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Women Artists Win!

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Bathers, Bodies, Beauty: The Visceral Eye

by Linda Nochlin

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WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution

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In 1971, Linda Nochlin, an assistant professor of art history at Vassar, published an essay asking “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”¹ Her question was meant to provoke, and it did, although she tried to suggest all along that it not be taken entirely seriously. Six years later, together with another art historian, Ann Sutherland Harris, she mounted an exhibition in several US venues featuring women artists from the Renaissance to the present.

The undisputed revelation of “Women Artists, 1550–1950”² was a seventeenth-century Italian painter named Artemisia Gentileschi, whose imposing—but until then little known—*Susanna and the Elders* (1610), painted before she had turned twenty, showed outstanding skill. More pointedly, however, this painting of a terrified young woman, surprised at her bath by two old lechers, evoked the dramatic start of the artist’s own professional life. Brought up in her father’s workshop in Rome—Orazio Gentileschi, a contemporary of Caravaggio, ranked among the most competent and versatile European painters of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—the seventeen-year-old Artemisia caught the perpetually roving eye of his collaborator Agostino Tassi.

Orazio Gentileschi had engaged Tassi, a potbellied rogue who specialized in painting fantastic classical architectures, to teach his talented daughter the finer points of perspective. Tassi, however, had other pursuits in mind. Before joining Gentileschi’s studio, he had hired an assassin to eliminate his wife. Confident that he was a widower, he first tried to seduce his new pupil, and then resorted to force. Gentileschi pressed Tassi to marry his daughter (which may have been Tassi’s plan all along); but it quickly emerged that the wife still existed—her assassin had simply pocketed the money.

To save Artemisia’s social standing (and then only barely), the Gentileschi, father and daughter, had only one real alternative: to charge Tassi with rape in a Roman court. In the course of proceedings whose transcripts are still preserved in Rome’s State Archive, Artemisia endured a medical examination to establish the state of her virginity and then the ordeal of testifying under torture. She was subjected to the *sibille*, the “Sibyls” (for their

oracular powers), strings threaded between her fingers and then progressively tightened, a dreadful prospect for a woman who intended to live by the work of her hands. It is unlikely that the *sibille* were applied for long, or with more than symbolic force: her testimony of Tassi's misdeeds is a horrific tale of stalking and rape, and the court found in Artemisia's favor. The rapist was sentenced to eight months in prison and a fine (it is not clear that he ever complied with either); his victim quickly married another painter and moved away to Florence. *Susanna and the Elders* was painted during the period of Tassi's assaults, and it has been irresistibly tempting, then and now, to connect the biblical story with events in Artemisia's own life (not least because the dirty old men who spied on Susanna were found out and executed).

The 1977 show also included female Old Masters of established reputation: Renaissance painters like the Cremonese aristocrat Sophonisba Anguissola and the Bolognese Lavinia Fontana; eighteenth-century professionals like the pastel portraitist Rosalba Carriera, whose Venetian studio was once as essential a stop on the Grand Tour as that of her male colleague Pompeo Batoni in Rome, and the Swiss-born Angelika Kauffmann, represented by a self-portrait that showed the dark-haired, porcelain-skinned beauty making a definitive choice between painting and music. Kauffmann's specialty would be the manly preserve of classical history painting.

Beauty also probably played a certain part in establishing the reputations of the enigmatic Russian flapper Tamara de Lempicka (not included in "Women Artists") and Argentine-born Leonor Fini (described in a recent Italian catalog, noted below, as *bellissima*—in his time, Edmund Wilson agreed). Although it may have been more of a grab bag than an encyclopedic retrospective, "Women Artists" nonetheless succeeded in achieving its fundamental aim, presenting women artists as fully competent, then and now, even in the restrictive sense of "artist" as synonymous with "easel painter in the modern Western tradition."

Artemisia Gentileschi's *Susanna and the Elders*—now in the Schönborn family collection in Schloss Weissenstein in Bavaria—was perhaps the most technically proficient painting she ever produced, vividly confirming that her father's well-run workshop stimulated and reinforced the competence of everyone involved in it. The virtuosity of the Old Masters was shaped by a system that took them in as children and sustained them ever afterward in a collective endeavor—such notorious misanthropes as Michelangelo and Caravaggio still spent their lives in the constant company of assistants. Girls were largely excluded from this world—Artemisia Gentileschi's experience suggests why—but this does not mean that girls lacked artistic talent, or, necessarily, that this talent was inevitably destined to be thwarted by an accident of birth.

