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Women Artists: A Book and Slides for Classroom Use

Estelle Lauter
lacking both creativity and inspiration. Over and over again, we were told that literary quality is the primary consideration in choosing a manuscript. A book that sacrifices this quality in order to promote a message, editors said, is defeated by its own pedantry and heavy-handedness. The ideal situation for all publishers is a book that unselfconsciously integrates positive values and readability. Editors from more progressive houses claimed that the paucity of new books on controversial subjects was related to the difficulty of finding manuscripts that successfully achieved this integration.

The tremendous emphasis which publishers placed on librarians led us to conclude that the influence of this group is crucial. As the principal purchasers of new books on the one hand, and the primary source of recommendations to readers on the other, librarians pack a double wallop in their ability to get certain types of books published and then disseminated.

More people are borrowing books from libraries, as rising costs make purchasing prohibitive. Parents depend on children's librarians for advice on books in general, as well as for specific information about books dealing with special situations. While the public reaction to controversial issues varies from one region to another, the librarian's individual level of awareness and her/his sensitivity are crucial factors.

But what should The Feminist Press and other alternative publishers conclude from this study? Statistics showed quite clearly that feminist prodding of the commercial houses has had, thus far, only limited success. Our initial optimism about the appearance of a handful of very good books dissipated when we realized how few they were in relation to the total production of children's books.

We are further discouraged by the attitudes we have encountered at various conferences on children's literature. At Rutgers University in October 1976, for example, a conference participant queried, "When is this whole equality thing going to end? Hasn't it gone far enough?" It is our conclusion that if such a question is still being asked, then clearly we still have a lot more prodding to do. The "equality thing" cannot be permitted to end until no publisher need list a separate category for "Role-Free Books" because all books will be role-free.

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Women Artists: A Book and Slides for Classroom Use

Karen Petersen and J. J. Wilson, Women Artists: Recognition and Reappraisal From the Early Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century, New York: Harper and Row, 1976, 212 pp. including Appendix, Notes, Bibliography, List of Illustrations, and Index. $5.95.

Although Karen Petersen and J. J. Wilson are not trained art historians, they have gathered quantities of historical information based on extensive research into a lively narrative that is a fine tribute to their training in comparative literature, and to the feminist spirit of collective research. Besides treating each of the 22 artists covered in Eleanor Tufts' Our Hidden Heritage, the authors provide similar commentary on 40 additional European and American artists, a chapter on the medieval period, sections on twentieth-century surrealists and feminists, and a chapter on women artists in China by Lorri Hagman. They treat all but 22 of the artists included in the exhibit catalog Women Artists 1550-1950 by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, but they illustrate works not included in the exhibition. Whenever possible, they draw on diaries and letters to enrich their account. The book progresses through the centuries, dividing artists by nationality or even by city of birth when appropriate.

The authors' feminist concerns give the book another unifying principle. When-ever possible, they show the artist's self-portrait, and examine her relationships with her family, the reasons she became an artist, her opportunities for training, her attitudes toward her profession, and the difficulties she encountered because of her sex, in addition to providing the usual information about formal schooling, achievements, and awards. They invite readers to continue their research by including their questions as well as their conclusions.

Fully accessible to "the common reader" for whom it was intended, the book can stand alone without its accompanying slide sets; its copious black and white illustrations are well-chosen and generally well-placed in relation to the text. My only reservation about the book (and the slides) is that Petersen and Wilson often do not give the size and the medium of the works. This should not affect the book's use in western civilization and women's studies courses, but it will be a drawback in art history classes, for which the more heavily annotated (and more expensive) exhibit catalogue by Harris and Nochlin may be necessary. If this information is not available from the authors for a second edition, perhaps some enterprising art historian could prepare a supplement.

Women Artists: A Historical Survey
(Early Middle Ages to 1900), 120 slides and Notes, $110.00.

Women Artists: The Twentieth Century,
80 Slides and Notes, $80.00.

Women Artists: Images—Themes and Dreams,
80 Slides and Notes, $80.00.

Women Artists: Third World,
80 Slides and Notes, $80.00.

Available on 21 day approval from Harper and Row, Audiovisual Department, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, New York 10022.

