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## Where are the Women? A Feminist Field Guide to the Museum

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**Where are the Women?  
A Feminist Field Guide to the Museum**

Taylor Weaver

Art 644: Design Studio Exhibition Research II

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## Introduction

*The Guerrilla Girls asked, “How can you really tell the story of a culture when you don’t include all the voices within the culture? Otherwise, it’s just the history, and the story, of power.”<sup>1</sup>*

Linda Nochlin’s seminal 1971 essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” was at the fore of the great battle cries of many feminist scholars that drew attention to the limitation’s that female artist’s face in the art world. Women have systematically been left out of the art historical narrative while their male counterparts remain at the forefront. When you think about the canon of “master” painters, which artists come to mind? Michelangelo, Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci, perhaps Caterina van Hemessen? The first three names are globally known, but the latter, the Flemish Renaissance Painter van Hemessen, is not a common name mentioned in art history books or in classrooms. This is because women’s contributions to art have been overlooked and are championed by only a select few women, think—Frida Kahlo, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Mary Cassatt—who are the token women most often referenced in our art history books. This lack of female representation in art history and in museums creates a skewed idea of history and creates a specific biased and gendered narrative of women’s role in art.

Nochlin, as well as many feminist scholars point out the lack of opportunity for women in art as well as challenges in historiography. I would like to expand on this and focus on how the theory of the male gaze directly contributes to the male-centric narratives of art history and positions women to be objects in art rather than participants.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, I am also debunking the myth

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<sup>1</sup> “The Guerrilla Girls – Biography and Legacy,” The Art Story, Accessed August 20, 2020, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/guerrilla-girls/life-and-legacy/>.

<sup>2</sup> Roberta Sassatelli, “Interview with Laura Mulvey: Gender, Gaze and Technology in Film Culture,” *Theory Culture & Society*, September, 2011.

that there are no great women artists for any given time-period and by including their contributions into the narrative.

In truth, there are many women that are very prominently represented in museums. They are largely nude and have been represented by male artists. While I do not argue that nudity in paintings should not exist, I do insist that museum goers become more aware of what these sexualized bodies represent—gendered power. It is the male gaze that controls the narrative, which is, that women are not equal contributors in society. Their agency is reduced to erotic or supporting objects. If female artists were represented equally to men, this would not be a problem. Contrary to popular exhibitions and literature promoted by these institutions, women have made equally significant contributions to art and culture which will be illuminated in this research.

The ultimate goal of this design project seeks to not only reveal this bias, but to correct it through the design of a field guide. By using this field guide, museum patrons will gain an understanding of how the male gaze is represented in sculpture and painting from classicism to late modernism in art history. In the guide, I will use examples to trace the visual beginnings of the male gaze and how it functioned through different art movements. This guide will also provide a framework to understanding women's systematic erasure from art history and supply an alternative timeline including women's contributions to the visual arts.

### **The Male Gaze**

In order to understand this problem of the male gaze in the context of the Euro-American Museum one must understand the history of the term and how it's related to the history of art.

The concept of the male gaze was introduced by scholar and filmmaker Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* in which she explored the problematic representations of women in cinema. From this emerged the concept of the male gaze in which Mulvey argues is a social construct derived from the ideals of the patriarchy to assign structures of power.<sup>1</sup>

According to Mulvey, the male gaze is the act of depicting women from a masculine heterosexual perspective that presents women as sexual objects for male pleasure. Mulvey argues that films are constructed with the idea that the viewer is heterosexual and male and that women are frequently sexualized to fit into the ideals of male pleasure and desire. She states that females become the passive object of looking and the male observer/artist is the active subject for which she is put on display.<sup>3</sup>

Since Mulvey's revelation, many feminist scholars have applied this theory to the visual arts. In 1989, Carol Duncan wrote the article, *The MoMA's Hot Mamas*, which dissects the damaging psyche of prestigious art institutions and outlines how the museum space is a "ritual of male transcendence" at the expense of the female body.<sup>4</sup> Duncan recounts how museum spaces and modern art are crowded with images mostly of women painted by male artists. She states that these images are of female bodies that are reclining, descending, and contorted into unnatural poses and situations. Most often these women being depicted are highly recognizable in society and are at the bottom of the social scale. They are tarts, muses, prostitutes, and whores to be used

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<sup>3</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema," 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Carol Duncan, "The MoMA's Hot Mamas," *Art Journal* 48, No.2 (1989), 171.

up by the artist.<sup>5</sup> As a result of sexualizing female bodies and how they are displayed, the museum becomes a predominately masculine social space.

Using Mulvey and Duncan's interpretations of the Male Gaze, as well as Nochlin's challenge to female representation in art history, I argue that both culturally and institutionally women's contributions have been underrepresented in Euro-American museums because of the biased structures designed largely by white men. Most people do not recognize this bias of women being represented in these patriarchal fashions, as Mulvey says, as object rather than subject. Consequently, most art museums are inherently biased toward male artists and perspectives and their collections and exhibitions exclude female perspectives. This is particularly problematic in that these institutions promote this distorted view to the masses with the institutional stamp of approval—official historical and contemporary narrative.

Mulvey and Duncan's interpretations of the Male Gaze helps us to understand how the female figure has been consumed throughout history. It is used in every major art movement to satisfy the desires of men both as makers and as consumers of visual art. Male artists create idealized pictures of women to suit their very needs. As muses, women's bodies become inspiring passive objects. Their bodies are instruments used to break traditions, start artistic movements, and showcase male genius.

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<sup>5</sup> Duncan, "The MoMA's Hot Mamas," 172.

## U.S. Museums: A History of the Traditions of the Patriarchy

Museums play an important role in how we view art and culture. When people visit museums, they expect to see collections of the highest standard of art and a reflection of culture and society. In her book *Culture Strike*, curator, Laura Raicovich points out that what people don't realize is that museums maintain an incredibly narrow and biased point of view. They glaringly exclude social groups that are often marginalized, and instead they speak to society's structures of power.<sup>6</sup> Despite the decades of being targeted by feminist critique, male artists are still the most represented and the most praised contributors to U.S. art museums. A study in 2019 by Chad Topaz showed that only 13% of female artists were represented in major US museums.<sup>7</sup> When it comes down to it, these institutions are telling a story of history that primarily focuses on biased politics and social structures that exclude those that do not fit neatly into certain ideologies. In order to be able to address the inequities of these prestigious institutions, it is important to dismantle the notion that they are neutral spaces and to have a brief understanding of the history of the founding of U.S. museums.