Painting may have been a largely male preserve, but it was never exclusively so. Like Orazio Gentileschi, Tintoretto taught his daughter Marietta how to paint alongside his sons; so did Lavinia Fontana's successful father, Prospero, and Fede Galizia's father, the miniaturist Nunzio. Sophonisba Anguissola was only the most talented among six painting sisters. And when Artemisia Gentileschi, the most ambitious of them all, established her own independent workshops in Florence, Rome, and Naples, she used her father's studio as her model; the architectural painter Viviano Codazzi collaborated with her much as Agostino Tassi had done with Orazio.

There is a fundamental problem, however, with restricting artistry to painting, either in the Renaissance or now. In the first place, Renaissance artists were also goldsmiths, sculptors, architects, military engineers, city planners, and designers of the sugar sculptures called “triumphs”—*trionfi*. Secondly, there were (and are) other preserves of wit and invention that have belonged predominantly to women, with their own traditions of apprenticeship and proficiency. These traditions have been relegated for several centuries to the status of craft rather than art, and the objects they have produced often wear out more quickly than painting, sculpture, and architecture. In their own way, however, they have been just as essential, as artistic, as art itself.

A fully equipped Baroque altar, for example, only began with the arts as we usually define them—its architecture, its sculptural decoration, and its painted altarpiece. In full glory, it was also lit by lamps of silver or bronze, by candles in ornate metallic or enamel candlesticks. The stone surface of its table would be covered by satin or velvet, intricately embroidered in silk or metallic thread, topped by cloths of white linen lined in lace. Along the tops and bases of the pilasters in most Baroque churches, there are still rows of small studs where elaborate embroidered hangings can be fastened on festival days, and these fittings are by no means gone: the Chiesa Nuova in Rome is resplendent in red and white every March 16, Santa Maria Maggiore in Florence has a gorgeous set of blue-and-white appliquéd festival hangings, and Palermo provides a veritable treasury of liturgical textiles.

This needlework and lace, meticulous in its perfection and complex in its design, is largely the work of women, and it requires the same coordination of hand and eye that Raphael needed to make a painting. Indeed, every woman who could was expected to sew, and few girls or women were ever seen with idle hands. Mary Queen of Scots whiled away her imprisonment with her “needyll,” and the calm, gradual rhythm of creation was surely the best sedative available to her. If we have no Leonardos and Michelangelos from this embroidered world, it is partly because so many towels and handkerchiefs have worn to rags, and partly because we have not been looking for greatness in their humble beauty. In the meantime, we do have that remarkable document the Bayeux Tapestry, a historical chronicle embroidered by Norman noblewomen. Embroidery was not always simply a way for La Bohème to eke out her living in a Parisian garret.

In the thirty years since Linda Nochlin wrote an article that really asked “Why are there no great women painters in the modern European workshop tradition?,” what were once known as the “minor” arts have changed status to become the “decorative arts.” This shift is no small matter, for many of these items originally cost more than the works of what has been considered “high” art. In many ways the most interesting answers to Nochlin’s question about women artists are those that emerge from setting the work of women painters and sculptors within a broader range of women’s—or human—handiwork.

In effect, this broader interpretation of the artistic impulse is now put forward routinely in exhibitions, not only in contemporary shows where “Fiber Arts” have garnered recognition in their own right, but also in historical exhibitions like the recent “Venice and the Islamic World, 828–1797,” which traveled to Paris, New York, and the Ducal Palace in Venice. There Iranian carpets, Turkish damask, and Italian embroidery kept company with Murano glass, Bellini paintings, and Ottoman weaponry. Women’s hands were no less involved than men’s

