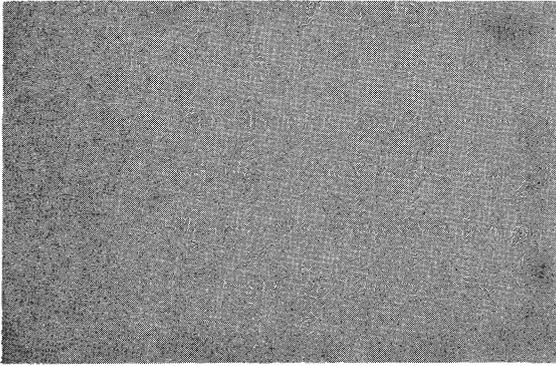
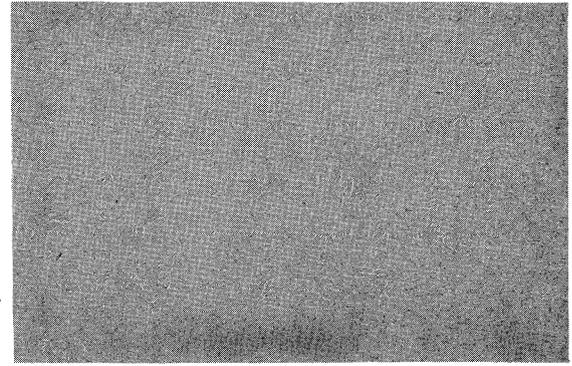


Women Artists: We Were There All Along

Maryon Kantaroff



Maryon Kantaroff, 'Flowering' 1975. T.E. Moore



**Femmes artistes: nous avons toujours été là—
Maryon Kantaroff**

**Une exploration des façons dont la contribution des
femmes dans les arts depuis les temps primitifs a été sous-
estimée, dissimulée et même effacée de l'histoire de l'art.**

From the beginning of time, the image of the artist has been shrouded in mystery. Equally, from the beginning of time, the image of woman has been veiled in mystery. What is it that the two have in common? Clearly, what they share is the power to create something from nothing. In the most primitive times, there is little doubt that the female body was viewed with great awe when it was observed to swell up and then deliver itself of a child. Similarly, the creative imagination seen to grow with the seed of an idea and deliver itself of a work of art was viewed with reverence.

In spite of all our scientific knowledge, both woman and the artist are still credited with mysterious powers. Both appear to be esteemed and placed on a pedestal; and both, because of these powers, are treated as outsiders and viewed with deep suspicion. But there is a fundamental discrepancy here. In spite of the many long-standing similarities between the artist and the woman, the making of art is presumed to be an aptitude and spiritual urge of men only.

In light of the modern prejudices which take for granted that women have little artistic genius, it is interesting to survey the recent studies of anthropologists. Their research is uncovering evidence which suggests that women were the first people to create works of art and that female gods were the first to be worshipped as creators.

To the twentieth century mind accustomed to the exclusion of women from art history and uncritical of the assumption that women's arts are domestic only, it is difficult to grasp the power accorded woman as Creator. Although, the study of civilization around 30,000 B.C. must, of course, rest partly on conjecture, there is increasing evidence to credit women with being the first to practise the Shaman art of engraving symbols on bones and capturing images on cave walls to ensure, by magic, the success of the hunt. In this Shaman art may be the first human attempts to control and give meaning to the powers of nature by an act of the imagination.

If these Cro-Magnon artists were women; if these women held the powers of life and death in their hands through their ability to give life and their control of the food supply—(research suggests primitive women gathered eighty per cent of the food while men, aided by women's magic, hunted

for the rest)—there is every reason to suppose that the image of gods must have followed and taken the form of the female body.

We have ample evidence of fertility goddesses: Venus of Kostienki (Russian), Venus of Willendorf (Austrian), and the French Venus of Lespugue. These three sculptures, all 27,000 years old, represent pregnant women in exactly the same pose, yet they were found thousands of miles apart. There are no images of men from that time. It would seem, then, that women were perceived to possess powers beyond those of men.

The literature of anthropology is filled with documentation which supports these views. It records women's creative contributions to humanity in making and inventing artifacts, rituals, music and decoration. There is little doubt that women created weaving and pottery and developed the arts of agriculture and husbandry. In other words, women carried out the major creative activities which shaped our earliest civilization. The parietal and chattel art of palaeolithic and neolithic times were almost certainly done exclusively by women. The recent excavations at Catal Hüyük reveal fascinating evidence of women's predominant creative role.

As an artist, I am compelled to challenge the traditional denial of women's creativity. The 'whys' behind the devaluation of women cannot be explored here. However, the 'hows'—with reference to creativity—can be suggested.