The root of current biases has been passed down from the early eighteenth century when museums were established in Europe during the Enlightenment and early European colonialism.<sup>8</sup> Museums were a model of colonization and were spaces for society's most elite, only available

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<sup>6</sup> Laura Raicovich, *Culture Strike, Art and Museums in an Age of Protest* (London: Verso, 2021), 1.

<sup>7</sup> PLOS, "First large-scale study' illuminates artist diversity in US museums," Eureka Alert, March 20, 2019, Accessed August 3, 2020, [https://www.eurekaalert.org/pub\\_releases/2019-03/p-ls031319.php](https://www.eurekaalert.org/pub_releases/2019-03/p-ls031319.php).

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Rodini, "A Brief History of the Art Museum," Khan Academy, accessed January 2, 2021, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/approaches-to-art-history/tools-for-understanding-museums>.



to patrons with “proper letters of presentation”—which were mostly wealthy men.<sup>9</sup> In the sixteenth century, *Wunderkammern*, or cabinets of wonder, were the closest examples of museums in early modern Europe. They were private collections belonging to societies most elite and were used to deepen people’s knowledge through objects. Some *Wunderkammern* were literal cabinets containing cupboards and drawers filled with objects. Others were rooms filled with displays of artifacts, all held by private collectors. *Wunderkammern* reflected the intellectual attitudes of the day and held objects that were highly valued by society.<sup>10</sup>

Continuing with the theme of elitist collections, in 1748 in the United States, the Charleston Library Society was formed in Charleston, South Carolina and consisted of a group of “gentlemen” that were responsible for the founding of the first museum in the United States in 1773. This museum was founded on materials and artifacts such as books and pamphlets that the organization collected and wanted to disseminate to educate the public.<sup>11</sup> In 1762 a public advertisement for The Charleston Library stated, “The gross ignorance of the naked Indian must raise our pity (so) it is our duty as men, our interest as members of a community, to take every step, pursue every method in our power, to prevent our descendants from sinking into a similar situation.”<sup>12</sup> This institution reflected the ideals of colonizers to provide meaning for the “New World.” It was the ideals of these “founding fathers” that formed the basis of what our museums collected and valued.

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Rodini, “A Brief History of the Art Museum,” Khan Academy, accessed January 2, 2021, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/approaches-to-art-history/tools-for-understanding-museums>.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Rodini, “A Brief History of the Art Museum,” Khan Academy, accessed January 2, 2021, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/approaches-to-art-history/tools-for-understanding-museums>.

<sup>11</sup> Raicovich, 26.

<sup>12</sup> Raicovich, 26.

Raicovich notes that like the Charleston Library Society, museums in the U.S. were founded by collectors who were often not experts, but enthusiasts of art and objects.<sup>13</sup> A pattern that continues today; wealthy, and powerful individuals whose private collections become public museums.<sup>14</sup> Charles Wilson Peale for example, is credited with being the first American museum director. His museum began in his home before expanding to sites in Baltimore and New York in 1786.<sup>15</sup> Other examples of these private collections becoming public are the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Morgan Library, and the Frick Collection.<sup>16</sup>

The essay, “The Gloom of the Museum,” written in 1917 by John Cotton Dana, describes the failures of these early twentieth century museums. He points out that the many private collections that entered museums were donated or assembled by wealthy men. These were personal collections of objects that were “not only raced and classed, but also came to represent what was “important” or even “excellent” in art and culture.”<sup>17</sup> The collections didn’t hold objects that were outside of these men’s personal desires. Bodies of work with which they were not familiar with or did not like were never included.<sup>18</sup>

One main motivation for those running the museums was to obtain artwork that—in their opinion—was the best representation of culture. In that pursuit, one of the largest blind spots

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<sup>13</sup> Raicovich, 28.

<sup>14</sup> Raicovich, 29.

<sup>15</sup> Edward P. Alexander and Mary Alexander, *Museums in Motion; An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums* (United Kingdom: AltaMira Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>16</sup> Raicovich, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Raicovich, 30.

<sup>18</sup> Raicovich, 30.

were works by women, minorities, and untrained artists.<sup>19</sup> Because of this, these collections and museums that hold them were never neutral. The history of art which museums celebrate demonstrates a patriarchal society that puts men in power and reduces the contribution of everyone else.<sup>20</sup>

### **Modern Museum Practice**

While we may have come a long way from eighteenth and nineteenth century museums' model, we may even recognize more women as artists, these spaces are still not neutral and there are still many gender inequalities yet to be reconciled. In art museums, only fourteen percent of exhibitions in the last decade feature female artists.<sup>21</sup> In her article *Feminist Curatorial Practices and Strategies since the 1970s*, Katy Deepwell explains that it was not until the 1960s that work by women began making its presence in museum collections, and not until the 1980s that they were afforded solo exhibitions, which is still mostly reserved for the great 'masters.'<sup>22</sup> These institutions appear to be doing little to correct this gross inequality.

The dominant storytellers in art are men. It is their artworks that set the tone of the museum experience—artworks of female nudes from every art movement. The Guerrilla Girls asked in their famous 1989 poster, “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? Less than

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<sup>19</sup> “The Changing social functions of art museums,” Khan Academy, accessed September 19, 2021, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/approaches-to-art-history/tools-for-understanding-museums/museums-in-history/a/the-changing-social-functions-of-art-museums>.

<sup>20</sup> Raicovich, 30.

<sup>21</sup> National Museum of Women in the Arts, “The Numbers Don’t Lie,” Accessed August 3, 2020, <https://nmwa.org/support/advocacy/get-facts/>.

<sup>22</sup> Katy Deepwell, 67.

5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.”<sup>23</sup>

Which urges us to analyze how women are represented in artwork. Surely that number from 32 years ago has grown significantly, but unfortunately, it has not. In 2019, a study by the Public Library of Science revealed that 87% of artists displayed in American collections were male artists.<sup>24</sup>

Carol Duncan explains, that in the great canon of art, artists often make their biggest statements or showcase their newest stylistic movements with the female nude.<sup>25</sup> This can be seen in works such as: Picasso’s *Le Femmes d’Alger*, Kirchner’s street walkers, Duchamp’s *Nude Descending Staircase*, de Kooning’s *Woman I*, and that list goes on. Duncan asks, why are these images of sexualized bodies given such high praise and why doesn’t history account for this infatuation with them?<sup>26</sup> Museums institutionalize the male gaze because of what and who they choose to exhibit. This creates a masculine space in which the viewer must interpret work from the perspective of the male creator and viewer.