in creating the aesthetic environment in which people lived.³

Clearly, moreover, women's handiwork had immense importance in earlier societies. Archaeologists now generally assume that the first potters, like the first farmers, may well have been women. In ancient Greece, where a single word, *techne*, described every kind of handwork from painting to weaving to blacksmithing, a goddess, Athena, ran the show, except for the smithy where the gods ordered up their armor (and perhaps the shoes for Pegasus and Apollo's horses of the sun): that dark, dirty realm belonged to lame Hephaistos. The earliest architectural remnants in Italy, of Iron Age houses (2,600 years ago), show that the single most important article of furniture, the central idea behind the plan of these dwellings, was a great standing loom, the pride of the *materfamilias*, the mother of the family. Its rows of threads, in Latin the *ordo*, constituted the original meaning of the word "order"; thanks to increasingly sophisticated methods of archaeological investigation and conservation, we are able now to see just what those ancient fabrics looked like, and they are amazing. It no longer sounds implausible when ancient Greeks write about the intricate textiles made by legendary weavers like Penelope and Arachne, or about historical weavers, like the women of Athens who created a new dress, or *peplos*, for the statue of Athena Polias on the Acropolis. The rows and registers of figures on these fabrics were, in their own way, as carefully composed and worked out as a play by Sophocles or a frieze by Phidias. In a domestic setting, a mother's loom was also as likely to produce a complex interwoven design as it was a rough bolt of homespun. The proverbial Roman woman's epitaph, *Domi mansit, lanam fecit* ("She stayed at home and made wool"), praises a creator with the same verb, *facere*, that artists used.⁴

It is therefore discouraging that two recent shows at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York must propose elevating these traditional crafts to the status of art by adding suggestive adjectives—*Extreme Embroidery*, *Radical Lace*, *Subversive Knitting*; by opening the field to men; and by smacking down the women who "made wool" to less personal fanfare.⁵ Brutally, the museum's Web site exclaims:

Radical reformers in the world of knitting and lace making have overthrown the status quo from the inside out. In the space of ten years, knitting has emerged from the "loving hands at home" hobbyist's den into museums and galleries worldwide. Knitting clubs meet in cities from San Francisco to Stockholm, while interactive knitting "performances" have been held in as seemingly unlikely places as the London Underground.⁶

Implicitly, a proper critical sensibility must disparage those arts that once literally underpinned social life, as if clothing families and bringing beauty into homes and places of worship were merely the work of "loving hands at home" hobbyists. The text continues:

Artist Sabrina Gschwandtner turned the traditional knitting circle into a participatory event, in which Museum visitors can use knitting to engage in a dialogue about war.

Are we really to suppose that the women who knitted socks for the soldiers in the Civil War, or World War I, or World War II (or, for that matter, Penelope, weaving and unweaving as her husband fought for ten years at Troy) were waiting for some twenty-first-century artist to tell

them that they could “use knitting to engage in a dialogue about war”? Only today, when handwork is tidily and cheaply outsourced to women in China!

In the rest of the world, the legendary artistry of Penelope and the archaeologically attested ingenuity of Iron Age matrons still flourishes in artful craft traditions, as the Norwegian artist and entrepreneur Annemor Sundbø discovered when in 1983 she bought an old factory in Oslo that reduced castoff woolen knits to “shoddy,” the combed fiber that more frugal generations used as stuffing for mattresses and comforters. The shoddy factory came complete with its own rag pile, but rather than simply feed the rags to her shredding machine, Sundbø first performed her own archaeological investigation, eventually saving some fifteen hundred pieces as something between a museum and a knitted archive.

The oldest knitwork Sundbø discovered in her late-twentieth-century rag pile was a pair of seventeenth-century mittens, discarded alongside heavily patched longjohns, black-and-white fishermen’s sweaters, and decades of stylish pullovers and jackets adapted, often with clever variations, from patterns published in women’s magazines that ranged from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.

Rather than simply catalog her repertory, Sundbø has written several books describing how these knitted garments reflect four hundred years of changing Norwegian society.⁷ At the same time, in order to understand how these various pieces were made, she has recreated many of her castoffs: a remarkable combination of historical and sociological research undertaken with genuine respect for all the “loving hands at home” who preserved the people of Norway from the elements with resourcefulness and style. Meanwhile her factory, Torridal Tweed, continues to recycle its piles of wool shoddy as if Norway were still a land of frugal fishermen rather than one of the wealthiest nations in the world.

At about the same time that Annemor Sundbø took possession of her rag pile, at the opposite extreme of Europe, Consiglia Azzopardi had begun to take a similarly pointed interest in the lacemakers of Malta.⁸ Here the story has a definite and surprisingly recent beginning: in 1846, a parish priest on the Maltese island of Gozo handed a narrow ribbon of Genoese bobbin lace to two local sisters, who learned its complicated technique and passed the skill on to their friends.

