with artistic and material creativity as a means for self-expression and community building.

## **ART IN THE CLOISTER**

Women who committed themselves to cloistered life—nuns and non-nuns alike—spent their days within the walls of their convents. These hubs of communal worship hummed with artistic creativity and a spirit of collaboration. When women joined religious communities, in their youth or as widows, they brought with them their expertise in needlework, drawing, lacemaking, embroidery, and paper-rolling. Using affordable materials like paper or straw, they made small objects for personal use or for devotional use by their community.

Some cloistered women managed or trained in professional workshops, thereby contributing knowledge and skills in engraving, painting, and sculpting. To support their orders, they fulfilled commissions and sold high-quality works, such as elaborate engravings and painstakingly rendered reliquaries.



## THE DOMESTIC SPHERE

Intricately embroidered bedroom hangings, needlework samplers, and an elaborate rolled paper tea caddy: while these and other works on display here were made for domestic use, they also highlight the artistry of their makers. The gruelling demands of running a household and raising children necessitated creative outlets that could easily be set aside, like needlework, embroidery, and paper-rolling. Many of these objects are small—desk- or lap-sized—and reflect the limited physical space most women had at their disposal.

Art historians have traditionally dismissed objects made in the home as separate from the realm of art, banishing them to the category of “anonymous craft.” While minimal biographical evidence exists for many of these women makers, details about their experiences can be reclaimed through the objects they made. These objects are meticulously rendered works that reward close-looking.

## DOMESTIC LUXURY

Contemporary studies show that women who support other women are more successful. In pre-modern Europe, elite women unconsciously maintained this principle, purchasing works from artisan-class women. Supporting women makers resulted in a home decorated with high-quality goods. The furnishings, paintings, and objects on view in this gallery symbolize this luxury.

Paintings of expensive delicacies, such as Josefa Ayala's *Still Life with Watermelon and Pears*, reflect the wealth of the patron class. Intricate, high-end lace made by professional women lacemakers—who typically earned low incomes—graced the homes and bodies of wealthy women and their servants. Women who ran silversmith workshops made objects for tables or desks, while prints by women embellished walls or filled albums.

## **SILENT LABOUR**

Why are there so many unknown makers in this exhibition?

Before the 1800s, most women did not have official access to art education and professional opportunities. Many were excluded due to gender, class, or race. Yet, women worked at every level of artistic production before 1800—sourcing and preparing materials, managing workshops, and marketing products—in addition to their expected responsibilities as household managers and mothers. The combination of familial demands and high mortality rates surrounding childbirth led to smaller artistic outputs—a key factor in women artists' historical anonymity. Notably, others continued working after birthing as many as a dozen children.

While their identities are lost today, these women were often known as makers during their lifetimes. In fact, many of the displayed objects can be attributed to more than one single artist. Throughout the exhibition, consider how women—individually or collectively—may have contributed to artistic production.

## WOMEN OF THE GARDEN

In Europe, the garden has long been a symbol of fertility, beauty, and purity—qualities that pre-modern society expected women to embody. Art theorists of the era encouraged women artists to focus on subjects they deemed “socially acceptable,” like flowers. Although men also worked professionally in this genre, flower painting is often cast into the domain of the amateur woman painter.

From the 1500s to the 1700s, women also engaged with the garden as a source of scientific inspiration, producing illustrations for botanical treatises or pharmaceutical instructional texts. Others applied this knowledge to their meticulous paintings of floral still lifes. Dutch artist Maria van Oosterwijck’s *Still Life*, depicting a vase erupting with colourful blooms, is one such example. These works appealed to a growing class of art collectors.

## NATURAL EMPIRE

Plants, birds, insects, and shells—natural specimens obtained through the enslavement of people and extractive colonialist practices—increasingly appeared in European homes and institutional collections by the 1700s. Women studied them and produced precise imagery that appeared in scientific texts and art.

Some women had the means and connections to travel to and study in colonial outposts throughout Africa, the Americas, and Asia. While access helped establish women's involvement in scientific fields like entomology, botany, and zoology, the complex entanglement of colonial conquest, exploration, and collecting underscored these advancements.

Europeans viewed colonial subjects as “exotic”—see Sarah Stone's vibrant painting of a macaw or Dame Ann Hamilton's watercolour of a scarlet runner bean on view in this gallery—and translated them into decoration. Objects like the gold enamel snuffbox, decorated by Mademoiselle Duplessis, held goods like tobacco, an item that originated in the Americas.

Together, these works reflect the colonial impulse to document, classify, and commodify.

## **DRAWING THE BODY**

Life drawing—sketching live, nude models—has long been at the centre of European art education. For centuries, women were officially banned from studying live models alongside their male counterparts. Yet, they found creative ways to bypass these formal constraints.

Women born into artistic families—like British artist Mary Moser, whose exacting chalk drawing of a nude is on view here—could learn from family members or observe studio sessions. For women without connections, copying images from prints allowed them to practice. Women also used their family members as well as their own bodies as models to perfect their depictions of the human form.

