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WOMEN,

ART, AND

SOCIETY

Revised edition



For Moira

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more historically common form of address by patronym. The fathers of artist daughters are identified by full name while the daughters are most often referred to by family name; for example, Gentileschi refers to Artemisia Gentileschi, while her father is called Orazio Gentileschi. The problem of naming is only the first of a complex set of issues to do with women and language, the first of which is explored in an introductory chapter on the writing of art history and women artists.

Art History and the Woman Artist

The origins of art history's focus on the personalities and work of exceptional individuals can be traced back to the early Renaissance desire to celebrate Italian cities and the achievements of their more remarkable male citizens. The new ideal of the artist as a learned man and the work of art as the unique expression of a gifted individual first appears in Leon Battista Alberti's treatise, *On Painting*, published in 1435. The emphasis of modern art historical scholarship, beginning in the late eighteenth century and profoundly influenced by idealist philosophy, on the autonomy of the art object has closely identified with this view of the artist as a solitary genius, his creativity mapped and given value in monographs and catalogues. Since the nineteenth century, art history has also been closely aligned with the establishing of authorship, which forms the basis of the economic valuing of Western art. Our language and expectations about art have tended to rank that produced by women as below that produced by men in "quality," resulting in lesser monetary value. This has profoundly influenced our knowledge and understanding of the contributions made by women to painting and sculpture. The number of women artists, well known in their own day, but whose work apparently no longer exists, is a tantalizing indication of the vagaries of artistic attribution.

Any study of women artists must examine how art history is written and the assumptions that underlie its hierarchies, especially if the numerous cases of attributions to male artists of works by women are to be reviewed. Let us consider three paradigmatic cases from three centuries: Marietta Robusti, the sixteenth-century Venetian painter; Judith Leyster, the seventeenth-century Dutch painter; a group of women artists prominent in the circle of Jacques-Louis David, the eighteenth-century French painter; and Edmonia Lewis, the black nineteenth-century American sculptor. Their stories elucidate the way art history's emphasis on individual genius has distorted our understanding of workshop procedures and the nature of collaborative artistic production. They also illustrate the extent to which art history's close alliance with art market economics has affected the

attribution of women's art and how the knowledge of gender can affect the ways in which we literally see works of art.

Marietta Robusti was the eldest daughter of Jacopo Robusti, the Venetian painter better known as Tintoretto. Her birth, probably in 1560, was followed by those of three brothers and four sisters. Her sister Ottavia became a skilled needlewoman in the Benedictine nunnery of S. Amia di Castello; Robusti and her brothers Domenico and Marco (and possibly Giovanni Battista) entered the Tintoretto workshop as youths. It is known that she worked there more or less full-time for fifteen years and that her fame as a portrait painter spread as far as the courts of Spain and Austria. Her likeness of Jacopo Strada, Emperor Maximilian II's antiquarian, so impressed the emperor that she was invited first to his court as painter and subsequently to the court of Philip II of Spain. Her father refused to allow her to leave and instead found her a husband, Jacopo d'Augusta, the head of the Venetian silversmiths' guild, to whom she was betrothed on condition that she not leave Tintoretto's household in his lifetime. Four years later, aged thirty, she died in childbirth.

The model of artistic production in Italy had shifted from that of crafts produced by skilled artisans to works of art by the inspired genius of an individual creator. In sixteenth-century Venice, where the change occurred more slowly than in Florence and Rome, the family was still a unit of production (as well as consumption), and family businesses of all sorts were a common feature. Tintoretto's workshop, organized around the members of his immediate family, would have been classified as a craft under guild regulation. Similar to the dynastic family workshops of Veronese and Bellini in Venice, Pollaiuolo, Rossellino, and della Robbia in Florence, the workshop provides the context within which to examine Robusti's career (or what little we know of it). At the same time, that career is inextricably bound up with Tintoretto's, understood since the sixteenth century as the expression of an individual temperament.

As Tintoretto's daughter, Robusti's social and economic autonomy would have been no greater than those of other women of the artisan class. Nevertheless, remarks by Tintoretto's biographer Carlo Ridolfi about her musical skills and deportment, published in 1648, suggest that she was also part of a changing ideal of femininity that now emphasized musical and artistic skills for women, as well as some education. Other accounts of Tintoretto and his workshop offer a series of paradoxes with regard to a daughter whose hand was apparently indistinguishable from that of her father, whose painting



2 Marietta Robusti
Portrait of an Old Man With Boy
c. 1585

was sufficiently good to be confused with his, and whose fame must have continued after her death since Ridolfi placed her among the most illustrious women of all time.