Within two decades, Maltese lace had become an important cottage industry, with its own identifying motifs, international distribution (including Queen Victoria’s court), and a transforming role in the lives of the women who were able to turn this newly acquired skill into a source of income. While writing about lace as a key to recent Maltese social history, Azzopardi has actively promoted the tradition’s survival by teaching its techniques, combining, like Annemor Sundbø, ingenious research with perpetuation of a manual skill having plausible claims to the status of art. (One can now take a degree in Lace Studies at the University of Malta.)

American quilting provides a similarly complex social picture, in its fabrics, its designs, its historical connections with particular groups, from African slaves to Pennsylvania Dutch, and now with its lively presence, as with so many handicrafts, on the Internet, a medium that blithely levels any distinction between high and low, major and minor arts, amateurs and professionals. The Internet reveals, as plainly as any other source, that the question about the

place of women in art is really a question about the place of women in the artistic marketplace.

Yet here, too, in the world of art narrowly conceived, women have consistently stood in the avant-garde, beginning with the small number of women who were part of the avant-garde movement that first resolved to distinguish art from handicraft, the *maestri* of the Italian Renaissance. Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, first published in 1550 and revised in 1568, did much to single out these three pursuits as more intellectually challenging than all the other forms of handicraft, and their practitioners as divinely inspired geniuses rather than humble manual workers. Michelangelo, with his heroic struggles and his foul temper (not to mention his Tuscan origins), stood as Vasari's paragon, with results that are still with us today: there are many more books written on the agonies and the ecstasies of Michelangelo, Caravaggio, and Leonardo than on their more equable colleagues Raphael, Titian, Bernini, and Rubens.

Yet despite the preconceptions and the practical obstacles that the Italian workshop system posed for women artists, they do appear among Vasari's biographies of the "most excellent," grouped into the chapter he devotes to Properzia de' Rossi. She is the single artist to whom he gives an honorific title: "Madonna Properzia de' Rossi"; but then her temper seems to have rivaled Michelangelo's. Among her specialties were miniature sculptures for the Medici court: a hundred faces carved into a cherry pit, a proper employment, Vasari notes, for her delicate feminine hands (one wonders what he would have made of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American expatriate Edmonia Lewis, part African-American, part Native American, hewing marble in Rome with her hammer and chisel).

There are perceptible differences in the work of some women painters. Sophonisba Anguissola and Lavinia Fontana pay knowing and meticulous attention to all the other ways in which women plied their hands, painting all the intricate knots in lace collars, ribbons, cuffs, embroidered tablecloths—textures that Titian or Velázquez will evoke instead with an abstract pattern of brushstrokes. Yet some male painters take the same pains to record knots and stitches; as Vasari noted, the Florentine artist Antonio del Pollaiuolo, best known now as a painter and sculptor, was also an expert embroiderer.

Artemisia Gentileschi herself belonged to another avant-garde wave within Italian art: in the aftermath of the reforming Council of Trent, Catholic painters in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries sought new ways to reinforce the religious impact of their work, and found a promising solution in Caravaggio, with his heightened effects of light and dark and the searing clarity of his biblical narratives.

Gentileschi also made no secret of her ambition; she was the first woman admitted to the exclusive Florentine Accademia del Disegno, and took every possible advantage of this professional distinction. Rather than working in miniature like Properzia de' Rossi or Lavinia Fontana, she worked, like Caravaggio and her own father, on big canvases with big themes. She bore four children (and probably buried three when they were very young); if her later work looks tired, there were good reasons for that fatigue.

Women Impressionists joined Manet, Degas, and the other *Réfusés* in challenging the formal Salons of Paris. "I hated conventional art," declared the American expatriate Mary Cassatt in

accepting Manet's invitation to join the Salon des Refusés in 1877. "I was beginning to live."⁹ Indeed, women took a significant part in the Impressionist secession, and not only in that elusive role of "muse." When Degas spotted a Cassatt portrait in the 1874 Salon he recognized a kindred soul: "This is someone who feels as I do."¹⁰ Inevitably, however, these women painters faced the age-old limitations: demanding families and male-run markets.

