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JHNA Conversations 3

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This JHNA *curatorial roundtable examines early modern women artists from a curatorial perspective: specifically, collecting and presenting their work in the museum context. The foundational exhibition* Women Artists: 1550–1950 (*fig. 1*)*, which opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in December 1976, traveled across the United States to the University of Texas at Austin; the Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute (now the Carnegie Museum of Art), Pittsburgh; and the Brooklyn Museum the following year. Of the eighty-four artists featured in the show, eight hailed from the Low Countries, including Levina Teerlinc (fig. 2), Judith Leyster, Margaretha de Heer, and Maria Sibylla Merian.*

It was accompanied by a highly informative catalogue that revealed almost as much about the process of organizing an exhibition as it did about these historical artists. In the preface, the curators—art historians Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin—shared some of the practical aspects that complicated the presentation of their research in exhibition format. They stated that they limited their checklist to paintings and works on paper in order to maintain a consistency of media within the galleries and a coherence of the intellectual questions that they sought to address. They explained that, in their pursuit of high-quality works to borrow, some lenders were not keen to part with objects for the run of the four-venue show, nor were others willing to risk the loan of works whose values had risen significantly due to the rise of second-wave feminism in the early 1970s. Additional factors, like an artist's anniversary year or a museum's own in-house exhibition, also prevented coveted works from being lent. For many readers, this preface was an enlightening peek behind the curtain at the act of curating.

While knowledge production in the realm of women artists has expanded in recent years through illuminating initiatives like Lund Humphries's Illuminating Women Artists *book series, the Dutch Research Council–funded* The Female Impact *research project, and the recent volume of the* Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek *titled "*Women: Female Roles in Art and Society of the Netherlands, 1500–1950*," exhibitions continue to make vital contributions to our understanding of these artists.* The Art of Clara Peeters *(Museum Rockoxhuis, Antwerp, and Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, 2016–2017) (fig. 3) and* Michaelina: Baroque's Leading Lady *(Museum aan de Strom, Antwerp, 2018) (fig. 4), for example, have helped to define these artists' oeuvres, shape our understanding of their life experiences, and integrate them definitively into the history of art. Yet the success of these shows does not mark an end to the obstacles outlined by Sutherland Harris and Nochlin almost fifty years ago. JHNA has therefore brought together four curators, all women, to discuss the challenges facing museums when it comes to re-visioning historical women artists today. The conversation, edited and condensed for clarity for publication, was organized and moderated by Jacquelyn N. Coutré, Eleanor Wood Prince Curator, Art Institute of Chicago.*

Participants in the Roundtable, April 2025

- **Jacquelyn N. Coutré** (moderator and associate editor, *JHNA*), Eleanor Wood Prince Curator, Art Institute of Chicago
- **Katrin Dyballa**, curator, Bucerius Kunst Forum, Hamburg
- **Ginny Treanor**, senior curator, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC
- **Maureen Warren**, curator of European and American art, Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
- **Laurien van der Werff**, co-chair and research associate, *Women of the Rijksmuseum*, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Collecting with Intention

1. **Jacquelyn N. Coutré**: I am delighted to have you all here to discuss current issues related to the collecting and exhibiting of works by early modern women artists in museums. Maureen, let's start with you and what is, according to some, the foundation of museums: collections. Could you share your approach to collection development? What do you see as the role of women artists within the Krannert Art Museum and the larger university? And what focused issues do you consider, given the makeup of your collection, when you're looking to acquire a work by a woman artist?

2. **Maureen Warren**: Thanks, Jacquelyn. As a university art museum, we prioritize teaching and research. We don't have a huge number of opportunities to make new acquisitions. As such, any acquisition has to have considerable teaching and research potential. Fortunately, because we're a big university—nearly sixty thousand students—there are many different disciplines and potential avenues to explore. Understudied and underknown artists can fit well with that agenda. A lot of women artists make compelling cases for new avenues of research. For instance, while not an early modern example, one student's research identified the year and location of a landscape painting by the American artist Emily Groom.[1]

3. Another consideration, because we are a smaller institution (of about eleven thousand objects), we have to think about is maximizing installation potential, and an object's capacity for light exposure is really significant in this context. So it would be harder for me to justify something with the light sensitivity of a watercolor or a pastel because we could so rarely put it on view, perhaps only for three months every five to ten years at most. While the number and percentage of women in our collection are important, we have chosen to focus on the number and percentage that are actually on view at any given time. So having something that can tolerate light is advantageous. But I'd say, overall, teaching and research are my primary concerns.

4. **JNC:** And Laurien, in terms of your work at the Rijksmuseum and spearheading the important project called *Women of the Rijksmuseum*, which seeks to examine and promote the women artists in the collection, how do you think about expanding the number of women on view?

5. **Laurien van der Werff:** I think one part of the story is filling in obvious gaps, simply increasing the number of women artists in the collection, through purchases and gifts, and installing them in the galleries. The other side is looking at what we already have and asking ourselves how we can present those objects in new ways or give them a new spotlight. For example, one of our milestones was having women artists in our "main stage," the Gallery of Honor (**fig. 5**), which is the suite of galleries comprising highlights of the seventeenth-century collection that leads up to Rembrandt's *Night Watch*. This is one of the most visited areas of the museum, and it contains some of the most beloved works in our collection of Dutch art.

6. Given the prominence of the Gallery of Honor, and the fact that it might be the sole space that tourists seek out during a short visit to the museum, it is crucial that we find ways to include women artists in this space, either through acquisition or through examining our storage areas. One of the best examples that we have at the moment is the recently acquired still life by Maria van Oosterwijck (**fig. 6**), which is currently hung adjacent to the portrait of her painted by Wallerant Vaillant (**fig. 7**). The visual relationship is so powerful (**fig. 8**); you see her as a female artist, dressed in white and yellow satins, with her palette in her hand, and next to this portrait is a painting made by her, the product of her actual hands. But it wasn't only about the visual connection; it was a great curatorial moment. We combined, in our most coveted space, a new acquisition with a work that has been in our collections since 1886. We gave this new acquisition a big stage, but we also amplified the power of a work long in our collection in an exciting way.