The slides in each set are almost all full-color transparencies of excellent quality. Only a handful appear in more than one set. Slides and notes are packaged in a
three-ring binder; cardboard-mounted slides are in protective plastic sleeves for convenient storage and browsing. A useful selected bibliography comes with each set. The notes include the artist’s name, dates (except in Images—Themes and Dreams), full title of the work, date if known, and two to eight lines of commentary giving biographical highlights, or historical highlights, quotations from the artist or her contemporaries, or Petersen’s and Wilson’s way of seeing the work. The notes are presented in the conversational tone of a script for a slide lecture.

The inclusion of 19 slides of medieval works in A Historical Survey makes this a unique collection. The remainder of the slides (often two to six for each artist) are well-chosen to deepen our knowledge of the major artists, and to give us access to fine works by those who are not well-known. There is very little overlap between this collection and Sandak’s similar survey. The notes make the paintings accessible to nonexperts; however, the presentation is greatly enriched if the audience has read the accompanying book.

With the exception of Brooks, Kollwitz, Modersohn-Becker, Munter, and Stettheimer, The Twentieth Century gives only one or two slides for each artist, concentrating on the significant similarities among their works rather than attempting to predict who will be greatest. The set reveals interesting innovations, particularly by pre-World War I Russian painters, post-World War II surrealists in Mexico, and 17 Americans in the sixties and seventies. The book is less useful in tandem with this set because it covers only about a dozen of these artists in significant depth.

The same is true of Images—Themes and Dreams, where Petersen and Wilson give their feminist perspective freest rein. It is a fascinating collection of mostly twentieth-century works, arranged thematically rather than by artist, or nationality, or school, and it is likely to be most useful in courses and programs whose primary objective is to understand contemporary women. As in the other sets, there are many self-portraits, but the ones included here are painfully honest, not only about the artist’s soul and body, but also about her relationship with others. Many of the paintings are studies of working-class girls or women; many deal with the experience of child-bearing or child-rearing, of growing up, being trapped by clothing or furniture, being overwhelmed; many of the most striking images are of female emergence or female power; a few concern men, and several offer resistance to war.

The set entitled Third World takes the first step toward creating a history of twentieth-century American women’s art by members of minorities: the revelation of 80 fine works by virtually unknown Black, Indian, Chicana, Chinese, and Japanese American women artists should stimulate a collective search in each region of the country for similar materials. Since most of these artists are not mentioned in the book, instructors will have to rely on the notes and on other books suggested in the bibliography. Because the slides are well-selected and deal with myths, family figures, dreams, visions, and experiences that are both accessible and powerful, they should become part of our repertoire of familiar images, even if we are not yet competent to “place” them academically. Indeed, it is a rare treat to be able to see such works before they have been processed by the various establishments.

Petersen and Wilson and Harper and Row have performed an extraordinary service in making these images available to a general audience in the book and in the slides. Both formats offer ample proof of greatness among women. And because many women artists have been concerned with self-identity, the female form, and female lives, the works gathered here greatly enrich our understanding of what is possible for female human beings. □

In Defense of Sarah Lawrence College

The following letters were written in response to a recent attack in the media on Sarah Lawrence. They were sent, as a group, to the Coordinating Council of the National Women’s Studies Association. The staff of the Women’s Studies Newsletter has decided to give them national circulation.

May 10, 1977
To the National Women’s Studies Association Coordinating Council:

We would like to alert you to an article, “The Trouble at Sarah Lawrence,” by Anne Roiphe, which was printed in the New York Times Magazine on March 20, 1977. This article is now being nationally syndicated and may be printed in your local paper. The following letters to the editor were written in response to the article. The New York Times Magazine chose not to print these letters.

We consider this article to be part of a nationwide backlash against women’s studies and the women’s movement. The article fails to examine any of the real problems of higher education, or the real issues that women’s studies is trying to get colleges to face.

The response at Sarah Lawrence has been a gratifying one. Both feminists and nonfeminists at the College united to fight for a strong Women’s Studies Program, and did not allow themselves to be diverted by lesbian-baiting and other divisive issues. As a result of their action, the Sarah Lawrence administration has agreed, for the first time, to support the Women’s Studies Program fully, and to integrate it into the operation and budget of the College.

We believe that feminists in the academy must stand firm in defending both lesbian rights, and the rights of all women to a nonsexist education. As members of the National Women’s Studies Association, we know that you are deeply concerned with the future and goals of women’s studies. We hope that you will share this letter and the other materials with as many members as possible, and we hope that you