The presence of the male gaze in art museums is hard to ignore once you have been introduced to the theory. By understanding these patriarchal cycles of social structure and the male gaze, viewers may begin to see why there is a lack of female artists present in museums. Museum director, Charles Esche correctly states: “The museum is built on a lie. It’s built on a universality that comes from a highly specific identity that is white, male, heterosexual, ableist, highly

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<sup>23</sup> “Guerrilla Girls: How Women get Maximum Art Exposure in Art Museums,” Guerrilla Girls, accessed January 2021, <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/naked-through-the-ages>.

<sup>24</sup> National Museum of Women in the Arts, “The Numbers Don’t Lie,” Accessed August 3, 2020, <https://nmwa.org/support/advocacy/get-facts/>.

<sup>25</sup> Duncan, “The MoMA’s Hot Mamas,” 171.

<sup>26</sup> Duncan, “The MoMA’s Hot Mamas,” 172.

educated, wealthy, and so on.”<sup>27</sup> The claim of universality for museum patrons can be made, but who does the term actually describe? Men.

Women are misrepresented as objects of desire instead of contributors to art and society. The problem is that the only acceptable paintings of sexuality are unrealistic fantasies painted by men which then marginalize women artists. The male gaze allows men to be in control and to hold the power within museum spaces. So why are these beloved paintings problematic when they objectify women in art? Because the persistent sexualization of female bodies creates a primarily masculine space for women to exist in. The male gaze plays an important part in enforcing patriarchal structures that elevate the white male ‘genius’ at the expense of women. This results in an imbalanced power structure. As a result, the cannon of art history contains many degrading depictions of women and excludes their contributions.

### **Examples**

By using this field guide, readers will gain an understanding of how the male gaze has been perpetuated through history by way of examples of sculpture and paintings spanning from classicism to late modernism. These examples trace the visual beginnings of the male gaze and how it functioned throughout art history.

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<sup>27</sup> Raicovich, 25.



Figure 1 Aphrodite of Cnidos (Roman copy after a Greek original by Praxiteles, c. 350 BC) Museo Pio Clementino, Rome

**Ancient Greek and Roman Sculpture: Praxiteles; *Aphrodite of Cnidos* C. 350 B.C.E. and its afterlife.**

The male-idealized female nude can be traced back to 350 BCE when Greek Sculptor Praxiteles created the nude sculpture, *Aphrodite of Cnidos*. Female nudity was not a cultural norm of this time, and *Aphrodite of Cnidos* is said to be the first nude sculpture of the female body.<sup>28</sup>

Aphrodite had been previously represented in art, but never in the nude. *Aphrodite of Cnidos* is

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<sup>28</sup> Rosemary Barrow and Michael Silk, *Gender, Identity and the Body in Greek and Roman Sculpture* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 35.

one of the most celebrated sculptures in history and was distinguished in Greek and Roman cultures for its beauty. In the sculpture, the goddess appears to be surprised right before her bath, as the garments and water container may suggest. This creates an erotic narrative in which the goddess is spied upon by the viewer. This is described by the Roman historian Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History*:

...superior to all the statues, not only of Praxiteles, but of any other artist that ever existed, is his Cnidian Venus; for the inspection of which, many persons before now have purposely undertaken a voyage to Cnidos... needed, from whatever point it is viewed, its execution is equally worthy of admiration. A certain individual, it is said, became enamored of this statue, and, concealing himself in the temple during the night, gratified his lustful passion upon it, traces of which are to be seen in a stain left upon the marble.<sup>29</sup>

The sculpture, *Aphrodite of Cnidos* also established a new tradition for representations of the idealized female nude in art. She is pivoted into an s-curve with her head turned to the side and her right hand covers her pelvis, which is suggestive of “pudica,” or modest Venus pose. “Venus Pudica” became a common term in Ancient Greece and Rome and references a pose in which an idealized female figure is shown modestly covering her genitals and sometimes her breasts with her hands. This was then replicated and exaggerated in subsequent generations of Greek and Roman sculptures interested in this type of Venus figure. These statue Venuses appeared in gardens and baths throughout the ancient world in various types and various stages of undress.

In fact, the original *Aphrodite of Cnidos* is lost, but it is through these later emulations that we attempt to understand it.<sup>30</sup> There were many replicas created in ancient Greece and Rome such as *The Capitoline Venus* and *The Venus de' Medici*. There are variations of Venus pudica seen in

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<sup>29</sup> Pliny the Elder, “Book XXXVI, Chapter 4” in *The Natural History*, translated by John Bostock, H.T. Riley. London: Taylor and Francis, 1855, (5.).

<<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.02.0137:book=36:chapter=4>>

<sup>30</sup> Barrow and Silk, 37.

paintings like Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and other Greek and Roman nude women sculptures inspired the pose of Titian's reclining *Venus of Urbino* among other Renaissance and western painted examples.

The comparison of male and female nudes in Greek and Roman sculpture reveals a double standard of gender representations in art. Male nudes are highly celebrated and signify the perfected human form and ideal masculinity as those statues were emulated, yet the sexually suggestive Venus and the established convention, "Venus Pudica," suggests female nudity as temptation and sexuality for the male viewer.<sup>31</sup> Female nudity in ancient Greek and Roman sculpture modeled the vulnerable but sexualized woman, impacting and setting the precedent for attitudes toward the depiction of the female nude in subsequent movements in European art history which are almost exclusively represented by male artists.

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<sup>31</sup> Dr. Renee M. Gondek, "Introduction to Ancient Greek Art," Khan Academy, accessed October 29, 2021, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ancient-art-civilizations/greek-art/beginners-guide-greece/a/introduction-ancient-greek-art>.





Figure 2 Jean-Honore Fragonard, *The Swing*, 1767

### **Rococo: Jean-Honore Fragonard, *The Swing*, 1767**

Greek and Roman inspired nudity was a typical example of how women were sexualized. These models give us plenty of easy examples to identify their objectification in the Renaissance and many of the periods beyond it. But what about when the women are clothed? Do they have agency, and can they still be sexualized? The Rococo period is a prime example of how even though clothed and well mannered, a woman can still be an object of the male gaze.