7. **JNC:** I think you make a good point about curatorial intention: it's an issue not only of metrics (which is certainly important in terms of women artists being seen) but also of thoughtful and compelling integration into our galleries. By the way, I saw the Van Oosterwijck installed in the Gallery of Honor a few months ago. It made me think that Vaillant's portrait was likely acquired as much for his skill in depicting her as it was for the subject—a woman artist—but her still life was acquired purely in recognition of her abilities. In a way, Maria van Oosterwijck the sitter is centered so much more with her still life hung next to her.

8. Maureen, you made a prominent acquisition at the Krannert a few years ago, a floral still life by Anna Ruysch (**fig. 9**), younger sister to Rachel and also her pupil. As a smaller museum covering art from around the globe, how did you know that this floral still life was the right thing for your collection at that moment?

9. **MW**: That was a really fortuitous find because it was early in my career—nine years ago?—when she was affordable enough for our institution. And it fits well, again, into our research and teaching mission. The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign is a land-grant university, institutions that were founded in the nineteenth century with gifts of land from the US government. It was mandated that these institutions teach science, engineering, agriculture, and what they called military science. They were meant to fuel research to advance US military and industrial interests. The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign has therefore always had an incredibly strong agricultural program, and we at Krannert didn't own any early modern European floral still lifes. At the time, the university had just developed a medical engineering program, so the "art and science" background relevant to

early modern still life fit well with the school's wider research agenda. It just seemed like the perfect storm of the university's research interests and, of course, if you can have a Ruysch sister in your collection, why not? And the acquisition was made well in time for the recent Rachel and Anna Ruysch retrospective, where our painting is one of the few to represent Anna's production. We were extremely fortunate, because her work is now selling at auction for ten times the amount we paid to a dealer. We had her on our radar in the small window when acquiring her work was still possible for an institution of our scale.

10. **JNC:** It was a tremendous acquisition! Ginny, would you like to weigh in on this issue? The mandate of the National Museum of Women in the Arts [NMWA] is different, in that your entire charge is to collect and preserve women artists. How do you discern which women need to be brought into the collection and when?

11. **Ginny Treanor:** I think we're in a unique position at the National Museum of Women in the Arts: we collect women artists and were the first museum to do so exclusively. One of the benefits of this, at least to my mind, is that you can demonstrate to visitors that women are not a monolith. Even so, there is certainly a great push for diversifying our collection through acquisitions. And that can mean any number of things. It can mean the ethnic or geographical background of the artist, the material that they work in, or the period in which they worked. We strive to tell multifaceted stories of women artists. Their stories are incredibly diverse. Their social circumstances dictated the kind of options that were open to them, even more so than their gender in many cases. As a collection that spans the Renaissance all the way through contemporary art, we seek to bring as much diversity as possible into every area and era that we collect in. As a recent example, we acquired a work by the contemporary artist Suchitra Mattai, whose solo exhibition at NMWA in 2024 showcased her works that create new histories and mythologies for women of the South Asian diaspora. She uses a plethora of material, including upcycled saris that she weaves together into massive tapestries, as well as vintage needlepoints of bucolic landscapes into which she inserts brown figures.

12. **JNC**: Maureen's mention of the University of Illinois's status as a land-grant university made me think of institutional mandates, and I wonder: To what degree are you tasked with incorporating women artists into your rotations or exhibitions? Is this something your museums as a whole are considering, or is this a curatorial priority of yours? At the Art Institute of Chicago, it is an institutional priority, but each curatorial department addresses it in their own way, depending on the nature of their collections. Painting and Sculpture of Europe tries to keep its works by Maria van Oosterwijck, María Josefa Sánchez, Camille Claudel, and Berthe Morisot, for example, on view in its permanent collection galleries at all times, but Prints and Drawings or Textiles, for example, have to think strategically about incorporating women makers into their frequent rotations or doing focused exhibitions of their work, because of the light sensitivity issue that Maureen mentioned earlier.

13. **MW**: We just finished strategic planning, and one of our primary aims is to have a collection that's better representative of our university audiences, which, of course, means better gender and racial equity. I think it is understood that the opportunities to acquire early modern works by women at our price point are limited. But my personal interest in women makers is also combined with issues of gender more broadly. In cases where it is not

possible to include works by women artists, we shift to make sure that gender-related issues can be considered in programming, whenever possible. So, for instance, I'm working on a show that will open next fall called *Imagination, Faith, and Desire: Art and Agency in European Prints, 1475–1800*. It includes a lot of familiar names from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, but it bothered me that there were no women artists in our collection that fit into this show. So Sandra Racek and I have organized an associated scholarly symposium that will focus on questions of gender and sexuality. It is a way to bring new research into dialogue with these objects and to have those conversations. There is also a real push at my institution to make explicit and visible the contemporary relevance of historical materials. Often, that is interpreted by contemporary artists. In the context of *Imagination, Faith, and Desire*, we have invited a woman printmaker, Althea Murphy Price, to come and speak about her work, which is deliberate because the show reinforces canonical male art figures. Remember, we are a smaller institution in the middle of Illinois. I think it's still worthwhile to put those canonical works on view for our audiences, who might not otherwise have access to a great many early modern European museum objects. But I think we have to acknowledge the need to consider underrepresented audiences when we perpetuate the canon.

14. **GT**: I think that's an important point. I mean, as curators, we shouldn't shy away from the gaps or the lack of visibility of certain groups, and closing those gaps through programming is a great way to do it. We should lean into it and ask, why are there these gaps? Why are there no women in this particular exhibition? I went to the Phoenix Art Museum at the end of January 2025 to talk about my upcoming exhibition *Women Artists from Antwerp to Amsterdam, 1600–1750* (September 26, 2025–January 11, 2026) at the invitation of the curator there [Rachel Zebro]. She had organized an exhibition of Dutch paintings from the collection, and there were no women in it. And so she took the opportunity to create programming around that gap. She also included contemporary artwork by women artists who respond to the seventeenth-century work on view. This was another way to approach the issue of the lack of not only women but people of color represented within the objects in the exhibition.

