Art by Women Made Accessible through Slides

Estella Lauter
Art by Women Made
Accessible through Slides
By Estella Lauter

Karen Petersen, American Women Artists: The Nineteenth Century (1979)
Mary Stofflet, American Women Artists: The Twentieth Century (1979)
Karen Petersen and Mary Stofflet, Women Artists: Sculpture (1979)

Each set has 80 slides and is accompanied by notes and index. The American sets are $90.00 apiece; the others, $99.00, plus postage and handling. All are available from Harper and Row Media, 2350 Virginia Ave., Hagerstown, MD 21740, on a 21-day preview policy.

These four new sets of slides, along with the four sets by Karen Petersen and J. J. Wilson, produced in 1975 (Women Artists: A Historical Survey, Images — Themes and Dreams, Third World, and Twentieth Century, reviewed in the Women's Studies Newsletter 5:3 [Summer 1977]: 20-21), should make it possible to include women artists in virtually any curriculum. In art history or studio courses, the sets will greatly reduce the instructor's preparation time by providing high-quality slides of major works with full documentation (in the new sets) of the artist's name, dates, nationality; the work's size, medium, and location. This certainly beats the usual practice of taking slides from books, given the paucity of good color plates from which to choose, the difficulty of ensuring good results, and the dubious legality of the custom. More important, the sets open up possibilities for others who are not trained in art history to work productively with visual images in their women's studies classes, or in any setting where women's perspectives are discussed. If we accept the fact that much of our thinking occurs visually, then we must take visual images more seriously in planning our curricula.

The notes, always interesting in the first four sets, are superb in the new ones, offering salient historical and interpretive comment in addition to the basic data. The selected bibliographies are useful, including books on art and history, exhibit catalogues, and key periodical articles. The indices make it possible to call slides for special purposes; a supplementary index to the Sculpture collection, for example, lists ninety-two additional works included in the other seven sets. An art historian on any campus could make similar supplementary indices by medium; a women's studies professor might make an index of self-portraits, or images of men, of nature, of female genitalia; a history teacher might index all the nineteenth-century works from different countries in different media; a student might list all the slides of works by a single artist; and so on. The eight sets (360 in the first four and 320 in the second) provide an excellent resource for research and discovery by faculty and students alike.

Each of the new sets could be purchased separately; each has its own distinctive character. The Nineteenth Century, which contains a handful of works that predate 1800 and a few that postdate 1900, is full of little-known and rarely reproduced works of substantial aesthetic merit. Only the five works by Mary Cassatt and one or two of those by the Peale sisters (Anna, Margaretta, Sarah, or Sophonisba) are likely to be in the typical college art slide collection. The selections include Native American arts, folk art, needlework and quilts, paintings, sculpture, decorative arts, prints, and one example of architecture (The Woman's Building, 1893); the portraits and sculpture are particularly strong. Once again, as in her brilliant collaboration with J. J. Wilson on Images — Themes and Dreams, Karen Petersen shows her remarkable ability to place works in meaningful relationship with each other. Thus Alice Pike Barney's 1905 portrait of her famous daughter Natalie appears here in a group of images by Cecelia Beaux, Lilian Westcott Hale, Lila Cabot Perry, and Mary Cassatt showing a variety of stances that a turn-of-the-century woman could assume; by avoiding a rigidly chronological or generic organization, Petersen encourages us to see the strengths of individual artists who have lived in Cassatt's shadow.

The Twentieth Century collection does not have the same visual coherence and might be more difficult to use as a set unless the instructor reorganized it along the lines suggested in Mary Stofflet's notes — in small groups of slides representing different styles or concerns: social comment, murals, folk, abstract, super-realism, and performance art are the most obvious possibilities. Stofflet also emphasizes variety; only six of the fifty-five women are represented with as many as three slides (Bourgeois, Frankenthaler, Hesse, Nevelson, Schapiro, and Stettheimer). The works are well chosen to present the best or most characteristic work that has not already been made familiar through reproduction. When Stofflet gives us two or more slides, it is usually to present different styles (as in Helen Lundeberg's movement from surrealism to geometric painting) or different media (as in Eva Hesse's progression from painting machine parts through her construction phase to her free-standing sculpture). Stofflet's choices are always interesting from the point of view of art history, and they often have implications for women's studies as well. Elizabeth Catlett's 1947 oil of a Black working woman, or Lucienne Bloch's lost mural from 1936 entitled Cycle of a Woman's Life, or Rosemary Mayer's beautiful fiber sculpture of Galla Placidia, the last Roman empress, could be discussed profitably in a variety of courses.