Robusti, like her brother Domenico (who inherited the workshop on Tintoretto's death and was thus considered the new "master"), learned to paint portraits in her father's style. It is commonly assumed that her achievements were largely due to his influence. This facile assumption, however, is a product of modern scholarship. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources point in two directions: Robusti's close ties to her father and his production, and her independent achievement. Although Ridolfi mentions portraits by Robusti of all the members of the silversmiths' guild, Adolfo Venturi in 1929 was alone among twentieth-century art historians in tentatively identifying as hers a group of paintings in the manner of Tintoretto; his dubious but all too common grounds of reasoning was that they display a "sentimental femininity, a womanly grace that is strained and resolute." Most modern scholars attribute only a single work to her, the *Portrait of an Old Man With Boy* (c. 1585). Long considered one of Tintoretto's finest portraits, it was not until 1920 that the work was found to be signed with Robusti's monogram. Even so, the reattribution has subsequently been questioned.

The workshop's prodigious output, a subject of much comment ever since the humanist Pietro Aretino first commended Tintoretto's "speed in execution accompanied by excellence" in the sixteenth century, has helped to define the artistic genius of its Master. Though many Tintoretto scholars acknowledge the problems of attribution in the workshop, they generally embrace a model of almost superhuman production and use it to build an image of "greatness" for the artist.

Hans Tietze in 1948 proposed a "Tintorettesque style" to encompass the varied hands at work: "The Tintorettesque style is not only an impoverishment but also an enrichment of the style of Tintoretto; it enters into innumerable combinations with the personal style, makes transitions and mixtures possible, increases the master's scope, augments his effectiveness, and affords opportunity for trying out on a larger scale artistic principles which in reality are his own personal property." Thus the collective style called "Tintorettesque" is used to prove the individual genius of the artist Tintoretto, leading inexorably to Tietze's conclusion that, "Works in which pupils certainly had a considerable share—as for instance the two mighty late works in San Giorgio Maggiore—are among his most important and most personal creations." Constructions such as this make it all but impossible to disentangle Robusti from her father. Since women were not credited with artistic genius, an art history committed to proving male genius can only subsume women's contributions under those of men. Although in many extant Tintoretto portraits an "amazing variability of brushstroke" is detected, this has not led to new interpretations of workshop production that differ significantly from conventional views of individual creation.

It is widely assumed that Robusti assisted in the preparation of large altarpieces, as did all workshop assistants. Yet surely we should question Francesco Valcanover's 1985 assertion that in the 1580s, "assistants were largely confined to working on less important areas of the canvas, not only because of the family tie and the submission that could be expected but also because of the imperiousness of the recognized master that Tintoretto had by now become. . . . What responsibility they may have been allowed must therefore have been partial and at best modest." It is clear from Robusti's renown by the 1580s that she had achieved considerable status as a painter, although we do not know precisely what that meant. Nor do we know how it related to her continuing participation in the workshop. The model Valcanover assumes for the Tintoretto workshop is more conservative

and hierarchical than that of many other sixteenth-century artists' studios, but we lack the documentary evidence to challenge his view conclusively.

The imposition of modern views of originality and artistic individuality on workshop production obscures the actual development of painters like Robusti and her brother Domenico by putting them all under the name of Tintoretto despite contemporary evidence of independent achievement. Although it is clear that as a female member of Tintoretto's household Robusti was subservient and that her short life resulted in limited production, it is in fact modern scholarship that has buried her artistic life under that of her father and brother. Rather than seeing the workshop as a site of a range of production, modern scholars have redefined it as a place where lowly assistants painted angels' wings while a "Master" artist breathed life into the Madonna's features. Even Ridolfi's remark about the slackening of Tintoretto's "fury for work" upon Robusti's death in 1590, which he and others have attributed solely to a father's grief at the death of a beloved daughter, demands rereading in the light of the loss of so capable an assistant.

By the nineteenth century, interest in Robusti expressed itself primarily by transforming her into a popular subject for Romantic painters. Attracted by the familial bonds and the melancholy of her early death, they recast her as a tubercular heroine passively expiring as she stimulated her father to new creative heights. Léon Cogniet's *Tintoretto Painting His Dead Daughter*, exhibited at the Musée Classique du Bazar Bonne-Nouvelle in 1846, influenced both Karl Girardet and Eleuterio Pagliano to produce works on the same subject. They were followed by Philippe Jeanron's *Tintoretto and His Daughter* of 1857, in which the female painter has become a muse and model for her father. During this period Robusti also figured in a novel by George Sand and a play by the painter Luigi Marta, *Tintoretto and His Daughter*. First staged in Milan in 1845, the play includes a deathbed scene in which the dying young woman now inspires Paolo Veronese.