15. **JNC:** Absence is inherent in all our collections, isn't it? We can ignore it, or we can marshal it in a variety of ways to expand the stories that we tell.

Gallery Geographies

16. **JNC**: This first question on building collections brought out differences in terms of how you're thinking about connecting your collection to your audience, and what women artists, specifically, can contribute to the institutional narrative. Laurien, when these objects are installed, be they in the Gallery of Honor or elsewhere in the Rijksmuseum, how do you think about the geography of their placement? How does it affect the position of these women within the larger story that you want to tell? And does site, in your opinion, impact the agency that these women hold? In museums as in real estate, location matters.

17. **LVDW**: While the Gallery of Honor is our feature gallery, we want to incorporate women throughout the whole museum. We have the great advantage of being not only an art

museum but an art and history museum. We can add multiple layers of perspectives to early modern women, for example, by speaking about the women that are portrayed, not simply calling them "wives of" established men, and actually sharing something about their life stories other than just the sociocultural context. In the end, our goal is to incorporate women throughout the museum in such a way that you see that women were present in history and that they mattered; that they participated in society. And that's not only just from the artist's perspective. We hope to have women as active agents in society in a very self-evident way in our galleries. It's actually quite subtle. We don't want to emphasize that it's extraordinary that you see a woman in a seventeenth-century artifact from Amsterdam; we want to create an installation that seamlessly presents women as a fundamental and necessary part of that society. If people enter the museum, starting in the Gallery of Honor, and see women artists as among the most esteemed artists of the seventeenth century, the tone is set. In that sense, yes, geography is important.

18. **GT**: Yes, I think what you're saying is crucial to this discussion because what you're ultimately doing is normalizing the presence of women in any of these areas of history or culture. That's important because so much of the time the language around women artists and women in history is this language of exceptionalism, which serves to set them apart and give the impression that these specific women were somehow singular, which eclipses the work of many other women. Artemisia Gentileschi was a fantastic painter, but she wasn't the only woman artist of her day! By keeping the spotlight on just a few, we're sacrificing a much more nuanced understanding of women and art in the early modern period. So it's an important point that you're making, and, having been to the Rijksmuseum since you've implemented this project, I think it's done incredibly well.

19. **JNC**: Katrin, I know that the Bucerius Kunst Forum is not a collecting institution, but thinking about your *Ingenious Women: Women Artists and Their Companions* show, did geography play a part in that? The focus was inherently different, I realize. The exhibition paired women with the male artists in their life, be they father, brother, or husband. Were there sites of prominence that allowed you to acknowledge these women's agency in terms of your installation choices? Did you endeavor to place the women artists on the sight lines, for example?

20. **Katrin Dyballa**: In the exhibition, I installed female and male artists side by side, not only to demonstrate those familial or marital relationships but also to show that, as Laurien and Ginny pointed out, there was no difference in the quality of works by highly in-demand male and female artists, even at that time (**fig. 10**). We had a big discussion within the exhibition team, because my colleagues maintained that it should be easily visible to the visitor which paintings were made by female artists. But I didn't want a visual distinction to be made in the exhibition hall or in the architecture of the exhibition to distinguish whether a work was done by a woman or a man. With the proposals from my colleagues, the paintings and drawings by women would have been presented on a striped background or a surface with colorful squares. This presentation would have been extremely distracting from the works. Visitors would no longer have been able to engage with the art. This presentation would also have had another negative effect: I would have had to commit to the hanging within a centimeter's precision from the outset, which would have eliminated any possibility for changes once we uncrated the objects in the galleries. All these suggestions were very

restrictive, both for the visitor and for me as curator. And ultimately, it was very important to me to put the female artists on an equal footing with their male colleagues, which is why no major differences should be made in the presentation. In the end, we compromised. I decided we could print the text of the object labels in a different color for the works by female artists: we used green-yellow ink for the women artists and white ink for the men. It was just a subtle hint, nothing as drastic as framing the paintings with colored walls or something that would force the attention of our visitors. Then I also decided to make the family or personal relationships between the artists clear in the labels. Usually it says "wife of" or "pupil of;" the woman is often the appendage of the man. We wanted to do this the other way around: we only included this additional information in the labels for the works by the male artists, where it then read "father of," "husband of," or "brother of." We even included "ex-husband of!"

21. We received very positive feedback, typically on guided tours, on the different-colored object labels. And I was particularly pleased that colleagues like Jenny Reynaerts, then senior curator and chair of the *Women of the Rijksmuseum* project, particularly liked the additional information "father of . . ." on the male artists' labels.

22. Finally, we also found a compromise for the catalogue: the pages on which the works by female artists are presented are slightly colored.[2] Specifically, this means that a different pastel shade was chosen for each of the eight chapters for the pages showing works by female artists. The works of the male artists are printed on normal, white pages. The reader can immediately recognize whether this is an artwork by a woman or a man. In the future, I hope that it will no longer be necessary to make a distinction, either in the exhibition or in the catalogue. We made these decisions because, here in Hamburg, this was the first show focusing on female artists, so we had to guide the visitors' viewing experience and reinforce that women artists had professional relationships with male artists in their social network.

23. **JNC**: Are there other approaches to constructing narratives in the galleries around women artists or the absence thereof? Maureen, because university art museums can be more experimental and nimbler than other institutions, can you speak to this topic?

24. **MW**: I wrote a text panel for our Renaissance and Baroque galleries explaining that our collection of Old Master paintings was formed, primarily, in the 1940s through 1960s, and that this period coincided with a certain stage of art history's development as a discipline. I am thinking about the types of objects featured in *Janson's History of Art* and how people were amassing these collections at a time when art was defined according to specific parameters that excluded women. We received mixed responses to that panel. Some visitors loved it, and a much smaller number were offended by it. The text panel assured visitors that we were taking strides to address the exclusion of women and other underrepresented people because we recognized that it was a problem.

25. **LVDW:** I am curious about how people were offended by your panel.