One important aspect of the Rococo period is the importance of different genres, and specifically to this field guide, not just “history paintings.” Rather, genre scenes, like those of the Renaissance Flemish painters or the Dutch 17th century refers to representations of everyday

life, often with moral implications or religious undertones, but not necessarily. Usually when artists depict women, this includes innuendo about their sexuality. The late-Rococo painting by Jean-Honoré Fragonard entitled *The Swing* from 1767 is an example of a genre painting that exemplifies sexualizing women while they are still clothed.

Painted by a man, for another man—an unnamed ‘gentleman of the Court’—the scene depicts an enclosed garden with three characters—an older man in the background pushing the swing, a young woman in pink swinging (the commissioner’s young mistress), and a younger man hiding in the bushes smiling at the woman. Innocent and flirtatious the woman appears to be in control of the scene; or is she just a construct of male fantasy?<sup>32</sup>

The young man in the bushes is positioned perfectly to catch a glimpse up the woman’s skirt as she flirtatiously flicks off her shoe in his direction. The female figure on the swing sits legs parted, the center of the composition, as an object of desire. The man in the bush emphasizes the importance of gazing at her. Through his gaze, viewers are directed to observe female sexuality and eroticism is implied by the swing that acts as a metaphor.<sup>33</sup>

Though the woman may appear to be controlling the scene with her flirtatious frivolity, the reality is that she is not. She is used as an object of sexuality and desire by a male painter for a wealthy male patron. She becomes nothing more than an object in a scene of sexual desire.

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<sup>32</sup> “Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732 - 1806) *The Swing*,” The Wallace Collection, accessed October 29, 2021, <https://wallacelive.wallacecollection.org/eMP/eMuseumPlus?service=direct/1/ResultDetailView/result.tab.link&sp=10&sp=Scollection&sp=SelementList&sp=0&sp=0&sp=999&sp=SdetailView&sp=0&sp=Sdetail&sp=3&sp=F&sp=SdetailBlockKey&sp=0>.

<sup>33</sup> Jennifer Milam, “Playful Constructions and Fragonard’s Swinging Scenes,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 33, No. 4 (2000): 555.

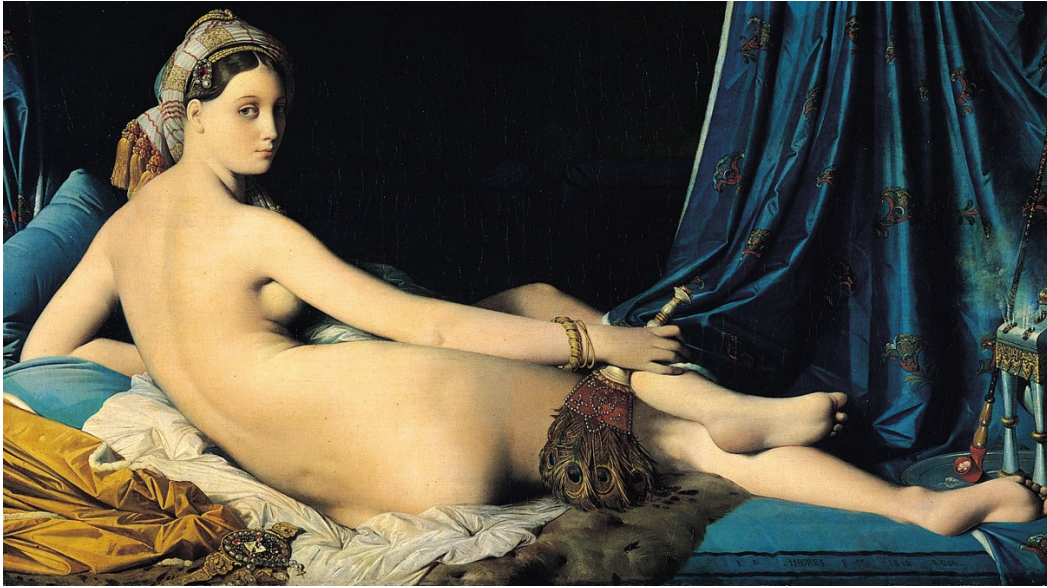


Figure 3 Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *Grande Odalisque*, 1814

### **Orientalism: Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *Grande Odalisque*, 1814**

Ingres, *La Grande Odalisque*, of 1814 follows the European tradition of the reclining female nude. Ingres abandons the previous traditions of depicting themes of mythological goddesses and places his reclining nude in a present-day setting of a Turkish harem which introduces us to Orientalism. The term Orientalism was defined by Edward Said as a mode of representation related to colonialism to justify European dominance of the colonized. This signifies another theme in visual representations of the sexualized female nude of other cultures, but on display for Western men.

Orientalism masks reality by creating the illusion of it to represent an ideal. Ingres does this by placing a white woman in a Turkish harem. A common trope of Orientalism is the “odalisque”—a female slave of the sultan. The turban, hookah, drapery, and color all reflect a common harem

setting, yet Ingres ignores the woman's ethnicity which furthers the arguments as this being a construction of the ideal or a French man's fantasy.<sup>34</sup>

This painting was shunned by the French academy in 1814 but captivated later audiences. Ingres' *Odalisque* broke tradition of how female nudes were typically represented, since he added extra vertebrae in her back to elongate it, so her body creates a sensual s-curve and enhances her sexuality. When this erotic Orientalist became admitted later, they noted the skill with which he removed any site of body hair to enhance her smooth skin and aesthetic beauty as her skin was compared to the silks on which she is reclining. Although her body is turned away from the viewer, her back is contorted in such a way that her buttocks and gaze suggest her sexual availability. By observing the setting and these constructs, it becomes clear that she belongs to the viewer, which is intended to be male and European.

Ingres had never been to a harem, so this was a Western idealization. Interestingly, he used Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's letters as inspiration, which contained descriptions of harems and bathhouses in which she published in France in 1805 after visiting. These literary sources provided inspiration for Ingres and others who had never ventured to these places.<sup>35</sup> This is important because what this image represents is only fantasy, a loose construction of what Ingres imagined about a sexual available Ottoman woman. She does not possess agency because of his fantasy harem, instead she is a construct of male desire, on display for a male audience.

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<sup>34</sup> Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, (United Kingdom: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2020), 204.

