
Anne Cannon Palumbo

The question ‘Why have there been no great women artists’ has received considerable attention since Linda Nochlin’s seminal essay appeared in 1971. Women as Interpreters of the Visual Arts, 1820-1979 focuses on a separate but closely related issue. Although one might very well make a case for the proposition that lacking a female Apollinaire we can hardly expect to discover a female Picasso, that is not really the major concern of this study. What it offers us is an historical account of the experience of women in the field of art scholarship and criticism and a consideration of their contributions to the enterprise. These are women who achieved professional careers as educators, writers, curators, librarians, archaeologists, and art historians rather than the often more glamorous keepers of salons or collectors, about which we already know a good deal. While many readers may be familiar with individuals like Margaret Fuller and Anna Jameson, unless they happen to have had similar research interests or been affiliated with institutions in which these women spent some part of their professional lives, few will know much, if anything, about the other women profiled in this study.

In choosing to plow a relatively uncultivated field, the contributors to this volume have presented us, if not with a finished picture, at least with a good working sketch of women’s experience in the world of museums, university art departments, and art publishing. Along the way they have also filled in some gaps in our knowledge of art scholarship in general as it has developed in the last 150 years. That today we tend to look for such scholarship in the university and the museum is made apparent by the fact that of the twelve women selected for in-depth treatment, only one of those whose careers fall in the twentieth century was without some kind of institutional association.

It was not always so, as the study itself demonstrates. In the first of the three periods into which the profiles of the twelve women are grouped, the period extending from 1820 to 1890, not only do we find that women like Jameson, Fuller, Lady Dilke, and Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer created careers for themselves outside established institutions, but, for the most part, they were self-educated as well. Typically, those who came later, when opportunities for higher education became available to women, held institutional appointments, often in women’s colleges (Georgiana Goddard King), sometimes as museum curators (Gisella Richter). However, the art departments of the most prestigious universities and important posts in the larger museums have traditionally been male preserves. Only one of the women chosen to represent the period from 1890 to 1930 taught in a top-ranking American university. But, though already a distinguished scholar and full professor at the University of Giessen in her native Germany when she fled the Nazis in the 1930s, Marguerite Bieber did not receive a full professorship at Columbia University despite her many years of teaching there. Erica Tietze-Conrat, who also came to the United States in the migration of European intellectuals, received no institutional support.

For the group who worked chiefly in the period 1930-1979 women’s colleges continued to be important, both in terms of education and training and as places of employment. With the exception of Serapie der Necessian, who was educated in Europe (but who taught at Wellesley), all of them began their art historical studies at women’s colleges. Agnes Mongan and Dorothy Burr Thompson at Bryn Mawr, under the guidance of Georgiana Goddard King and Rhys Carpenter, respectively, and Dorothy Miner at Barnard. Their scholarly contributions were made, but even at this relatively late date women seldom received institutional appointments commensurate with their professional accomplishments. When they did, the appointments were either temporary or very late in coming. Mongan is a striking example of the tardy (often grudging) recognition women scholars could expect during this period. Years of teaching, research and curatorial work at Harvard went unacknowledged by academic rank. Until 1964 she was not even listed in the Harvard catalog. Mongan was finally re-
warded with an appointment to the directorship of the Fogg Museum of Art – two years prior to her retirement.

Perhaps a census taken today would reveal greater concentrations of women in top-level institutional posts. If so, we should undoubtedly consider that an important measure of progress. Nevertheless, there appears to be something of an anomaly which this study brings to light. In the earlier period, women like Dilke, Jameson, Fuller, and even Van Rensselaer, though hampered by social constraints and the lack of educational facilities, became public personalities. Their range of interests was broad, and they were in the forefront of contemporary debate over issues of widespread concern. This has rarely been true of those who came after. In most cases, their work was highly specialized, known to and appreciated by a small group of fellow specialists.

Reasons for this seeming contradiction are not hard to find. In the initial stages of industrialization, the arts were consigned to the female sphere, thus becoming one of the few areas in which women of intellect and ambition could achieve distinction. Half a century later, a Margaret Fuller or a Lady Dilke might have been drawn to a very different sort of career. Another factor has been that the changing nature of the enterprise itself has encouraged a narrowing of interests. Interpretation of the visual arts moved from books and journals aimed at raising the level of public culture to the academy. Access to resources and training are concentrated in institutions, and institutions tend to erect barriers to keep out the uninitiated. Where women have been able to breach these new barriers, it has usually been by intensive cultivation of a narrow and highly specialized piece of turf.