26. **MW**: I think some visitors felt we were being critical of our donors by applying a contemporary lens to historical actions. This is a sensitivity, as the majority of our donors are alumni. There is a school spirit involved in giving to the museum and creating

community with other former students in this way. There was a feeling that we were not being generous with that audience. Others, unfortunately, interpreted our questioning of the norms established by white men of the past as denigrating white men today and their contributions. There was a perceived aggressive or critical tone that was far from what we had intended.

27. **LVDW**: That's very complicated.

28. **JNC:** I love the idea of using the written word to explain ideas that cannot be presented visually in the gallery, and the idea of connecting absence to collecting history and the history of the discipline. It shows, thoughtfully, the many layers of how museums have arrived at where we are today.

Unnamed Makers and Quality

29. **JNC**: Going back to the question of audience, you have to meet visitors where they are, so to speak, and then grow from that position. Ginny, your upcoming exhibition celebrates the diversity of media in which women artists and artisans worked. What are the advantages of having a variety of media in an exhibition or an installation, particularly at the National Museum of Women in the Arts? In other words, what can you tell about the journey of the woman artist across multiple media that you can't tell in a single medium?

30. **GT**: I think it gets to the heart of my own curatorial philosophy, particularly when it comes to women as contributors to material culture. It is important to me approach this topic as a group exhibition, hence *Women Artists from Antwerp to Amsterdam, 1600–1750*. This is not to say that monographic exhibitions are bad in any way, or that exhibitions that focus only on painting or only on prints are less valid. But what I want to do is to bring forward not only the number of women that were working and contributing during this time in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries but also expand our idea about what "art" is. I want to explore who decided what art was—that is, "high art"—and get visitors to start questioning the contours of that definition. Obviously, there were women painters in the Netherlands and in Flanders at the time, but they had to be of a certain social class, right? They had to be relatively wealthy to be able to afford to study with a master painter, if they weren't born into an artistic family. I realized that if we broaden our definition about what art is and what we today consider to be art, to look at it more through a seventeenth-century lens, we let more women into the conversation.

31. Lace (**fig. 11**), for example, was an important thing to include in this exhibition because it is so ubiquitous in the visual art of the period. In every portrait and genre painting, almost every figure is wearing lace. I asked myself, who was making all of this lace? It turns out that it was women, often poorer women and young girls. Yet this was an extremely expensive accessory. Lace was a luxury product just like paintings or tapestries, but we have not really considered it as a luxury object in the history of art.

32. Paper-cutting (**fig. 12**) was also a highly valued art form at the time. We were able to include works by Johanna Koerten Block, who was probably the most famous paper-cutter in the Dutch Republic, and her work sold for amazing prices. There is evidence that she sold one

of her works for more than Rembrandt was paid for his *Night Watch* earlier in the century! And I want to give visitors this kind of qualifying information: that not only did women painters become famous and make a living, but women paper-cutters also made names for themselves and made a living. And even though paper-cuttings could be more expensive than some paintings in the seventeenth century, we do not value them equally as art historical objects. Why is that? This will get us into the gender disparity associated with the hierarchy of art forms.

33. **JNC**: I also think it is important that we do not know the names of many of the women who made lace in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Andaleeb Banta, in an essay about preparing for the exhibition *Making Her Mark: A History of Women Artists in Europe, 1400–1800* (Baltimore Museum of Art, October 1, 2023–January 7, 2024), talks about having to convince curators at other institutions that the objects she wanted to borrow could have been made by women—because they are typically catalogued as by an anonymous unknown maker.[3] I wonder if we can say that including lace and paper-cutting in an exhibition is also giving agency to the larger female population operating in the realm of material culture.

34. **GT**: I'm lucky to be at my institution [NMWA] because I feel like I have more latitude due to our mission and our advocacy work, which aims to recognize the work of women across mediums while also calling attention to historical and present gender inequities in the art world. I am constantly thinking through these lenses as I have the opportunity to present these objects and ideas to our visitors. I don't think that's the norm among most art museums at this point, although more and more are starting to push these old boundaries, which is great. I think it's important to organize exhibitions like this because it allows you to ask important questions: when you get right down to it, most museums are founded on patriarchal and colonialist norms that have a narrow definition of what art is (painting and sculpture made, by and large, by white men) and how it should be displayed.

35. **KD**: I think we are still wrestling with those inherited patriarchal norms and their impact on perceptions of quality. Years ago, when I was involved in an exhibition titled *The Road to Van Eyck* in Rotterdam, we had loans from the Staatliches Museum Schwerin that had long been considered to be produced at the Cistercian Convent of the Holy Cross near Rostock. These were small, early fifteenth-century triptychs (**fig. 13**), and the quality was not very high: slightly exaggerated eyes, noses, and mouths, with elongated hands and feet. It was always said the nuns who lived in that convent painted them in their cells or in the cloister somewhere, and this was accepted only because of their rather modest quality.

36. In my research on these paintings, I uncovered a number of related works: a small one in quatrefoil format from the Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Ghent, which had been rightly attributed to an anonymous Early Netherlandish artist; a medium-sized panel from the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud in Cologne; and a triptych (**fig. 14**) from the Art Institute of Chicago, which Erwin Panofsky had called Flemish. There is also another triptych that corresponds to these works, depicting the Calvary in the center and scenes from the Passion on the wings, with a very early known provenance: it comes from the fifteenth-century funeral chapel of Don Pedro López de Ayala in the Castilian convent of Quejana in Álava. Given that we know that Flemish masters sold works for export at art fairs in the Southern Netherlands and that Panofsky had assigned one painting of this

related group to the Flemish school, it is far more likely that the Schwerin works originated in Flanders rather than nearby Rostock. My research demonstrates that art historians have been far too quick to explain works of lesser quality as by women artists. Instead, they could have been made for export.

37. **JNC**: Katrin, your tale makes clear that the "unnamed artists" category raises the issue of quality, which inevitably comes up when one has these conversations. Maureen, what are your thoughts?