<sup>35</sup> Chadwick, 204.

Although not scandalous in the 19th century, upon contemporary scrutiny, Orientalism is simply another example of how European colonialism shapes art. Linda Nochlin notes more specifically, Orientalism is about not only men's power over women, but a justification of the superiority and control of white men over "inferior, darker races."<sup>36</sup> Male artists used their power over the representation of women of other cultures to abstract and objectify these other-improper women, which served to establish and signify colonial and male power.

### **Modern Art and the Female Body**

The art of the Cubists, Fauves, German Expressionists, and other *avant-garde* artists of the early twentieth century display a similar discourse in their representations of the female nude.

European artists began unapologetically displaying the virile, vigorous, and uninhibited sexual appetite of the male artist instead the classical, allegorical, and Realist representations of the female body.

When discussing modern art, it requires a demystification of the masculine myths of the genius and the power boundaries it created for women artists.<sup>37</sup> Modern art as we know it today developed gradually from the 1860s to the 1970s in the background of an industrial revolution in Europe, then carrying over to the Americas. The different "isms"—impressionism, postimpressionism, realism, cubism, constructivism, abstract expressionism, etc.—that make up modern art were born from a rejection of the academic styles and challenged how the female body was represented—previously, as Eve or Venus.<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, art

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<sup>36</sup> Chadwick, 202.

<sup>37</sup> Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," in *Vision and Difference, Femininity, feminism, and histories of art* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 50-89.

<sup>38</sup> Chadwick, 292.

was typically commissioned by wealthy patrons or by the church. But during the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, art became solely about subjects of the artist's choosing including their feelings, dreams, and symbols.<sup>39</sup> The nude was where artists advanced these male artists' fight for leadership of the avant-garde, which broadened the range of how the female body was represented and personalized and stylized the emphasis of these nameless women."<sup>40</sup>

The idea of the avant-garde in art and scholarship is a power structure which marginalizes women just as the guilds in the fifteenth century did as well as the academies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>41</sup> The concept of the genius or avant-garde implies a romantic notion of an intensely gifted artist far surpassing technical skill and tradition. It is an almost mythical romanticism of high craft that cannot be pinpointed to an exact formula or style. Work by women is not valorized in the same manner and women are often identified with representing nature and femineity, but never "genius".<sup>42</sup> In *Domination and Virility in Vanguard Painting*, Carol Duncan analyzes that this male modern myth of genius is built on sexual and social inequality.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> "What is Modern Art?," MoMA website, accessed March 21, 2021, [https://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/themes/what-is-modern-art/](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/what-is-modern-art/).

<sup>40</sup> Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," 50-89.

<sup>41</sup> Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, (United Kingdom:Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2020), 292.

<sup>42</sup> Chadwick, 292.

<sup>43</sup> Carol Duncan, "Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting," 305.



Figure 4 Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*, 1907

#### **Early Cubism: Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*, 1907**

Picasso's painting, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* from 1907 aptly displays this virile appetite. This painting features figures which are abstracted, fractured, and angled and appear to be dangerous creatures. This articulates the male/female dichotomy and men's ambivalence toward women, according to Duncan.<sup>44</sup> She states that the abstraction of these women attempts to reveal the true nature of all women in which Picasso used ancient and tribal art to reveal her universal mystery.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Duncan, "Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting," 305.

<sup>45</sup> Duncan, "The MoMA's Hot Mamas," 175.

In the initial sketch of the painting, Picasso intended to include a male student on and a sailor in the left corner. The woman depicted in the front and center was to face the men and “her display of genitals turned away from the viewer.”<sup>46</sup> The men were removed from the final painting and instead of a male-female confrontation, it became a confrontation between viewer and image according to Duncan. The figure in the lower right-hand corner, with legs spread to insinuate genitalia on full display, although not detailed, is now directed toward the viewer.<sup>47</sup> Duncan continues that, the work now emphasizes to men and women viewers the privileged status of male viewers. It is they alone who are to experience the full effect of this painting. And, she continues, Picasso implies with his work that “truly great, powerful, and revelatory art” is male property.<sup>48</sup>

Duncan states that Picasso uses art history to state his thesis: “that the awesome goddess, the terrible witch, and the lewd whore are but facets of a single many-sided creature, in turn threatening and seductive, imposing, and self-abasing, dominating and powerless—and always the psychic property of a male imagination.”<sup>49</sup>

It is these spaces and subjects depicted by men that are associated with the development of modern art that is a ripe subject of feminist critique because it forces us to examine the sexism of male artists, the art world and modern society.<sup>50</sup> Chadwick documents the sexual representations and exploitations of the female body, describing it as:

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<sup>46</sup> Duncan, “The MoMA’s Hot Mamas,” 175.

<sup>47</sup> Duncan, “The MoMA’s Hot Mamas,” 175.

<sup>48</sup> Duncan, “The MoMA’s Hot Mamas,” 176.

<sup>49</sup> Duncan, “The MoMA’s Hot Mamas,” 176.

<sup>50</sup> Richard R. Brettell, *Modern Art 1851-1929*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 134.



...associated with the development of modern art wrest their formal and stylistic innovations from an erotically based assault on female form: Manet's and Picasso's prostitutes, Gauguin's "primitives," Matisse's nudes, Surrealism's objects... Modern artists from Renoir ("I paint with my prick") to Picasso ("Painting, that is actual lovemaking") have collaborated in fusing the sexual and the artistic by equating the artistic creation with male sexual energy, presenting women as powerless and sexually subjugated.<sup>51</sup>

*Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* is placed on a prominent wall inside the MoMA. Its large scale creates a dramatic confrontation between the viewer and painting. It also reminds women of their place in art; it is the men who make great art and the women who serve as their subjects. Just like the previous paintings discussed, we get a one-sided conversation on the realities of women.

### **Summary of examples**

Each of these women are idealized and fetishized by male artists. They are not the owners of their sexuality or even their personalities, but rather sites of misogyny and objectification. There are no distinguishing aspects of these women, and they are reduced to objects of beauty. They span from being modest, slightly more sexual, then overtly naked, yet still idealized and on display for the (male) viewer.

With museums and the canon of art being completely filled with these images, how are women supposed to relate to them? This imagery has little to offer the female viewer other than exemplifying the inequalities of gender differences in art. These images create a specific dialogue addressed to the male viewer by the male artist in which the female form is objectified and displays a fantasy.