The bizarre but all too common transformation of the woman artist from a producer in her own right into a subject for representation forms a leitmotif in the history of art. Confounding subject and object, it undermines the speaking position of the individual woman artist by generalizing her. Denied her individuality, she is displaced from being a producer and becomes instead a sign for male creativity. Zoffany's depictions of Kauffmann and Moser turned them into portrait types in which their individual features are barely discernible.

Robusti's metamorphosis into a dying muse turns her into an ideal of quietly suffering femininity.

The second case concerns the pressure that financial greed exerts on correct attribution. Since the monetary value of works of art is inextricably bound up in their attribution to "named" artists, the work of many women has been absorbed into that of their better-known male colleagues. Although not restricted to the work of women, such misattributions have contributed to the perception that women produce less. Ironically, some women have suffered from the overattribution to them of inferior work. To reassemble the *oeuvre* of the eighteenth-century Venetian painter Giulia Lama, Germaine Greer reported, scholars were forced to borrow from the work of Federico Bencovich, Tiepolo, Domenico Maggioletto, Francesco Capella, Antonio Petrini, Jan Lyss, and even Zurbarán. Thus it comes as no surprise that Judith Leyster, one of the best-known painters of seventeenth-century Holland, was almost completely lost from history from the end of that century until 1893, when Cornelius Hofstede de Groot discovered her monogram on *The Happy Couple* (1630) which he had just sold to the Louvre as a Frans Hals.

Judith Leyster, the daughter of a small ware-weaver who later became a brewer, was born in Haarlem in 1609. She is believed to have studied with the painter Frans Pietersz de Grebber and, by 1633, was a member of Haarlem's Guild of St. Luke. The only female member of the painters' guild known to have had a workshop, and the only woman painter actively involved in the art market, her early work shows the influence of Hendrick Terbrugghen and the Utrecht Caravaggisti. Determined to meet the demands of the open market, she modeled her painting style on that of Frans Hals (with whom she may have worked briefly) and his younger brother Dirck.

The attribution of her work has been further complicated by the paucity of her *oeuvre* (around twenty paintings are presently known) and by the fact that they were all executed within a relatively short period of time—between 1629 and 1635. This clearly makes it difficult to trace stylistic developments evident in the work of artists—usually male—whose output spans many years; often uninterrupted by childcare and domestic responsibilities.

The fact that in 1635 Leyster is recorded as having three male pupils is a good indication of her status as an artist, as is her inclusion in Samuel Ampzing's description of Haarlem in 1627. In 1636, she married the painter Jan Miense Molenaer, with whom she had five children. Twenty years later she seems to have been completely forgotten.



1 Judith Leyster *The Happy Couple* 1630



4 Judith Leyster *The Jolly Toper* 1629

As Frima Fox Hofrichter, author of a recent catalogue raisonné, points out, prior to 1892 no museum held any paintings attributed to her, her name was not recorded in sale catalogues, and no prints after her paintings were inscribed with her name.

As early as the eighteenth century, when Sir Luke Schaub acquired *The Happy Couple* as a Hals, her work had already begun to disappear into the *oeuvres* of Gerard van Honthorst and Molenaer, as well as Hals. Prices for Dutch painting remained painfully low until the latter part of the nineteenth century; then the emergence of "modern" art with its painterly surfaces and sketch-like finishes, the aesthetic tastes of the British royal family, and the appearance of wealthy private collectors all contributed to a burgeoning demand for Dutch paintings. As late as 1854 the connoisseur Gustav Waager could write of Hals that "the value of this painter has not been sufficiently appreciated"; by 1890 demand outpaced supply.

In the early 1890s, when Hals prices were rising dramatically, Leyster's name was known, but no work by her hand had been identified. Hofstede de Groot's discovery that the Louvre's *Happy Couple* was by Leyster led to the reattribution of seven paintings to her. In 1875 the Kaiser-Friedrich Museum in Berlin had purchased a Leyster

- 4 *Jolly Töper* as a Hals; a work sold in Brussels in 1890 bore her monogram crudely altered to read as an interlocking F.H. Another *Jolly Töper*, acquired by Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum in 1897, and one of "Hals's" best-known works, bears her monogram and the date 1629. Her emergence as an artist in her own right, however, was blurred in turn by her close connection to Hals and the many copies after Hals subsequently attributed to her. The attributions in Juliane Harms's series of articles on Leyster published in 1929 have been challenged by de Groot and, more recently, by Frima Fox Hofrichter.