38. **MW**: I think a lot of these issues concerning quality and the name or knowledge of the maker are actually bound up in two things: current market value, which I think continues to disproportionately affect scholarly and museum interest, and our field's tendency to stick with the Giorgio-Vasarian, single-maker, "hand of the genius" conception of fine art. When artwork is defined narrowly in terms of a single maker's genius, which produces something worth a lot of money, that definition excludes a lot of different types of objects. When I was working on my dissertation on Dutch political prints, I was occasionally asked by other art historians if I should have been a historian rather than an art historian because I examined more ephemeral forms of printmaking and not so-called "art" prints. The assumption was that all political prints were fundamentally less accomplished because their intention allegedly privileged content over style.

39. I think that while many fields of art history have had no trouble embracing material culture, it became ingrained in our narratives of premodern European art to exclude these objects. For museums that have a mandate to include history, such as the Rijksmuseum, I think they can more comfortably include these objects, and that their audiences accept them more readily. I'm quite fortunate that, with a research mandate, I can include such things in my exhibitions. But there remains an expectation that certain types of professional accomplishment are what makes something good and worthy of study, not only among our audiences but also among a lot of our art historian and curator peers.

40. **LVDW**: I really agree with you, Maureen, and that's also one of the things that we've been thinking about a lot at the Rijksmuseum. We can only measure women artists, as you said, Ginny, who had the same education and opportunities as men when trying to assess quality. Quality, in this context, is a construct shaped by the principles and rules of traditional art history. But more diverse forms of quality emerge when we look at how someone carried out their work and what they achieved, rather than focusing on what they failed to accomplish. We need to evolve our standards of quality, and I think people are ready for it. Not all people, certainly, but I think some forget that the public might want to see something other than what our classically trained, art historical eye may dictate. We're shifting towards a broader understanding of quality bit by bit.

41. **GT**: Yes, this issue of quality is fascinating because I think, as we are observing, it has been used as an excuse to exclude a lot of artists and makers who fall outside of the conventional definition of what art is. We used to sell a t-shirt in our shop which said, "Men make bad art, too." It was a particularly powerful statement in the gift shop of the National Museum of Women in the Arts. The idea that women's production is inferior to men's is an idea that

extends well into the twentieth century. Time and time again, this assertion just does not hold up when you look at the evidence. Take, for example, Rachel Ruysch, who was an extraordinary painter and tremendously famous in her day. There is no way that you can argue that the quality of her work was not as good as that of male painters of the time. If you look at the sales data for her work, her paintings consistently sold well throughout the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. We will publish our research in the forthcoming Women Artists catalogue, but Bernd Ebert has recently shown that her paintings were frequently estimated at around 100 guilders and, at times, up to 750 guilders each.[4] And yet she's not included in many twentieth-century surveys of the art of this period. The whole claim of the issue of quality simply doesn't hold up under scrutiny.

42. **KD**: That was precisely the aim of my show, putting female and male artists next to each other to show that there is no inherent difference in the quality of their production. But as you suggested, Ginny, quality has been gendered over time.

Biography and the Market

43. **JNC**: I wanted to go back to women artists in the galleries. Many curators are in institutions that adopt a formal analysis of works, with some social context thrown in for good measure. In terms of the stories that we tell in our galleries and bringing women artists into those stories, perhaps even presenting them at the fore of our galleries, where does biography play a role? Some scholars, like Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, have argued that biography marginalizes women, highlighting their differences and othering them.[5] Others have claimed that it explains some of the discrepancies in experience and training: that their careers had been cut short by the social contract of marriage, for example, or lack of access to the female nude, as Linda Nochlin highlights.[6] To what degree do you think biography is important to foreground in your galleries, both permanent collection and exhibition?

44. **LVDW**: We have guidelines for that at the Rijksmuseum. We have rewritten a lot of labels in our galleries, and our intention is not to reference biography unless it is relevant to what is visible in the object or pertinent to the story being told in the gallery. We want a woman's career to be seen as a given, not something that is constantly framed as exceptional.

45. **KD**: In my exhibition about female artists and their male relations [*Ingenious Women*], the biographies were quite important. But it was also my aim to share with visitors the social background of the male and female artists, the connections among families, and differences among women artists' status in different countries, like Germany, France, and the Netherlands. For these reasons, I incorporated biography deliberately into the exhibition, and it played quite an important role.

46. The exhibition had seven sections, and in each one, a female artist was selected to tell visitors about her life and how she became an artist. Visitors could read these short biographies on a postcard specifically designed for each individual, or they could access more detailed biographies—digital essays—available via a QR code on labels in the exhibition. The latter was conceived with an eye toward relating the perpetual challenges to female artists' productivity and success to our female visitors today. How, for example, did

Rachel Ruysch and Lavinia Fontana manage the work-life balance; how did they manage to have children and paint at the same time? We really tried to make more visible the lives of earlier female artists and highlight their experiences and living circumstances. For example, the gifted naturalist Maria Sibylla Merian, who was represented in our exhibition with wonderful works such as the *Blumenbuch*, was not allowed to paint in oil because this was not permitted for women under the painting regulations in German-speaking regions. She was, however, allowed to paint with watercolors. She was also held in higher esteem as an artist in the more cosmopolitan Netherlands than in Germany. A special exhibition, through carefully selected loans, can often expand the possibilities of exploring such themes beyond what is possible with just the permanent collection.

47. **LVDW**: And in your case, biography was very relevant for the story you wanted to tell. We would do the same thing in that case.

48. **GT**: It's an interesting question because all of these points are valid. I'm always interested in people's stories and histories, be they men or women. Part of the reason I wanted to do a multi-artist exhibition is that, when you put women in relation to each other, you can appreciate their differences much more than you can when thinking about them as a uniform group.

49. I think the narrative about women artists—that they married and had kids and didn't have time to paint—is no longer automatically accepted. Yes, in certain cases, it is true, but not in all. I did a small exhibition in 2019 on seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish women artists; it was just one room. Most of the objects were from our collection. And I had a painting by Judith Leyster (**fig. 15**) hanging next to one by Rachel Ruysch (**fig. 16**). I started thinking that on the surface, they have so much in common: they are both women artists who trained—they were not born into artistic families, per se—with outside masters. They both married other artists. They both had children. But the trajectory of Ruysch's career was much different than Leyster's. What was the differentiating factor? Socio-economic status. Leyster was the daughter of a clothmaker and brewer, whereas Ruysch was the daughter of the renowned anatomist and professor of botany Frederik Ruysch, and she had ample access to his acclaimed collection of botanical specimens. Again, I think biography can be advantageous in highlighting the differences in women artists' experiences in order to make clear that they did not all have the same experience. Largely, it was their social situation that dictated the course of their career and the shape of their lives, more so than their gender.