Art historians, traditionally male, have subdivided creative works into two categories—fine arts and crafts. By elevating the fine arts above the crafts, they have virtually dismissed the creative production of primitive cultures and the awesome role that women played in that production.

Furthermore, since the beginning of recorded history, humanity has valued the spiritual and intellectual above the temporal and physical, in an attempt to claim for humanity an immortality and pre-eminence denied the rest of mortal nature. Art work, which serves as a testimony to the human spirit and imagination, has traditionally been the measure of an individual's (or a culture's) transcendence of base nature. As patriarchy increasingly restricted women to the home, a realm dominated by the primitive, the physical, the natural, men gained the freedom to devote themselves to intellectual and imaginative pursuits. It was patriarchy that allowed men the privilege to claim creative genius as a uniquely male aptitude. The resulting prejudices against certain forms of art and against women have fostered the myth that women have neither the capacity nor the spiritual need to create art.

As if this stacking of the deck against women were not sufficient, art historians have taken great pains to erase the record of women's contribution to the 'fine arts'. Contrary to the authorities of art history, we were there. Women were there making art all along.

We were there with the famous Benin bronzes in Africa. We were the modellers and potters that created them, while our men did the metal casting. We were there in the Ming dynasty, when thirty-four of us were official court painters. We were there in ancient Greece, when Pliny speaks of twenty-four women artists and potters. Oh yes, we were there all along, even if very few people have recognized our contribution. We were there too with the Nun Erde when she created her famous *Beatus Apocalypse of Gerona*—over one hundred illuminated masterpieces of the 10th century. The Bayeux tapestry, one of the greatest masterpieces of the Middle Ages (1066), was both designed and executed by women. It was Queen Matilda and her ladies who documented the Norman conquest of England in this ambitious work. The *Opus Anglicanum*, England's greatest contribution to the international arts of the 13th and 14th centuries was the product of women. These women were embroiderers who perfected their craft to a high art and who were also responsible for the designs that made these vestments among the most prized treasures of the Christian world.

Then there was Sabina von Steinbach, sculptor-daughter of the sculptor Erwin von Steinbach. When her father died in the middle of his work on the Strasbourg Cathedral, Sabina took over and on its South Portal carved the statues of the Synagogue and of the Christian Church from 1230 to 1240. For many connoisseurs, her work surpassed her father's work in originality of concept as well as in depth of feeling and aesthetic rigor.

More recently the famous portrait of Mlle Charlotte du Val d'Ognes was bequeathed to the Metropolitan Museum by a Mr Fletcher in 1917. The press release issued on that occasion states that, 'as one of the masterpieces of this artist, the Fletcher picture will henceforth be known in the art world as "the New York David".' The painting was unanimously accepted by a consensus of experts as one of the greatest masterpieces of Jacques-Louis David, the founder of the

dominant 19th century style of neo-classicism. Ten years later, Professor Charles Sterling published an essay in the Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum proving that the portrait was not by J.L. David but by Constance Marie Charpentier, one of David's pupils. Her extraordinary power and originality had been proclaimed unwittingly by four generations of male art experts when they attributed the work to David. When the painting was discovered to be by a woman painter, it was removed from exhibition.

Modern art restoration techniques have uncovered a number of other works by women which had, for centuries, been accepted as the work of great male artists. 'The Jolly Topper' in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam was for years one of the most popular canvases of world-famous Frans Hals. Modern cleaning revealed the characteristic initial 'J' which identified it as a work of Judith Leyster, one of Hals' most brilliant followers. The cleaning also uncovered the date 1629, which makes this painting one of the earliest known works by Leyster, whose natural gifts enabled her to rival the greatest master of the brushstroke at the age of *nineteen*.

Although there have been many brilliant women artists throughout the centuries who have not been investigated or appreciated, the fact is that there have been no *acknowledged* great women artists. The erasing or exclusion of women from our art history has done both women and humanity immeasurable damage. It is my hope that by recognizing this problem, pooling our resources and conducting our own investigations for forgotten or underestimated women artists, we can redress some of this damage. Without a profound and personal historical perspective, we have no sense of ourselves in relation to our society or our universe. And without such a sense of ourselves, we cannot find the courage to create.

Every civilization depends on the emergence of great minds who will help shape and civilize their society. My own deeply felt belief is that the direction of civilization has been faltering for centuries because it has ignored the vital and inspired contributions of women. Against great odds—we have been there all along making our contributions. The challenge now is to recover our past and reshape our future so that we can freely claim the creative process as one of our natural territories—once again creating a world in our own image.



Maryon Kantaroff at her studio