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<sup>51</sup> Chadwick, 293.

## The Female Artist: Erasure and Underrepresentation

In museums, historically, and to this day, there exists a hierarchy of gender representations. The male gaze has created a space that is impossible for women to exist in as equal contributors.

Despite decades of feminist criticisms of the bias of museums, these institutions still have a long way to go to create more inclusive spaces. Because of this, the canon of art primarily represents the hetero-male perspective and women artists from all time periods get erased from the timeline of art history movements.

In the article *Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity*, Griselda Pollock notes that art historians and critics reduce the contributions of female artists by not canonizing or celebrating them in the same way we do male artists. Women’s art is simply referred to as “works by women.”<sup>52</sup> She goes on to say that women are denied representation of their desires and pleasures—their everyday lives they lived and painted get erased by not including them. So, to enjoy this cultural narrative produced by men, we must become them, Pollock says. We must assume the hetero masculine gaze and enjoy the site of women’s humiliation.<sup>53</sup> And by doing this, women get erased.

## Becoming a Trained Artist

During the Italian Renaissance, artists came from the social class of artisans. They completed apprenticeships with a well-established artist, then would join guilds—which later became academies—and set up their own workshops.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” 85.

<sup>53</sup> Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” 85.

<sup>54</sup> Guerrilla Girls (Group of artists), *The Guerrilla Girls' bedside companion to the history of Western art* (New York: Penguin Books), 29.

This process of becoming a trained artist was closed to women. The only way they could work as artists was if they were born into a family of artists and were able to assist in their family workshop. Women were not allowed to attend painters' guilds or academies and could not legally receive commissions or own their own ateliers.<sup>55</sup> They were also barred from the study of the nude model, which was the basis of training from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century.<sup>56</sup>

Women were excluded from education in the academies in Europe until the turn of the twentieth century. However, this did not stop women from training and studying nude models in private studios or attending academies for women in the late nineteenth century.<sup>57</sup> But, because of their exclusion from formal training, according to Deepwell, this encouraged many women to focus on "minor genres" of art: portraiture, still-life, and miniatures.<sup>58</sup> "High art" was considered to be genre, allegorical, and history painting, which garnered the artists reputation as "great," afforded to mostly male artists.<sup>59</sup>

It was in the 1890s that women artists gained access to professional training in the arts on the same terms as men. Yet, Deepwell points out that this nineteenth century association of women's art to "amateurism" continues because of the alignment of women artists with their sex and not the quality of their art.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Guerrilla Girls (Group of artists), *The Guerrilla Girls' bedside companion to the history of Western art* (New York: Penguin Books), 29.

<sup>56</sup> Chadwick, 9.

<sup>57</sup> Katy Deepwell, 71.

<sup>58</sup> Katy Deepwell, 71.

<sup>59</sup> Katy Deepwell, 71.

<sup>60</sup> Katy Deepwell, 71.

### **In Modern Art the Genius is Gendered Male**

The advancement of modern art and the notion of the genius coincided with the emergence of the first generation of women who were finally allowed almost equal access to artistic training and professional practice as men.<sup>61</sup> But because of mechanisms of cultural hegemony, the space in which women were allowed to interact was constrained. Griselda Pollock points out the obvious in which we previously stated; that all of the canonical masters are men. And she questions, was this because there no women involved in participating or championing any these movements in modernism? The answer is no. She argues that it is because modern art history celebrates and normalizes a specific set of gendered practices by male artists which causes the erasure of the female genius.<sup>62</sup> But women should not be denied the same status as male ‘masters.’ Men and women artists during this time are painting different subjects and scenes based on their historical contexts. Women are cultural producers within their specific contexts, just as are the men.<sup>63</sup>

### **The Denial of their Genius: Women Have Been Here the Whole Time**

In her book, *World of Art, Women, Art, and Society*, art historian Whitney Chadwick traces the early hardships female artists faced. She explains that there were two female artists who were founding members of the British Royal Academy in 1768: painters Angelica Kauffman and Mary Moser. Their works were celebrated by patrons across Europe and in English society. Yet, they were not pictured among the artists in the celebratory painting of the newly founded Royal Academy, *The Academicians of the Royal Academy* (1772), painted by Johann Zoffany.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Chadwick, 292.

<sup>62</sup> Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” 50.

<sup>63</sup> Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” 83.

<sup>64</sup> Chadwick, 9.

According to Chadwick, Zoffany's painting reveals the ideals of the academic artist as all the other members of the academy are shown grouped around a male model—except for these two women artists. Kauffmann and Moser do appear in the painting, but as two painted busts in the background among other plaster busts and figures.<sup>65</sup> They have become the objects of art rather than contributing producers. This painting is a great example of the disparities between male and female artists in art history. After Kauffman and Moser, no women were allowed membership to the academy until 1922 and then later in 1936.<sup>66</sup> These two successful women were the exception rather than a moment of growth.

Like Pollock, Chadwick also explores the question of why art historians have chosen to ignore the works of women artists. It could be explained by the societal constructs of the differing roles of the sexes in society. Women were to have children and focus on domestic activities while men were in the public sphere. Feminist analysis reveals how the work of women is presented in a negative relation to creativity and high culture. Qualities associated with women such as “decorative,” “precious,” “miniature,” “sentimental,” “amateur,” etc., are negative characteristics in measuring the quality of art.<sup>67</sup>

Irish painter George Moore described the work of Berthe Morisot (1841-1895), who was a founding contributor to Impressionism, that reflects these sentiments. Moore spoke of being impressed by Morisot's work, but that it was problematic because she was a woman, so her contributions were insignificant. He goes on to say, “but the insignificant is sometimes dear to

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<sup>65</sup> Chadwick, 10.

<sup>66</sup> Chadwick, 9.

<sup>67</sup> Chadwick, 11.

us.”<sup>68</sup> He details her work as being all about womanhood and is sweet and gracious, tender, and wistful.<sup>69</sup> This is just one example into how work by female artists is viewed by different standards.

There is a difference between men and women socially and economically in Paris in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century due to sexual social structures. They are constrained by where they are allowed to be present in society, which dictates what they produce. But they should also be seen as producers of our understanding of their specific spaces—on the terrace, in the drawing room, on the promenade, etc.—because that is exactly what men are representing in their depictions of bars, cafes, and brothels. What women represent in their art is just as important because it shapes our understanding of what life was like in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in women’s spaces that men never cared to paint. Women like Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt are cultural producers of their spaces just as Auguste Renoir and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec are.