The exhibition "Women Impressionists," now on view in Frankfurt and traveling to San Francisco, shows the different ways in which four women painters balanced their professional and domestic lives, all with reasonable success, none to perfection. Mary Cassatt, for all her paintings of mothers and children, stayed single all her life; she knew what marriage might do to her career. Berthe Morisot, who married Manet's brother Eugène, became something of a queen bee, jealous of the female colleagues she saw as rivals, notably the voluptuous Eva Gonzalés, whose artistic success was plagued by self-doubt and cut short by an embolism that may have been the consequence of childbirth. Marie Bracquemond, who studied with Ingres, turned from easel painting to painting ceramic dishes for her loutish but virile Impressionist husband, and then gave up painting altogether, in her own words, "for the sake of family harmony."

None of these painters enjoyed quite the same notoriety as their male colleagues and close friends Degas, Manet, and Renoir, but then three of the four spent much of their potential working time at home, in a sphere that the fourth of these women Impressionists, Mary Cassatt, chronicled with close attention as she stayed resolutely clear of it. By painting so many women and babies who were not the Madonna and Christ Child, Cassatt probably limited her reputation, then and now, despite her pioneering efforts to work in the style of Japanese prints, her commanding intellect, and the bold brushwork that contemporaries found anything but feminine. Her infants, unlike the baby Jesus, who concentrates his infant energies on saving the world, are pure flesh, wet with bath water, naked as jaybirds, suggestive of baby appetites and baby smells. Yet what artistic vision could be more utterly extreme, subversive, radical, or transgressive than the one that sees us as we were when our consciousness was limited, as Aristophanes put it more than 2,500 years ago, to "*mama, papa, kakka*"?

The ultra-moderns of the Italian Futurist movement had their own strong female contingent, a counterpoint to the more traditional emphasis of fascism. Benedetta Cappa, who married the Futurists' founder, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, used only her first name to keep her artistic independence of him.¹¹

In 1981, shortly after "Women Artists" made its grand tour of the US, Germaine Greer defined women's careers in art since the Renaissance as *The Obstacle Race*.¹² Recent exhibitions in the US and Europe offer a chance to assess whether Greer's phrase still applies. The traveling show called "WACK!" originated in Los Angeles to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the city's 1977 inauguration of "Women Artists"; it has now settled in Queens at the P.S. 1 Art Center before proceeding on to Vancouver. The Milanese exhibition "L'Arte delle Donne dal Rinascimento al Surrealismo" opened in December, ringing in the European Union's Year of Equal Opportunity with an endorsement from Milan's mayor, Letizia Moratti.¹³

Despite their strict chronological limits, both shows, in their own distinct ways, could only be sprawling affairs: women artists are no less various than the rest of the human population. Properzia de' Rossi's sculpted fruit pits (shown in Milan) might be compared with the micro-knits, less than one hundredth life size, that Althea Merback exhibited in "Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting," but they probably have more in common with the microscopically detailed lathe-turned ivories that Marcus Heiden produced for the Medici in the seventeenth century; both the fruit pits and the ivories, like the Medici cameo collection, express that family's love, shared by male and female alike, for all things tiny and exquisite.¹⁴

The "WACK!" catalog shows the room-size crocheted web of Faith Wilding's *Crocheted Environment* of 1972 as well as Judy Chicago's ceramic, embroidered, and oft-attended *Dinner Party*, a triangular table set for an imaginary banquet of thirty-nine women luminaries (Virginia Woolf, Georgia O'Keeffe), each with her embroidered section of the long formal tablecloth and her own distinctive plate. Neither the ceramic work nor the embroidery is of the highest quality, but the point of the piece was always its guest list, a list to spark a truly grand dinner party of the imagination. After wandering for years, *The Dinner Party* found a permanent home at the Brooklyn Museum just as "WACK!" opened.

It is far easier, of course, to mount an exhibition on art by women than it is to mount an exhibition of specifically feminist art. The subtitle to "WACK!," "Art and the Feminist Revolution," has been carefully chosen to allow its curators to include women artists who explicitly rejected any identification with the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, like the Belgian filmmaker Lili Dujourie, or who learned the hard way, like the African-American artists Howardena Pindell and Faith Ringgold, that most of its members were already daughters of privilege: predominantly white and well educated.