Though there are sharp differences between the experience of nineteenth and twentieth-century women, this study reveals that continuities also persist. From the time of Jameson and Fuller (who were themselves inspired by the example of Madame de Staël) to that of archaeologist Dorothy Thompson, women have found in travel, translation and immersion in cultures removed from their own by time or space, independence and an area which welcomed the exercise of their talents. This pattern was not confined to women for whom the visual arts were the chief focus of study – women missionaries and anthropologists provide us with other examples – but the tradition clearly influenced many of the women studied in this volume in their choice of career. Such patterns and relationships are admirably illuminated by the introductory and concluding chapters written by Claire Richter Sherman, assisted by Adele M. Holcomb. It is their skillful editing which gives the book coherence, no small achievement in a project involving many hands. Of varying quality, however, are the individual biographies, and this suggests the need to consider whether the biographical mode is the best choice for a study of this type. As a rule, the lives of scholars and academics are not notably rich in incident. This is not to say that scholars are necessarily dull subjects, but that the claim they make on our attention rests more with the quality of their minds and work than with the events of their lives. Not all contributors possessed the necessary expertise to enable them to assess adequately these qualities. Too often, especially in the essays treating more recent figures, the tendency is toward hagiography. One can sympathize with the authors’ desire to insure proper regard for the achievements of these women. Since the help and encouragement given students and other scholars is significant, it is proper to take note of it. But when individuals are presented as unfailingly helpful, generous, and warmly gracious, we begin to suspect that too much time was spent in talking to fund students and not enough in other kinds of research. We can hardly help wondering whether these women were invariably easy to work with? Did they never exhibit suspicion or impatience? Was none possessed of a sharp tongue or an overweening sense of self-importance? Paragons are infinitely less interesting and less believable than personalities.

Problems of this kind are not serious enough to impair markedly the value of this pioneering study. The use of the biographical format can be defended on the grounds that it is particularly successful in bringing to notice similarities in women’s experiences that tell us a good deal about the circumstances that promote or deter achievement. For example, it is certainly relevant to our understanding of women’s experience as professional inter-

---

**Figure 1.** Calotype portrait of Anna Brownell Jameson, ca. 1845. From Women As Interpreters of the Visual Arts, 1820-1979.

**Figure 2.** Photograph of Dorothy Burr Thompson and Homer Thompson, 1975. From Women As Interpreters of the Visual Arts, 1820-1979.
Robert Caron


André Giroux, Rodrigue Bédard, Nicole Cloutier, Robert Guittard, Réal Lussier et Hélène Vachon


Geneviève Guimont-Bastien, Line Chabot et Doris Drolet-Dubreuil


Depuis 1973, Parcs Canada publie dans la collection « Histoire et archéologie » des inventaires de différents fonds conservés aux Archives nationales du Québec, aux Archives civiles de Québec, aux archives de l'Université Laval, aux archives de la ville de Québec, etc. Ces inventaires, les titres de leurs respetifs, sont conçus des documents pour la recherche spécialisée, fruits d'un travail de compilation et de mise en ordre que d'une analyse ou d'une synthèse. Ils se composent généralement d'une court texte d'introduction, d'un catalogue et d'un index.

L'inventaire des dessins architecturaux aux archives de l'Université Laval répertorie les dessins et autres documents provenant du fonds Raoul Chéniervert (en première partie) et des fonds Jos.-Pierre Ouellet, E.-Georges Rousseau, Gérard Venne et Paroisse Saint-Sauveur (en deuxième partie). A travers maintes associations, des plans et des documents de diverses provenances ont été transmis à la firme d'architectes Chéniervert : les plans sont signés par les architectes Georges-Émile Tanguy, Alfred-N. Vallée (le rédacteur de l'introduction lui prête à tort le nom de Prudent Vallée), H. Lebon, Raoul Chéniervert, Henriette B. Chéniervert, Raymond Martinac, Wilbrod Dubé, etc. Chronologiquement, le fonds couvre les années 1860 à 1965 ; il compte des projets qui se situent pour la plupart dans la province de Québec, avec une forte concentration dans la ville de Québec. Le catalogue comprend 1 253 entrées classées par toponymes, puis, à l'intérieur des sections, par ordre chronologique. Chaque entrée comprend la référence du dossier aux archives de l'Université Laval, le nom du projet, le nom du propriétaire, la localisation, la date, le nom du ou des architectes et une description du contenu du dossier (nombre de feuilles, types de dessins, matériaux, nature de la documentation s'il y a lieu). Un index des noms propres (noms de l'édifice, du propriétaire et des architectes) et un index des toponymes facilitent la consultation du catalogue.


Ce volume ne constitue pas un inventaire exhaustif des dessins architecturaux conservés aux archives.