As long as female artists aren’t allowed to take up the same amount of space as men, aren’t heard, and aren’t given equal representation, women will continue to be viewed through the male gaze.

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<sup>68</sup> Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” 83.

<sup>69</sup> Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” 83.

## Conclusion

These female nudes, from *Aphrodite of Knidos* to de Kooning's *Woman I* represent significant ideals in the perpetuated myth of the great male master painters and genius artists from antiquity to the late modern era. These images represent the heroic male artists' self-searching exploration to create a new pictorial discourse in which to display their power. This discourse creates the framework for perpetuating the status of the male artist-hero, which is upheld by museums. Such degrading images of women confirm men as the more powerful gender and remind women of their place in society as being the lesser of the sexes. These visual representations of women are sites of struggle within which the social inequalities between men and women are signified and sustained in museums.

There is a moment that should happen, where museum visitors become confronted with the reality that museums and their collections were framed and built on a narrow patriarchal bias. Most visitors don't realize that the majority of artwork in museum collections are made up of mostly heterosexual white men. They also may not realize that the thousands of paintings of nude women were primarily painted by male artists, not women. And that these institutions were built and run by wealthy white men and reflect their point of views and ideals.

This marginalization has been covertly institutionalized so that the common museum guest doesn't see what is staring straight at them, and that is problematic. Why is it that men get to decide how the story of women is told and how are female artists supposed to fit into this very narrow perspective of history?

By understanding the patriarchal structures in which these institutions were built on and the male gaze, readers may begin to see why there is a lack of female representation in museums and history. It is with the field guide that readers will be educated about these implications and see an expanded list of examples from nine major art movements and how the male gaze functions in each.

Museum goers are typically blind to these structures because these observations of sexual difference and power are left to feminist scholars and are not in our history books or talked about in museums.

### **Where are the Women? A Feminist Field Guide to the Museum**

For the visual component of this research, I created a field guide titled, *Where are the Women? A Feminist Field Guide to the Museum*, which is an informational guide that interacts directly with the reader and fine art museums. The goal of this field guide is to visually represent the problematic and universal discourse about women in art and how they are represented in art museums. The field guide brings issues to the general museum goers' attention and gives a deeper understanding of art history, power structures, and the museum. It should be used for introspection and questioning of current and past structures that control the narrative of art history to gain a better understanding of the history of power and how it affects marginalized groups.

There are nine sections in this guide which are organized as follows: An introduction on why we need this guide, helpful terms used in art history that readers may not be familiar with, a brief



history of the museum, an explanation of the theory of the male gaze, visual examples of the male gaze, hardships of female artists, a major timeline of female artists, a conclusion, and prompts to follow when visiting the museum.

The following paragraphs will unpack the four major sections of the guide: History of the museum, Examples, Timeline, and Prompts.

### **History of the museum**

To set the scene for understanding these problems and as a precursor to expanding on the theory of the male gaze, it is important for readers to understand the history of the foundation of museums in the United States, as they are the container for these main issues that women face in art. Museums continue to institutionalize the male gaze and uphold a masculine environment in which visitors do not readily see. By expanding on the foundation of these institutions, it is my belief that readers will become more aware of the social structures that are in place and how they covertly marginalize certain groups.

### **Examples of the Male Gaze in art**

By using this field guide, readers will gain an understanding of how the male gaze has been perpetuated through history by examining sculpture and paintings spanning from classicism to late modernism. I included nine examples to trace the visual beginnings of the male gaze and how it operates through different styles and time periods. With this knowledge, readers will gain an understanding of how women's bodies get treated in different movements and the effect that this oppressive behavior has on women artists.

**A Timeline of Female Genius:**

This guide also provides a framework to understanding women's systematic erasure from art history and provides an alternative timeline which includes women's contributions to the visual arts.

Museums and art history books often use timelines to describe movements in art by organizing chunks of time into sequential reference points. These timelines are narrow in the sense that they exclude artists who do not fit certain criteria. Because of this, we get a very narrow picture of art history based on the male genius. Within the field guide, I chose to highlight well-known movements in art that are often championed by prevalent male artists. I replaced the male artists names with female artists who were creating successful work during these same time periods. The goal of this was to offer alternatives to the male 'genius' and 'masters' in certain art movements by providing female artists that were creating successful artwork within these time periods.

**Prompts**

There are prompts at the end of the guide with blank pages to use for introspection by readers. These prompts take ideas introduced by the field guide and provide directives for readers while visiting museums. The idea is to create space for the reader to reflect on the information from the guide and to encourage further examination of these problems in art.

### List of Prompts:

1. On your next museum visit, make a list noting how many works by female artists you can find hanging in the galleries.
2. Find paintings of female nudes in the museum and consider the scene. What are they doing, who are they doing it for, how do you relate to it? And what suggests that?
3. Based on these works, re-write the didactic for the painting and give it a twist based on your assumptions and what lead you to them.
4. Now, find paintings of men, and assess how they are represented in paintings and what the narrative may be. Are they the hero, being seduced, in love, being attacked?
5. Based on these works, re-write the didactic for the painting and give it a twist based on your assumptions and what lead you to them.
6. Challenge yourself to take a hard look at the paintings by men and women. In the same style or time period, is one technically better than the other? If so, why?
7. Find a painting of a woman that is clearly sexualized. Ask yourself, "If a woman painted this, what would her artistic reasonings be for how she represented the woman?"
8. Imagine visiting the studio of your favorite female artist whose work you saw today. Based on what you saw, what would you expect it to be like? What would you want to ask her about her life and work?
9. Pick a gallery in the museum and consider all the works in the room. Now that you know about the male gaze and the lack of female representation in museums, what art would you add to this room to tell a different story?
10. Finally, knowing what you know about how museums institutionalize the male gaze and how the female body was used in art to express male genius, how do you now feel in this space?

### Design

In the design of the field guide, I chose a more modern take than what is usually associated with art history. I used bright and bold colors and playful typography throughout the book to communicate the intricacies of theory and art history. Typically, the subject of art history conveys a very scholarly tone and therefore the design follows suit. I chose this more playful tone in order to make the content more digestible to a broader audience rather than solely art history students or historians.