50. **JNC**: Class remains a rather taboo topic across society, as well as in museums. Let's be honest: many of the objects that we steward in our collections were luxury goods that were owned by the wealthy. This partially accounts for why they still exist today. Maureen, as you orchestrate interdisciplinary conversations in the museum, is biography something that you emphasize, or does it depend on the situation?

51. **MW**: We have two works by early modern Netherlandish women: the Anna Ruysch mentioned above and an engraved self-portrait by Anna Maria van Schurman (**fig. 17**). For Anna Maria van Schurman, I try to place her in the larger narrative of the intellectual arguments in favor of women's education, as they have varied across classes and locations. Biography is absolutely central for Anna Ruysch. I don't know how you cannot talk about

her father the botanical specialist and her sister the painter when discussing her work. Given our university context, I generally highlight the still life's scientific context. Few visitors realize the significance of botany and its connection to medicine in early modern Europe. Exploring biography, and more specifically the impact of Anna's father, Frederik, on her work, enables you to delve into how botany and anatomy—the foundations of medical study—not only undergirded early modern healthcare but also informed a whole host of other issues, from global trade to crime and punishment.

52. **JNC**: It is not only in our current day that there is an awareness of the unique position of women artists on the market. As you write in one of your catalogue essays, Katrin, Giovanni Lanfranco famously proclaimed that his paintings could be sold for twice their price if they were thought to be by a woman.[7] Just a few weeks ago, a dealer at TEFAF (The European Fine Art Fair) proclaimed to me that there is such a rush on women artists that they can't keep them in stock anymore. Do you find that actually to be the case, or should we nuance that statement? What are your larger thoughts about being a curator interested in women artists and the state of the market? Katrin, can your research on signatures on paintings connect to this topic?

53. **KD**: As already mentioned, we are not a collecting institution, so I cannot buy art, but my observation is that, indeed, the prices are incredibly high. I think that a lot of museums cannot afford to buy works by female artists. And yet, as you said, once a dealer at TEFAF has a work by a woman artist, it is sold almost instantaneously. On the one hand, it is nice that female artists now have a certain value and are on the radar screens of a larger audience, but on the other hand, it is not easy for public museums to acquire these objects. It is almost a stroke of fortune when museums succeed in acquiring funds for works by female artists who have come to the attention of the public in recent years.

54. Works by female artists remained much less common than works by male artists in the early modern period, which is why they were so sought-after and fetched such high prices. This is probably why they signed their work more often than their male colleagues did. Even today, the signature is still the starting point for attribution and thus also for pricing.

55. **LVDW**: I agree. It is a double-edged sword: there is appreciation for works that were poorly valued at an earlier point in time, and the fact that their value has increased is also an acknowledgment, in a sense, that it is now worth paying a lot of money for a woman artist. But on the other hand, I have the sense that the art market manufactures a sense of scarcity. In other words, it is wonderful that there is more recognition and appreciation for women artists in the market, but the downside is that it also becomes harder for public institutions to acquire their works. It feels, sometimes, a bit . . .

56. **MW:** Mercenary.

57. **LVDW**: Indeed. It can feel unsettling to manipulate the current move toward inclusivity for financial gain.

58. **GT**: I think a lot of factors are at play, generally speaking, in the market. But we have to be clear about what we're talking about here. We are talking about paintings, and specifically paintings by women artists who now have name recognition. In other words, there is not such a fierce appetite for all women artists, nor is there such desire for all types of art. I do not think prints by women artists, for example, have risen drastically in price in the last ten years. Perhaps they are a bit more expensive than they were, but I don't think that they have reached the same dramatic heights in terms of price as paintings. So, it is definitely a double-edged sword for paintings and paintings only. Then again, this is our bread and butter at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, advocating for gender equity in the arts. If you look at the overall statistics, they are still absolutely pitiful in terms of how women perform on the market and how men perform on the market.[8] And that is across all different eras, early modern as well as contemporary. While it might seem that early modern women artists are having a heyday at this moment, and I think a few of them are, there is far from an equal distribution in terms of pricing. But in terms of museums' desire to collect certain works, I think, for better or for worse, we are still immersed in this cult of personality.

59. **MW**: I would agree with all of that. And just to circle back to the traditional hierarchy of media that continues to lionize paintings, we do have the advantage of being able to put them on long-term view without concerns of damaging them. The risk of light damage has long held back textile arts, among other media in which many women participated, in the fight against adhering to a more traditional hierarchy of media. There are only so many paintings by women to go around, and demand is always going to outpace supply. It is not a question of finding more of them. There just are fewer paintings. I think it is a question of shifting focus to other media in which women practitioners are more abundant, and that will lift some of the market constraints.

Conclusion: Expanding Gender

60. **MW**: I have a question, and it may push the boundaries of our discussion beyond the established parameters. A lot of my colleagues are invested in queer theory; it is one of the primary lenses through which we, as a very contemporary art–heavy institution, consider art. In thinking about our conversation, I wonder if you have received any pushback in terms of your work reaffirming a gender binary. Do you think that a heavy emphasis on women needs to be, and I hate to sound academic, problematized with thinking about nonbinary and intersex people? Are those things in contradiction for curators who work on early modern women in general?

61. **GT**: I will say that, obviously, the National Museum of Women in the Arts has "women" in the title and a mandate to collect and preserve artwork by women. But this is a conversation that we have had internally over the past few years, and it is ongoing. A few years ago, we decided to put a gender statement on our website because of this evolving discussion of gender fluidity within our culture.[9] We also decided that we are going to champion women artists, trans women, and people who are nonbinary. Our whole ethos is to uplift the marginalized. Of course, women have historically been marginalized, but so have a lot of other people on the gender spectrum.