The *Sculpture* collection provides a very effective overview of nineteenth- and twentieth-century work by Europeans and Americans. Of the forty-seven artists, only Bontecou, Callery, Chryssa, Claudel, Falkenstein, Hepworth, Nevelson, Oppenheim, and Richier are represented by three or more slides. Often, however, the images are so powerful or important that one is enough; Niki de St. Phalle’s *Church for All Religions* (1978-79) is a case in point. The chance to compare Bonheur’s *Sheep*, Huntington’s greyhounds and stallions, Callery’s *Horse*, Richier’s *Six-Headed Horse*, and Graves’s *Camels* is sufficient by itself to recommend the set; but this is only the most obvious level of relationships to be studied. In subjects, physical materials, and visual effects, this body of work is one of the most impressive testimonies to women’s strength available to us. The set is a must for women’s studies programs.

The *Photography* collection, all in black and white except *Dolls* by Marie Cosindas, is likewise excellent, offering a balance of the great and the less well-known European and American artists in several genres of photography from the late nineteenth century to the present. The set affords a predictably rich opportunity to study our visions of rural life through powerful images by Kate Mathews, Emma Coleman, Chansonetta, Stanley Emmons, Tina Modotti, Doris Ullmann, Eudora Welty, and Dorothea Lange. Perhaps the surprise here is that there are so many cityscapes, architectural studies, nudes, and abstractions. Because the subject matter is for the most part familiar, this would be the easiest of the sets for those trained in fields outside the arts to use; it also offers a convenient way to introduce students to the differences artistic technique can make in vision.

In short, I cannot recommend the slides highly enough, nor can I overstate the importance of providing formal education in visual thinking by women.

*Estella Lauter is Associate Professor of Communication and the Arts at the University of Wisconsin — Green Bay, where she teaches three women’s studies courses on creative women, three courses in aesthetic awareness for students of the several arts, and a course on the role of myth in contemporary life.*

**NEWS from Women’s Studies Programs**

*By Florence Howe*

We began this feature because we had news. and we continue to have news. Also, rumors are current again about the potential demise of programs, as well as the less dramatic cutting of budgets. We know of the demise of no programs, and the occasional budget cut we have heard of (as at the University of Washington) is not for the curricular program, but for some new addition that was planned. Send items—good news or bad—to NEWS, Women’s Studies Quarterly, Box 334, Old Westbury, NY 11568.

Congratulations to Nancy Cott, newly tenured in history at Yale University, and new Coordinator of Women’s Studies at Yale; and to Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Director of Women’s Studies at the University of Washington, tenured in women’s studies.

In addition to Yale’s developing program (and a women’s studies faculty seminar currently in progress on that campus), women’s studies programs are in the planning stage at Princeton, M.I.T., and Harvard. At M.I.T., Foreign Languages and Literature will offer a Sex Roles course in Spring 1982, the first such course since the one offered by Lillian Robinson and Susan Jhirad in the late sixties. The new course will be team-taught by Marjorie Resnick, Isabel De Courtivron, Louis Kampf, and Edith Waldstein.

At Stanford University this academic year, in preparation for the initiation of a new Feminist Studies degree-granting program, scholars have sponsored a regional, year-long colloquium on current issues in the theory and scholarship of women’s studies. One of the members of this group, political scientist Nan Keohane, was recently appointed President of Wellesley College.

Deborah Rosenfelt, now Director of Women’s Studies at San Francisco State University, is the first full-time, tenure-track person in that position. Another new appointee, Judith Gappa, was hired as Associate Provost of the University, fully tenured as Professor of Women’s Studies. Gappa came from Utah State University with a large WEEAP grant for disseminating the insights of feminist scholarship throughout introductory courses in the social sciences.

The Bay Area Women’s Studies Consortium, which has been meeting for a year, consists of feminist scholars from the University of California and the State University systems. In addition to discussing substantive issues in women’s studies scholarship, they explore the potential exchange of resources and information, including the development of a system of course credit exchanges for students.