As the "WACK!" catalog acknowledges by its inclusive choice of artists, it was probably the sheer presence of women, rather than their personal credos, that really delivered a whack to the world of art. Ultimately, any successful movement gathers a following, and most pioneers make reluctant followers, no matter the cause. "WACK!" chiefly demonstrates that in the twentieth century, as before, women were present in every aspect of art's avant-garde, from abstraction to realism, minimalism, performance art, body art, film, video, fiber arts, not to mention the ancient art of painting. In retrospect, the quality of the work produced in these years ranges from sublime—as in the Florentine artist Ketty La Rocca's intensely introspective exploration of words through paint, print, photography, and X-ray—to dreadful, but the general spirit is infectiously exuberant in its eagerness to conquer the world, not just the art world, and set it to rights.

Feminist criticism of art, unlike the art itself, has settled into definite patterns, especially in the US, where its most telling phrase is "those of us"—women who write to belong to the club rather than to communicate. The lucid clarity of German scholar Ingrid Pfeiffer's essay in *Women Impressionists* shows that such hermetic, academic feminist writing is largely passé in Europe.

Linda Nochlin's *Bathers, Bodies, Beauty*, the record of her 2004 Norton lectures at Harvard, stands somewhere in between. By then she had been an influential historian and critic of modern art for forty years, a front-line feminist, and a guiding light for younger women

scholars, many of whom she helped on their way. Her lectures have a certain retrospective feel, involving subjects with which their writer has been concerned for decades, like contemporary realist painting and the French Impressionists, and one subject, old age, that the passage of decades imposes of itself. They also record uncertainty: a mind still grappling restlessly and self-consciously with the mysteries of art and its history.

Her legacy is not simple. The first lecture opens with a partial repentance for having subjected Renoir's *Great Bathers* to the type of feminist attack that quickly became predictable to the point of caricature: obligatory objections to "the male gaze," tortuous phrases like "disempowering idealization of the female body" followed by invocation of (choose one) Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" or, as here, Michel Foucault's chapter (in *Les Mots et les Choses*) on Velázquez's *Las Meninas*—if men must have the last word, please give me that canny survivor Plato.

As Nochlin begins to suggest in *Bathers, Bodies, Beauty* (and occasionally shows by example, however inadvertent), academic feminism has often become more of a trap than a liberation, imposing its own Newspeak, its own "theory," its own hierophants, and its own prejudices. Nochlin, disarmingly, admits having come at last to a new understanding of Renoir brought on, as she says, by "long consideration and a too tight belt in Paris": perhaps his generous nudes appealed to female viewers, too, offering corseted nineteenth-century women

a certain feminine fantasy of bodily liberation... the pictorial possibility of unconstricted movement, of simply breathing deeply, of not having their breasts pushed up under their chins and having their ribs and lungs encased in whalebone.

In the end, though, she cannot absolve Renoir entirely for having painted all those beauties. These Norton lectures may bear the subtitle "The Visceral Eye," but in fact Nochlin's own eye remains firmly set in her head: it is an acute, verbal, intellectual eye that, by her own admission, recoils instinctively from the big, buxom women of Renoir and Courbet. These lectures enthusiastically commend less visually appealing works almost as if they will be good for us, cod-liver oil for the eyes—but twentieth-century figurative painters Alice Neel, Sylvia Sleigh, and Philip Pearlstein simply do not paint as beautifully as Courbet or Renoir.

Often Nochlin's intellectual vision seems to shrink back from the most sensual qualities of art itself, beginning with the sheer pleasure of looking: there are intensities to a Renoir purple, a Courbet green, a Bonnard pastel (and Andy Warhol's Day-Glo!) that provide their own reward, no matter what the subject of the picture may be. It is a pleasure that she almost seems to deny on moral principle. Of a Degas chalk drawing, *Woman Bathing in a Shallow Tub*, where a red-headed woman bends forward in a ravishing contrast of silver-white, deep orange-red, and turquoise, she says:

Degas, on the contrary, emphasized the grotesque, even abject aspect of the naked body. Instead of putting the spectator at a seemingly distance, we are thrust intrusively into the pictorial space of modesty and privacy... the female [bather] is totally preoccupied with her own bodily needs, unaware of the viewer, or much of anything else.

What could be "grotesque, even abject" about that radiant red hair?