Leyster's reemergence as an artist of stature in the twentieth century, however, remains subject to all the vagaries of interpretation. Some critics have felt it necessary to remind their readers that she was, after all, a woman and a sexual being. Hofrichter notes that in 1928 Robert Dangers suggested that Leyster was Rembrandt's lover (the suggestion was subsequently repeated in some general histories); others have speculated on a relationship with Frans Hals, for which there is no evidence. Walter Liedtke, reviewing the 1993 exhibition of her work and quoting from the exhibition catalogue, argues that "Leyster's fading from fame was in a sense self-imposed, considering that in a career of only seven years, she 'made a determined effort to break into this [Haarlem's] exclusive and demanding market, hoping to achieve some measure of recognition by imitating her contemporaries Frans Hals, Dirck Hals and Jan Miense Molenaer.'" Such refusals to explore the actual conditions of Leyster's production only lead to insinuations that her reputation, when finally secured, was not truly deserved.

Leyster's work, though painted in the manner of Hals, is not the same. Nevertheless, the ease with which her works have been sold as his in a market eager for Hals at any price offers a sober warning to art historians committed to a view of women's productions as obviously inferior to those of men. "Some women artists tend to emulate Frans Hals," noted James Laver in 1964, "but the vigorous brushstrokes of the master were beyond their capability. One has only to look at the work of a painter like Judith Leyster to detect the weakness of the feminine hand." Yet many have looked and not seen; the case of Judith Leyster offers irrefutable evidence of the ways that seeing is qualified by greed, desire, and expectation.

- That there is a direct relationship between what we see and what we expect to see is nowhere clearer than in the case of three well-known "David" paintings in American museum collections. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Portrait of Mademoiselle Charlotte du Val d'Ognes* (c. 1801) was purchased as a David for \$200,000 in 1922 under

the terms of a bequest. In 1952, The Frick Collection purchased a *Portrait of Antonio Bruni* (1804) through Knoedler & Co., and in 1943 the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University acquired a *Portrait of Dublin-Tornelle* (c. 1799) from a bequest. All three were believed to be by David.

Jacques-Louis David, chronicler of the Revolution and painter to Emperor Napoleon, was France's foremost artist from the 1780s until his exile in 1816. As a popular teacher when reforms initiated by the Revolution had opened the Salons to unrestricted participation by women (the number of exhibiting women artists increased dramatically from 28 in 1801 to 67 in 1822), David played a not inconsiderable role in the training and development of female talent in the early years of the nineteenth century. Moreover, he encouraged his women pupils to paint both portraits and historical subjects, and to submit them regularly to the Salon. George Wildenstein's publication of a list of all the portraits exhibited at the Salon in Paris between 1800 and 1826 greatly aided attempts to sort out the profusion of portraits executed in the Davidian style. It contributed directly to the reattribution of the *Charlotte du Val d'Ognes* to Constance Marie Charpentier in 1951, the *Portrait of Antonio Bruni* to Césarine Davin-Mirvault in 1962, and that of *Dublin-Tornelle* to Adélaïde Labille-Guiard in 1971. All three women were followers or pupils of David and their portraits, like the works by David which inspired them, are characterized by the strong presence of the sitter against simple, often dark backgrounds, clarity of form, academic finish, and candid definitions of character. The existence of three such outstanding examples of late eighteenth-century portraiture should provoke future art historical investigation into David's role as a teacher of women.

The finding, during reattribution to lesser-known artists, that works of art are "simply not up to the high technical standards" of the "Master" is common. The shifting language that often accompanies reattributions where gender is an issue is only one aspect of a larger problem. Art history has never separated the question of artistic style from the inscription of sexual difference in representation. Discussions of style are consistently cast in terms of masculinity and femininity. Analyses of paintings are replete with references to "virile" handling of form or "feminine" touch. The opposition of "effeminate" and "heroic" runs through classic texts like Walter Friedlaender's *David to Delacroix*, where it is used to emphasize aesthetic differences between the Rococo and Neoclassical styles. Such gendered analogies make it difficult to visualize distinctions of paint handling without thinking in