62. **LVDW**: When we research our early modern collection, it is more difficult—although in some cases possible—to think about those kinds of gender layers. But there are many ways to address gender. In the summer of 2024, we had an exhibition titled *Point of View*, curated by my colleagues Marion Anker, Maria Holtrop, and Charles Kang. *Point of View* explored how ideas around gender have been visualized through time, and how they are constantly shifting. For instance, we considered whether objects are gendered—is there such a thing as a male and female desk, for example? But we also tried to include the broader gender questions by asking young photographers to capture their perception of gender identity. The last gallery exhibited their self-portraits (**fig. 18**), which offered that broader scope. It is not something we can do with every exhibition or installation, but we try to investigate the nonbinary when we can.

63. **MW**: I think those are both great approaches. This is one of the reasons we have chosen not to label a gender marker in our collection records. It also, of course, varies by geographic region and historical period, and it would be very difficult to come up with categories that we could use consistently across collections.

64. **GT**: And I will say—forgive me, because I live in Washington, DC and work in a museum in Washington, DC, where national politics is local politics—that what is happening in government now is troubling the art world, too. Not to be alarmist, but these conversations and this type of work are more important than ever in this moment when outside actors are aiming to put everyone back into these boxes that we have fought so hard to escape. I think our cultural institutions, particularly in the United States, are going to be vital sites for standing up for and proclaiming this idea of equity and inclusion, which have now become dirty words.

65. **JNC**: A great concluding point to this conversation, and a reminder of how vital this work in the art historical realm is to our current moment. I appreciate having the four of you come together to discuss this issue: your insightful comments, thoughtful retellings of your experience, and reflections on where your respective institutions are now have revealed valuable perspectives. Thank you for sharing them.

Biographies

Jacquelyn N. Coutré is the Eleanor Wood Prince Curator in Painting and Sculpture of Europe at the Art Institute of Chicago and a specialist in early modern Northern European painting. She holds an M.A. and Ph.D. from New York University and a B.A. from Indiana University. Her exhibitions and publications address Rembrandt and his circle, histories of taste and collecting, and artistic rivalry and exchange in the early modern era. She is an associate editor of the *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* and has published and co-edited articles, festschrifts, and exhibition catalogues, including *Leiden circa 1630: Rembrandt Emerges* (Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 2019) and *Van Gogh and the Avant-Garde: The Modern Landscape* (The Art Institute of Chicago, 2023).

jcoutre@artic.edu

Katrin Dyballa is a curator at the Bucerius Kunst Forum in Hamburg, where she curated the exhibition *Ingenious Women:. Women Artists and Their Companions* (2024–2025). Her focus lies in the Old Masters. She wrote her doctoral thesis on the Nuremberg artist Georg Pencz (ca. 1500–1550). She has co-curated several exhibitions at the Städel Museum in Frankfurt am Main and the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, for example on Albrecht Dürer, Hieronymus Bosch, and Jean Fouquet. Her most recent publications in this field include the catalogue of early Netherlandish and French painting at the Gemäldegalerie (2024).

dyballa@buceriuskunstforum.de

Viginia Treanor is the senior curator at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. She holds a Ph.D. in seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish art, which she earned at the University of Maryland under the direction of Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., former curator of Dutch and Flemish painting at the National Gallery of Art. She has worked at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the National Gallery of Art, among other institutions. Committed to scholarship that both elucidates and contextualizes the contributions of women artists, she has curated exhibitions on seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century art, as well as numerous contemporary projects.

vtreanor@nmwa.org

Maureen Warren is curator of European and American art at Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. She is a specialist in early modern European art and works of art on paper. She was the content editor for and lead author of *Paper Knives, Paper Crowns: Political Prints in the Dutch Republic* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), a project that stemmed from her doctoral thesis on print media depicting the executed politician Johan van Oldenbarnevelt (1547–1619).

maureen@illinois.edu

Laurien van der Werff is co-chair of the project *Women of the Rijksmuseum* and research associate for that project and the Rijksmuseum Print Room. She specializes in early modern (art) history, works on paper, and paleography. She most recently published an article in the *Rijksmuseum Bulletin* on the role of women in the print publishing and printing industry in the late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Low Countries.

l.van.der.werff@rijksmuseum.nl

Illustrations

Fig. 1 Installation Photograph of *Women Artists: 1550-1950*, an exhibition installed at the Brooklyn Museum October 1 through November 27, 1977. The exhibition was shown previously at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, December 23, 1976 - March 13, 1977; the University of Texas at Austin, April 12 - June 12, 1977; and the Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, July 14 - September 4, 1977 (artwork in the public domain)

Fig. 2 Levina Teerlinc, *A Girl, formerly thought to be Queen Elizabeth I, as Princess*, 1549, paint on vellum on card, d: 4.8 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, inv. no. P.21-1954 (artwork in the public domain)

Fig. 3 Clara Peeters, *Table with a Cloth, Salt Cellar, Gilt Tazza, Pie, Jug, Porcelain Dish with Olives, and Roast Fowl*, ca. 1611, oil on panel, 55 x 73 cm. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, inv. no. P001622 (artwork in the public domain)

Fig. 4 Michaelina Wautier, *Triumph of Bacchus*, before 1659, oil on canvas, 270 cm x 354 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, inv. no. GG_3548 (artwork in the public domain)

Fig. 5 Gallery of Honor, Rijksmuseum, 2015. Photo: Erik Smits

Fig. 6 Maria van Oosterwijck, *Vanitas Still Life*, ca. 1690, oil on canvas, 30 x 40 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Acquired with support from the VriendenLoterij and the Women of the Rijksmuseum Fund, inv. no. SK-A-5104 (artwork in the public domain)

Fig. 7 Wallerant Vaillant, *Portrait of Painter Maria van Oosterwijck*, 1671, oil on canvas, 96 x 77.8 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. SK-A-1292 (artwork in the public domain)