On the most basic level, Renoir, too, appeals to people through his deep, joyous color. Like Rubens before him and Matisse after, he positively luxuriated in paint. To judge from the way he put oil on canvas, he seems to have loved everything he saw, not only women, but also boats, cats, the sea, the sky, leafy trees, grass, men in straw hats. And he created many of them at the price of terrible physical pain. Here is how another writer on contemporary art, Jed Perl, writes about this great, and greatly beloved, Impressionist:

Both Renoir and Dufy did their greatest painting while suffering from crippling arthritis, and the pure joy of the strokes of paint that they managed amid the most urgent physical disabilities could not but be an act of resistance, the visual bliss of the painting being a rebellion against physical trouble.¹⁵

Isn't this crazy courage what life and art—the arts—are really all about?

Letters

Who Embroidered the Bayeux Tapestry? July 17, 2008

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- 1 “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” *Art News*, Vol. 69, No. 9 (January 1971), reprinted in her book *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (Harper and Row, 1988). ↵
 - 2 “Women Artists, 1550–1950,” Los Angeles County Museum of Art, December 21, 1976–March 8, 1977; University Art Museum, University of Texas, Austin, April 12–June 12, 1977; Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, July 14–September 4, 1977; and the Brooklyn Museum of Art, October 8–November 27, 1977. The catalog of the exhibition was published by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art/Random House, 1976. ↵
 - 3 “Venice and the Islamic World, 828–1797,” reviewed in these pages by William Dalrymple, July 19, 2007. Exhibition at the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, October 2, 2006–February 18, 2007; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, March 27, 2007–July 8, 2007; and the Palazzo Ducale, Venice, July 28–November 25, 2007. The catalog of the exhibition was edited by Stefano Carboni, with texts by Sylvia Auld, Michael Barry, Rosa Barovier Mentasti, Giampiero Bellingeri, Barbara H. Berrie, Stefano Carboni, Giovanni Curatola, Walter B. Denny, Maria Vittoria Fontana, Ernst J. Grube, Jean-Claude Hocquet, Deborah Howard, Susan La Niece, Julian Raby, Adriana Rizzo, Sandra Sardjono, Catarina Schmidt Arcangeli, and Marco Verità (Metropolitan Museum of Art/Yale University Press, 2007). ↵
 - 4 Cited in J.C. von Orelli, *Inscriptionum latinarum selectarum amplissima collectio ad illustrandam Romanae Antiquitatis disciplinam accommodata, ac magnarum collectionum supplementum complura emendationesque exhibens* (Zurich, 1828), Vol. 2, p. 4848 as “*domum servavit, lanam fecit*,” but often paraphrased. ↵
 - 5 “Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting,” January 25–June 17, 2007, and “Pricked: Extreme Embroidery,” November 8, 2007–April 27, 2008. ↵
 - 6 See “Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting” at www.madmuseum.org. ↵
 - 7 Annemor Sundbø, *Setesdal Sweaters: The History of the Norwegian Lice Pattern*, translated by Amy Lightfoot (Kristiansand: Torridal Tweed, 2001); *Invisible Threads in Knitting*, translated by Carol Huebscher Rhoades (Kristiansand: Torridal Tweed, 2007); *Kvardagsstrik: Kulturskatter frå fillehaugen* (Everyday Knitting: Treasures from a Ragpile) (Oslo: Norske Samlaget, 1994). ↵
 - 8 Consiglia Azzopardi, *Gozo Lace: An Introduction to Lace Making in the Maltese Islands* (Gozo, Malta: C. Azzopardi, 1992). ↵
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 - 10 Cited by Griselda Pollock in “The Touch and the Gaze,” p. 156. ↵
 - 11 *Benedetta. Fughe e ritorni Presenze futuriste in Sicilia*, edited by Anna Maria Ruta. Catalog of an exhibition at the Palazzo delle Poste, Palermo, November 27, 1998–January 24, 1999 (Naples: Electa Napoli, 1998; Mirella Bentivoglio and Francesca Zocoli, *Women Artists of Futurism: Almost Lost to History* (Midmarch Art Press, 1997). ↵
 - 12 Germaine Greer, *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979). ↵
 - 13 “L’Arte delle Donne: dal Rinascimento al Surrealismo,” Palazzo Reale, Milan, December 5, 2007–March 9, 2008. Catalog edited by Vittorio Sgarbi (Milan: Federico Motta, 2007). ↵

14 For a truly remarkable article on lathes and seventeenth-century European nobility, see Joseph Connors, “Ars Tornandi: Baroque Architecture and the Lathe,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 53, (1990). ↩

15 Jed Perl, *New Art City: Manhattan at Mid-Century* (Knopf, 2005), p. 274. ↩

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