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Ways of Perceiving (ADAD4019)

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Lecturer: Gwenillian Beynon

Illustration. BA

Question 4.

You have the opportunity to negotiate an essay topic based on your illustration interests.
This needs to be negotiated with your tutor.

In this essay I will be discussing why there are so few women included or recognised in the History of art. In 2022, Katy Hessel an art historian, curator, broadcaster, and author conducted a YouGov survey to test the knowledge of the British public into women artists. It was quite simple, to name as many women artists as they could, from any race and time in the history of art. Two thousand people responded, and the results were quite surprising, 30% could not name more than three women and 83% of 18 – 24-year-olds could not even name three. More than half said they had never even been taught about any women artists in school. (Hessel 2022).

There are so few women included in Art Galleries and yet statistics show that within GCSE, A-level, Undergraduate and Post Graduate Art and Design courses they are very heavily populated by women [_freelandsfoundation.com](https://freelandsfoundation.com)

Our national art galleries in the United Kingdom are much devoid of women artists. The following statistics are taken from the most recent research by the Freelands Foundation.

The Tate in 2019 – 2020 acquired 481 pieces of work, and only 155 (35%) were by women.

The National Gallery was shockingly worse, they have a total number of 2,632 pieces of artwork in their collection only 29 (1.01%) are by women – and that was 17 women artists.

This was a drop of 0.5% in comparison to the previous year.

One wonders if this has an impact on our society- if we have such an unbalanced representation from the world of art. Katy Hessel stated that,

Artists pinpoint moments of history through a uniquely expressive medium and allow us to make sense of a time. If we aren't seeing art by a wide range of people, we aren't really seeing society, history, or culture as a whole.

It is an important thing to consider, do we have we an accurate picture of world history, considering women artists, overall, have been ignored or forgotten?

In this essay we will be looking at Kathe Kollwitz, a female artist who through her medium gave us an important glimpse into the world within which she lived, opening our eyes to the realities of those times. We will then discuss the possible reasons why there are so few women in the history of Art, does it matter and is it getting better?

Kathe Kollwitz (1867 – 1945). was born into a deeply religious and socialist family in Prussia in 1867. As the years passed, she saw the effects of industrialisation in the society around her, saw the hunger, poverty and pain that was experienced by the working class. She moved to Berlin and married her husband Karl, who was a doctor and she often accompanied him and saw incredible depravations and tragedies that were caused by the society of that time. Through a variety of medium, from simple pencil and line drawing, to etchings, woodblock prints and even sculpture her mission was to portray what she saw (Rix). She wrote, “It is my duty to voice the sufferings of men, the never-ending sufferings heaped mountain high. This is my task, but it is not an easy one to fulfil.” (Mahler, 2016). She wanted the sick, the grieving, the struggling, the downtrodden and vulnerable to have a voice. This she did with much tenderness and compassion throughout her whole life.



Kollwitz, K. (1909) *Unemployment*. Etching

This etching shows a father in despair, sitting beside the bed containing the sick and dying mother and three children.

The longer [I examine the situation] the more I understand the typical plight of working-class families. Once the man starts drinking or becomes ill and unemployed, it always leads to the same results. He either hangs round his family's neck like a millstone [...] or he takes his own life.

(Kollwitz, 1908)

She and her husband were pacifists and were devastated when their youngest son, 18-year-old Peter wanted to enlist and fight in World War One. They reluctantly agreed and tragically not long after Peter was killed in action in Flanders Field (Rix p55).

Sadly, Kollwitz never really came to terms with the loss of Peter and her artwork reflected that in her series of artwork about War and Death. (Rix)



Kollwitz, K (1903) *Woman with Dead Child*. Etching

Woman with Dead Child (Kollwitz) was created in 1903, and she and her young then 7-year-old son Peter and herself were the models. As they posed in front of a mirror It filled her with such remorse at the time, that she cried and experienced much anguish and in later years stated that she wondered whether it was a premonition of the tragedy to come. It struck home with the German nation, (Martin. P221)

“This composition was to become a profound symbol of collective grief in Germany.”

(Martin. P.221)

Kollwitz wanted to make a difference, to make the world aware of the pain and agony caused by often things not of the individuals own making.

If we did not have access to Kollwitz's work, we would have missed a major source of information from that period, particularly from a part of the world that we would at the time have considered to be the 'enemy' during the world wars. It could be assumed that the Germans were doing better than the British and the Allies, but we can see that the German people suffered just as much. They were just as frightened, just as damaged. A woman, particularly a mother's perspective of life and experience during troubled times can be quite different from a man.

So, we return to the original question as to why there are such gaps of women's contributions in the history of art? We previously saw from the statistics from the Freeland Foundation that in all art and design courses ranging from GCSE right up to Post Graduate Degrees, they are highly populated with women and yet somewhere along that path from qualifications to career and success, the many women artists either do not make it, or else are never truly recognised. This is so apparent by the fact so few women's art, even today are rarely displayed in our galleries. In times gone by it appeared to be down to the whole attitude towards women. They had to know their place in society, and it was not in universities. We also know, simply by opening books and research that there are many, many wonderful and incredibly talented women artists out there, and have been throughout all ages. Many of these women were pioneers in their time. But they have often disappeared into obscurity. There are some theories, Kirsty Meehan an Archivist at the National Gallery of Scotland stated that,

There's a historical effacement of their work, so what they were producing wasn't worthy of keeping, and looking after, and having that legacy, so it doesn't survive in the art collections, because over generations, people have thought that it didn't have that value.

(Meehan. 2021)

If this is the case, then in history no matter what talent a woman artist had, most would not have been recognised by the simple fact that they were a woman. As the generations pass, they would be forgotten. It is sad.

Lucy Askew, the Chief Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, National Galleries of Scotland (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKMtZAfaLi8&t=129s>) said, that many talented women have been side-lined by their famous husbands/partners. She also suggests that museums and galleries must make tough choices when choosing an exhibition. Do they go for a familiar name (usually a man's) that will be of interest to the public, and bring a lot of footfall, or take the risk and choose a talented but lesser-known woman, who, will not initially catch the public's attention. It becomes a cycle. Even for women curators who want to see change, they still must consider what is going to bring the public into their gallery. It is a tough decision.

It is debatable whether the situation is much improved in our current era, we live in a more accepting and all-embracing age, so you would certainly expect it to be, but amazingly it is not the case. Women have the same access now to art training as men, women are now

being employed in key positions in art and design courses and within art galleries, on that front there is progress, but looking at the statistics from the Freeland Foundation our art galleries are still almost entirely filled with male artwork and very few women artists have become household names. We clearly have an exceptionally long way to go. Without the art contributions from all levels of society we are sadly missing so much historical, societal, and cultural information. Imagine if we had more artists like Kathe Kollwitz that want to change the world's understanding. We need more women, we need more women of colour, we need more people from every area of our society to tell us their stories and consequently create more understanding, tolerance, and compassion. As the world's awareness of the inequality increases, hopefully we will see the changes and progress start to happen and what a momentous day that will be.

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