Fig. 8 Installation photograph of Maria van Oosterwijck's *Vanitas Still Life* with Wallerant Vaillant's portrait of her in the Rijksmuseum's Gallery of Honor, 2025. Image: Laurien van der Werff

Fig. 9 Anna Ruysch, *Still Life of Flowers in a Glass Vase on a Stone Table Ledge*, ca. 1690s, oil on canvas, 64 x 54 cm. Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana, Museum purchase through the John N. Chester Fund and the Richard M. and Rosann Gelvin Noel Krannert Art Museum Fund, inv. no. 2017-18-1 (artwork in the public domain)

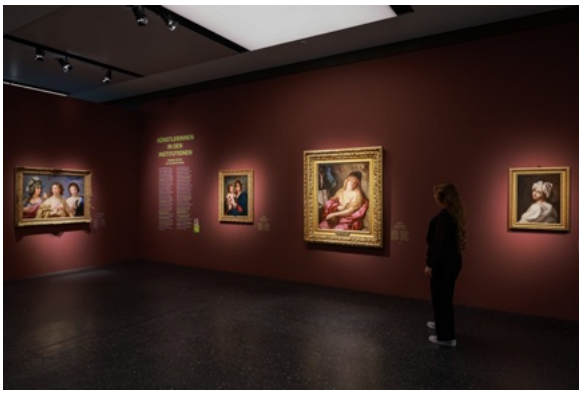

Fig. 10 Installation view of the section *Women Artists in Art Institutions*, with paintings by Elisabetta Sirani, Andrea Sirani and Ginevra Cantofoli in Ingenious Women: Women Artists and Their Companions, Bucerius Kunst Forum, Hamburg

Fig. 11 Flemish, *Lace Fragment,* early 17th century, linen, h: 13.3 cm. Cooper Hewitt Design Museum, New York City, Bequest of Marian Hague, inv. no. 1971-50-347 (artwork in the public domain)

Fig. 12 Johanna Koerten Block, P*aper-Cutting with a Portrait of King Stadholder Willem III*, ca. 1700, paper, 31.5 x 25.8 cm. Museum de Lakenhal, Leiden, on loan from Ars Aemula Naturae, Leiden, since 1928, inv. no. B12

Fig. 13 Southern Netherlands, *Triptych of the Crucifixion*, ca. 1410, oil on wood, center panel 39.5 x 20 cm, wings each 10 cm. Staatliches Museum, Schwerin (artwork in the public domain)

Fig. 14 Netherlandish or German (possibly Rhenish), *Triptych of the Crucifixion with Saints Anthony*, Christopher, James and George, ca. 1400, tempera and oil on panel. Left wing: 56.6 × 20.6 cm; center: 56.7 × 40.4 cm; right wing: 56.8 × 20 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection, inv. no. 1947.394 (artwork in the public domain)

Fig. 15 Judith Leyster, *The Concert*, ca. 1633, oil on canvas, 61 x 79.4 cm. National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington DC, Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay. Photo: Lee Stalsworth

Fig. 16 Rachel Ruysch, *Roses, Convolvulus, Poppies, and Other Flowers in an Urn on a Stone Ledge*, ca. late 1680s, oil on canvas, 108 x 83.8 cm. National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington DC, Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay. Photo: Lee Stalsworth

Fig. 17 Anna Maria van Schurman, *Self-Portrait,* 1640, etching and engraving on laid paper, 20.3 x 15.6 cm. Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Museum Purchase Iver M. Nelson Jr. Fund, inv. no. 2021-2-2 (artwork in the public domain)

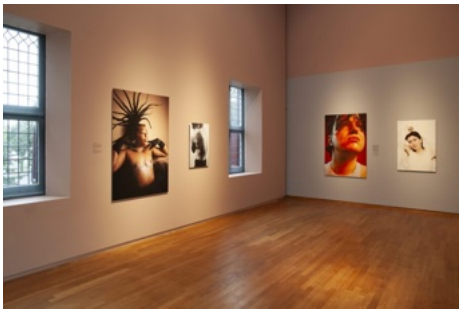

Fig. 18 Installation photo of *Point of View*, July 5–September 1, 2024, featuring (from left to right) Bete van Meeuwen (they/them), Portrait of Ize Silva dos Santos Medina (they/their/them /theirs), 2024; Jesse van Dijk (he/him), Self-Portrait, 2024; Ruben Harms (he/him), Self-Portrait, 2024; Jesse van Dijk (he/him), Portrait of Joost van der Mout (they/their/theirs), 2024. Photo: Rijksmuseum/Albertine Dijkema

Endnotes

1. Sophia Mendicino, "Lost in the Landscape: Curatorial Research and Emily Groom's *Winter Stream*," Krannert Art Museum, accessed July 8, 2025, https://kam.illinois.edu/resource/lost-landscape-curatorial-research-and-emily-grooms-winter-stream.
2. Katrin Dyballa, ed., *Geniale Frauen: Künstlerinnen und ihre Weggefährtinnen* (Munich: Hirmer, 2023).
3. Andaleeb Banta, "The Making of *Making Her Mark*: Expanding Beyond Traditional Curatorial Priorities," *CODARTfeatures*, June 2024, accessed July 9, 2025, https://www.codart.nl/feature/curators-project/the-making-of-making-her-mark/.
4. Berndt Ebert, "Beyond Beauty: Collecting Ruysch in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in Robert Schindler, Bernd Ebert, and Anna C. Knaap, *Rachel Ruysch: Nature into Art* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2024), 175.
5. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, "Preface (1980)," in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), xli.
6. Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *ARTNews* 69, no. 9 (January 1971): 32–36.
7. Katrin Dyballa, "Zu den Signaturen bei Künstlerinnen und Künstlern," in Dyballa, *Geniale Frauen*, 35.
8. "Get the Facts: Learn About Gender Inequity in the Arts with Some Eye-Opening Facts," *National Museum of Women in the Arts*, accessed July 9, 2025, https://nmwa.org/support/advocacy/get-facts
9. "Gender Identity Statement," last reviewed May 2024, National Museum of Women in the Arts, accessed July 9, 2025, https://nmwa.org/support/advocacy/get-facts.

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