### **Gadsden Museum of Art Exhibition**

The primary goal of my exhibition at the Gadsden Museum of Art was to visually represent the ideas from this research and my field guide to create a three-dimensional field guide for visitors to experience. I took two of the main sections for my book: the timeline, and examples of the male gaze and dedicated them to two walls.

For the timeline, rather than a list, I created an interesting graphic to that weaves the different art movements together and showcases works by female artists.

For the examples of the male gaze, I took a different approach from the guide. Instead of informational posters, I created a salon style wall with paintings that exemplify the male gaze. Over the paintings, I printed text on transparency film and placed them over the paintings. The text placed over each painting serves as a quick reference to problematic ideas represented in the paintings.

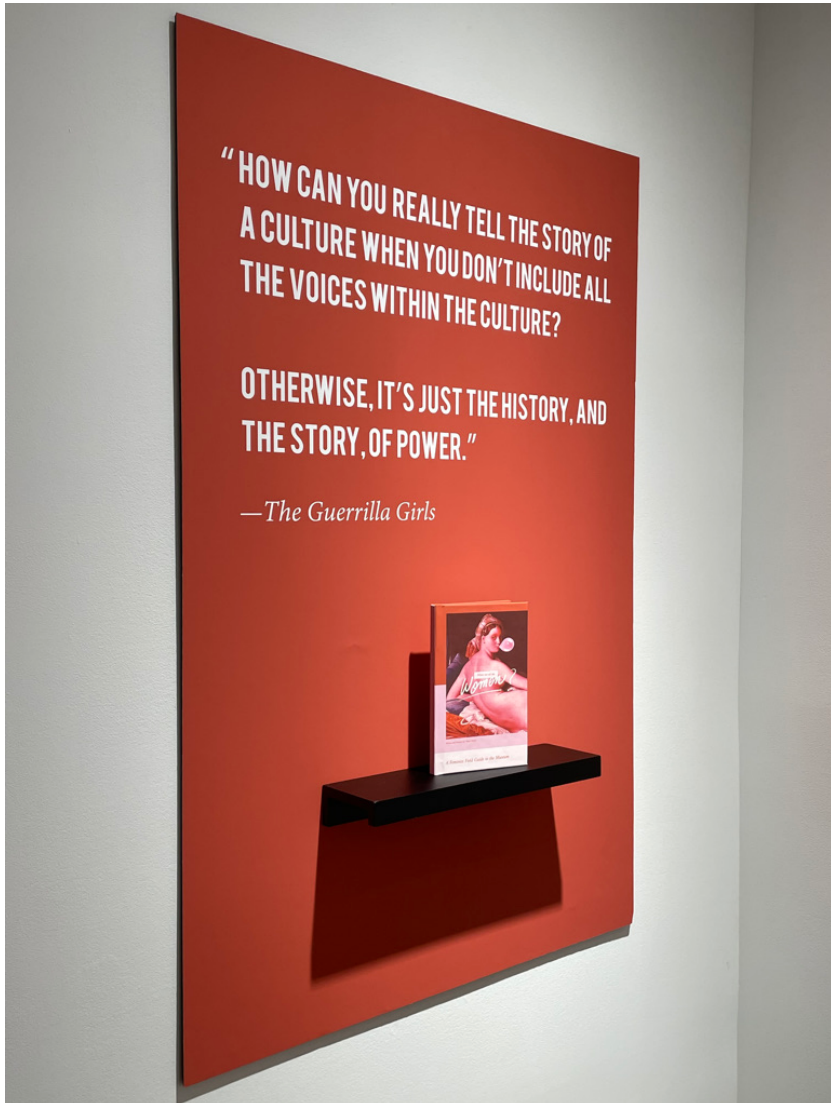
Another wall in the exhibition serves as a quick reference to problematic facts and statistics about female artists. These facts and statistics are often buried deep in scholarly research and online articles, but are important in framing the problem of the erasure of women in art.

Exhibition: Where are all the Women? A Feminist Field Guide to the Museum





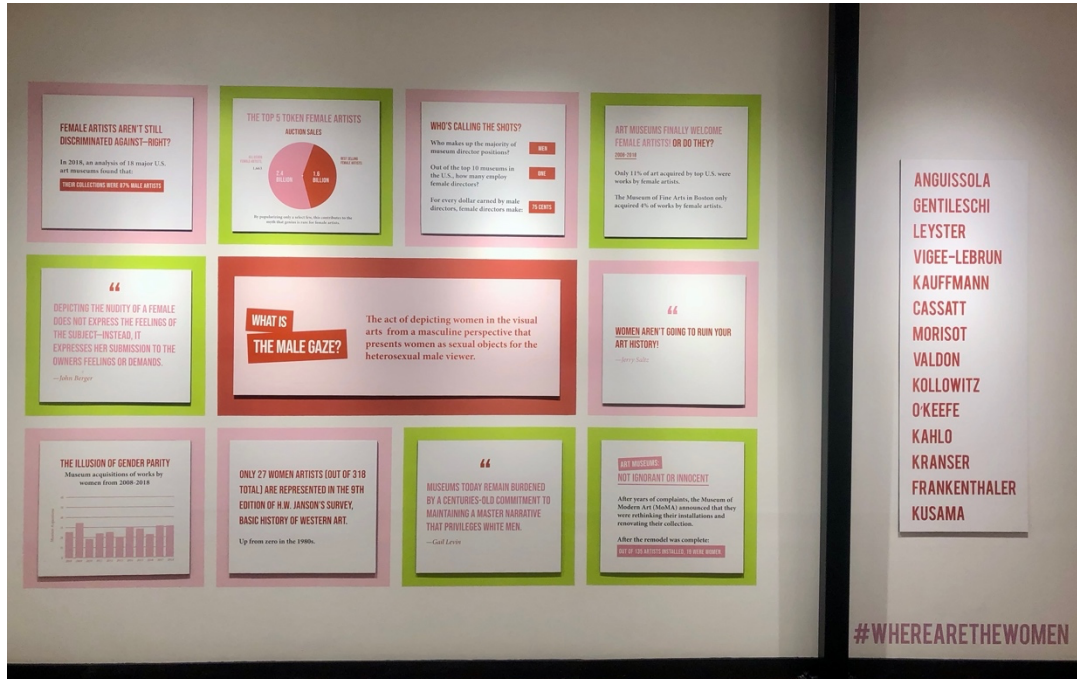












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