## **THE ART OF SCIENCE**

For most of the pre-modern era, women could not receive a formal education in science, contributing to the fallacy that they did not work in scientific fields. They in fact worked in astronomy, obstetrics, chemistry, physiology, veterinary medicine, and natural philosophy, among other disciplines. Like many women today, they found ways to sidestep societal restrictions and actively participated in scientific communities as investigators, translators, and illustrators.

From Maria Clara Eimmart's drawings of celestial bodies to Barbe Michel Adam Fessard's engraving of horse anatomy, the works in this section reveal how women artists engaged with scientific phenomena beyond botany.



## WIDOWS

Hard labour and toxic chemicals underscored artistic production in this era, leaving many wives of craftsmen and artisans widowed—often at a young age. Since women were generally prohibited from registering businesses in their own name, tragedy became a catalyst for change. A widow could continue the workshop's production following her husband's death, typically with more freedom. By the early 1700s, widows ran 10 to 20 per cent of households and businesses in London, England.

Scholars have traditionally dismissed the contributions of widow managers, but research shows that they were savvy businesswomen. They introduced new design sources, increased staff, and expanded distribution of their products through strategic partnerships and advertising. Some, like the Veuve (widow) Perrin, tied their identities to their product, establishing name brands that promoted their status as widows.

## **ENTREPRENEURIAL WOMEN**

The arts were foundational to female entrepreneurship in pre-modern Europe. For centuries, women and girls worked in nearly every stage of the process to produce textiles, printed books and images, ceramics, sculpture, paintings, and more. The majority of women makers did not receive recognition for their work within family workshops, orphanages, or sites of forced labour. However, today we are fortunate to know the names of a significant number of women who managed workshops, manufactories, and other businesses across Europe.

Several women featured in this section developed independent careers, such as textile designer Anna Maria Garthwaite. Her drawings for silk brocade, and the gown made from fabric she designed, exemplify the style of the period. Others like pastellist Rosalba Carriera and needlepainter Mary Linwood created internationally recognized luxury products.

## THE GRAND TOUR

From the 1600s to the early 1800s, the custom of “The Grand Tour” led wealthy, young Europeans to travel across the continent in pursuit of improved education. Primarily from England and northern Europe, these elite visitors toured ancient and contemporary artistic marvels in key cities. While most of these travellers were men, as seen in Katharine Read’s painting *British Gentlemen in Rome*, the Tour exposed travelling women artists to historic sites and art collections, connecting them to patrons.

Italy was considered the prime destination on the circuit, specifically because of its recently excavated ancient Roman ruins and collections of ancient Greek and Roman sculpture. This led to a renewed interest in Greco-Roman subject matter throughout the 1700s, known as Neoclassicism. Women artists like Angelica Kauffmann embraced this shift in style, while others like Laura Piranesi capitalized on the niche artistic souvenir market created by Grand Tourists.

## **COLONIALISM AND GLOBAL TRADE**

Tea, coffee, sugar, and tobacco—common and relatively inexpensive products today—were costly in pre-modern Europe. Europeans established global trade networks to bring these goods home: tea from China, coffee from Ethiopia and countries in the former Ottoman Empire, and tobacco from the Americas. Europeans brought sugar plants to South America and the Caribbean for better climate conditions.

While this exhibition focuses on the art and labour of European women between 1400 and 1800, the silent labour of Indigenous and enslaved people reverberates through many of these objects. European women made and designed the luxurious objects on view here, like coffee and tea services. These items held goods that enslaved labourers, often women, were forced to extract and harvest. The domestic rituals that became embedded in European society, like afternoon tea or sniffing tobacco, bear traces of colonial violence.

## **PATHWAYS TO PROFESSIONALISM**

By the mid-1700s, the male-dominated art world gradually widened, revealing professional opportunities for women artists. Women no longer had to rely on royal or church patronage to achieve success. The growing number of art dealers, auctions, state-sponsored exhibitions (Salons), and commissions provided women artists with recognition as well as income to support themselves and their families.

Private gatherings hosted and attended by influential figures in major European cities also provided networking opportunities. The gender restrictions that formerly shut women out of academia and official exhibitions began to relax, allowing more women to display their work at Salons. In addition, women artists began to train other women in an official capacity. The close, almost familial relationships that instructors formed with their students created a legacy of women mentors and teachers, one that reverberates throughout this gallery.

## **FASHIONING THE WOMAN ARTIST**

In her self-portrait, Judith Leyster painted herself wielding a paintbrush in one hand and gripping several more in the other while dressed in fine clothing—an impractical ensemble for the messiness of artmaking. In her chalk drawing, Anne Gueret depicted an artist (possibly herself) holding a drawing tool, with a portfolio on her lap. These and other works in this section reflect the desire of accomplished women artists to be seen as intellectuals and professionals.

In depicting themselves or others, women artists played with art historical tropes, including the female muse and women as allegorical sources of inspiration, or as models subject to the male gaze. These transformations resulted in dynamic images that emphasized their agency as artists.