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Abstract

A review of Paris A. Spies-Gans, *A Revolution on Canvas: The Rise of Women Artists in Britain and France, 1760-1830* by Gabrielle Stecher

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Paris A. Spies-Gans. *A Revolution on Canvas: The Rise of Women Artists in Britain and France, 1760-1830*. Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale University Press, 2022. 384 pp. ISBN: 9781913107291.

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Paris Spies-Gans has positioned *A Revolution on Canvas: The Rise of Women Artists in Britain and France, 1760-1830* to be an indispensable volume for art historians and scholars of the long-eighteenth century. In this data-driven study, Spies-Gans challenges assumptions that professional women artists during this period were few and far between while articulating how their active participation in the art market reflected their broader engagement with and determination of cultures in flux. Ambitious in its scope, she uses an array of statistics, presented across more than two dozen charts and tables, to support her revisionist narrative of the generic undertakings and professional decision-making of some 1,300 British and French women artists. In addition to artist writings, both published and personal, and the artworks themselves, much of Spies-Gans' data is collated from exhibition catalogues and reviews, artist and patron financial records, and both Academic and state records and reports. The result of this study is a clearer vision of the realities faced and shaped by women artists in the age of revolution, one that centralizes women's artistic production and commercialization as a "neglected revolution" in and of itself (2). Even more crucially, detailed, statistical analysis allows Spies-Gans to highlight the consistency with which women consciously identified themselves as professionals, rather than amateurs, as they exhibited their work in London and Paris and, therefore, achieved new levels of artistic, and therefore cultural, authority. In this way, Spies-Gans has revolutionized how we should understand the rise of women artists, not as a few lucky anomalies but as a collective, commercial, and professional enterprise.

By revealing the extent to which women artists presented themselves as professionals in the late eighteenth century, Spies-Gans departs from and corrects previous scholarship that has suggested women artists failed to professionalize on a large scale before the late nineteenth century due, at least in part, to their exclusion from Academic schools (3, 27). Additionally, she seeks to revise the notion that French artists in particular were set back by revolutionary and reactionary turbulence. As Spies-Gans illuminates, women created and maintained a strong professional presence across Academic and non-Academic venues, including the Parisian Salon which opened in 1791 to all artists regardless of gender and affiliation, national or Academic. As a whole, this volume is clearly envisioned as a necessary update to Linda Nochlin's landmark essay "Why Have

There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1971). Spies-Gans articulates her contribution to the field as an expansion of "the long-accepted narrative of women's pedagogical prospects first articulated in 1971" by Nochlin (58). Where Nochlin believed that women's lack of access to formal academic study restricted their ability to successfully paint in the highest of genres, such as narrative or history painting, Spies-Gans proves that it was possible for women, on a large scale, to participate in these genres through other forms of training, just as rigorous and professionally-minded as that of their male contemporaries (60).

Across the volume's five chapters, Spies-Gans repeatedly stresses the necessity of reorienting our understanding of how and why British and French women pursued professional artistry despite institutional blockades. The volume is organized such that the reader moves gently back and forth between London and Paris; the cultural climate of both cities is woven together in a careful and balanced manner. This is not an easy feat, particularly in such a statistically ambitious project. Only two of the five chapters focus on one of the cities; yet these two chapters mirror each other in their shared consideration of subject and genre choices in London and Paris exhibitions, respectively. The first chapter sets the stage for studying how women developed their professional presence by surveying the data that outlines women's participation in public exhibitions in both cities between 1760 and 1830. It was during these years that "despite differences in city, nation, and venues, the exhibition activity of female artists on each side of the Channel rose in tandem" (50). Though the number of women artists exhibiting in London doubled their Parisian counterparts, it was the French artists who showed a greater quantity of pieces. In both cases, their presence marked a consistent rise in the professionalization of women artists who were intent upon showcasing their artistic excellence while promoting their studio and commercial endeavors.

In chapter two, Spies-Gans traces the educational pursuits of women artists, correcting the notion that familial tutelage was less serious and more amateur than formal, and therefore more traditional, institutional study. In the case of British women artists, this is one of the moments in which the author exercises the most revisionist power over Nochlin: the seeming informality of home-based training is rectified through the author's examination of "the profoundly commercial bent of this instruction" (60). In France, women from artistic families were becoming the exception, rather than the rule; at least 183 women were formally trained in the atelier of male artists, including the likes of David (65). Spies-Gans, then, corrects many of our longstanding beliefs about the relationships between womanhood, education, and professionalization. Despite women's age or marital status, they pursued their art as a career and/or a way to provide for their families, and they

were not barred or discouraged based on their exclusion from official Academic life-drawing classes (109).

After establishing how and why women pursued careers as artists, in chapters three and four, Spies-Gans traces patterns in women's selection of genre and subject matter. Women artists did not limit themselves to exhibiting flowers, still lifes, or interior scenes; instead, Spies-Gans emphasizes, perhaps at the expense of our truly understanding of the presence and value of other genres, that women artists of both nations were producing and exhibiting prestige pictures-- narrative and portrait paintings-- just as their nation's own male Academicians were. In Britain, while women artists such as Angelica Kauffman "set the terms for the production of a narrative art by a generation of women," the women who followed "foreground[ed] female figures and highlight[ed] contemporary refrains," addressing both cultural and political questions in their historical, literary, allegorical, etc. compositions (126, 167). After 1792, however, British women artists increasingly produced portraits, a genre that could be infused with narrative symbolism and commercially exploited, all the while being positioned as Britain's "native and creative art" (155). In Paris, women artists also ambitiously exhibited portraits and historical and contemporary scenes, but even more important were their portraits of female artists: works that fashioned how women artists were to be understood as both public professionals and *citoyennes*. Finally, in chapter five, the author discusses how women negotiated the commercial sphere and forged paths into the mainstream art market before pivoting to a brief conclusion in which she contemplates how our historical narratives have been shaped by notions of "greatness" and "genius." What Spies-Gans ultimately argues is that the work of revising and amending the stories we tell about women artists has the power to clarify "current perceptions of the Revolutionary era" just as it "reshapes and refines the histories of art, gender, and the modern self" (299).

While this book does not have space to flesh out in immense detail the lives and analyze in full the thousands of the women and artworks who appear, most frequently, as data points, she successfully tells the stories (however abbreviated) of a select few. Each chapter begins with moments in the lives of particular artists, from Clara Pope, Marie-Gabrielle Capet, and Maria Cosway to Marie-Nicole Dumont and Anne Forbes. These are the moments in which the author succeeds at staging and capturing the dynamism of their professional careers. Take, for instance, Spies-Gans' graceful movement from recalling Dumont's first exhibition—one in which the artist explicitly defines and narrativizes her self-image as a mother-painter, a creator twice over—into a discussion of how women's genre and subject choices reflected the same levels of prestige that their

male counterparts sought after. Ultimately, the author provides the seeds that we have long awaited so that we may now go off and conduct fuller, more individualized studies of more of the women, works, and genres aggregated here. Her methodological approach can and should be applied to more diverse contexts; what might a similar approach to collecting and synthesizing data say about race and professionalization, for instance, in Europe and abroad? Her intent to “restore women to this narrative” has only just begun (53). In this way, Spies-Gans’ contribution is a massive gift to researchers and students alike; that we will only understand the true significance of in time.

Works Cited

Noclin, Linda. “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” *ARTnews*, Jan. 1971, pp. 22-39; 67-71.