

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/66375/

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:
Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

http://sro.sussex.ac.uk
The Gender of the Art Writing Genre

Francesco Ventrella


In the past decade, art history has taken a self-reflexive turn which some have hailed as yet another crisis, and others have embraced as a welcome renewal. Reflecting on the infrastructure of the discipline, from a political as well as an epistemological point of view, is vital for an inherently undisciplined discipline prone to syncretism and catachresis. But while professional journals are inundated with a reassessment of the founding texts of the discipline, the continued absence of women art historians from these historiographical accounts has become ever more manifest. This exclusion could be explained by the formats favoured by art historiographers. The history of academic art history is often told as a reflection of national narratives, while the history of its methodologies is always enveloped in a progress narrative moving from the subjective approach of early art writing to the ‘objective’, ‘scientific’ and ‘rigorous’ study of art championed by specific, and again, typically national, schools of thought, resulting in something of a vicious circle. Scholarship in art historiography has thus identified with a strive for objectivity and scientificty which is constantly defeated by the programmatic exclusion of women art historians from the historical picture.
Wendelin Guentner’s edited volume and Hilary Fraser’s monograph, demonstrate not only that women were active players in the field of nineteenth-century contemporary art criticism, but also that there were plenty of them. Both books emphasise how women experimented with writing genres, thus pushing the boundaries of art history writing at a moment in which the discipline was methodologically not so homogenised as it became in the first half of the twentieth century. The reissue in paperback of these two publications should be taken as a positive sign of the growing interest in feminist art historiography, perhaps informed by the wider desire to reflect on the temporalities of feminist art history itself.1 Whereas the context of feminist art history has its own historical, methodological and political specificities, it is interesting to notice that feminist art historians have seldom turned to earlier female voices in art history. As Elizabeth Mansfield has astutely pointed out, art history is still a discipline with too many fathers, but remains motherless.2 Speaking from the standpoint of interdisciplinary literary studies, Guentner and Fraser make a compelling proposition that we cannot navigate the question of gender in art history unless we tackle the problem of what defines art history as a writing genre.

Since the publication of the pioneering volume *Women as Interpreters of the Visual Arts, 1820-1979* edited by Claire Richter Sherman and Adele Holcomb, historiographers have sought to rescue the works of women art historians as translators, connoisseurs, librarians, and curators.3 Yet, this research remained unattended for many years until, in the 1990s, Pamela Gerrish Nunn argued that the additive project of feminist art history should be expanded to a deconstruction of art historiography as well: ‘to expose the true worth of women’s work we must rethink the definitions and categories of a patriarchal history’.4 Building on this claim, Meaghan Clarke has been able to sketch out the complex web in which women art critics in Britain operated in relation to the contemporary art scene at the end of the nineteenth century.5 However, Fraser’s new book analyses how women also wrote about the art of the past, and thus actively contributed to the methodological formations of the nascent discipline of art history.
Looking at the context of Victorian visual culture, Fraser proposes that we turn to women’s art writing to understand how they looked. The book is especially committed to examining how, beyond the fact of being mere objects of the gaze, women did explore modern ways of being engaged observers. A study of women’s art writing is therefore vital to understand how the emergence of art history in the nineteenth century ‘cast new light on the gender politics of both visuality and history’ (3). Fraser’s analytical prose may resonate with feminist theory (Elspeth Probyn, Laura Mulvey), but it is particularly occupied with visual theory (Jonathan Crary, Norman Bryson, Martin Jay) through which she supports her argument that women’s art writing is a document of the differentiation of visual subcultures in the contested ‘scopic regime of modernity’ (98). Her main methodology in this book is to fragment the monolithic discourse of the subject ‘art history’. Hence, it is refreshing to notice that Fraser has not opted for a biographical approach to women art writers, for the declared aim here is to understand how they have become invisible to the modern gaze, including that of second-wave feminists.

Fraser suggests that feminist art historians have neglected women’s earlier contributions to art writing on the assumption that those women did not challenge, but in fact supported the formation of the patriarchal canon which has been the object of feminist criticism since the 1970s. This builds on Deborah Cherry’s claim that nineteenth-century women’s art writing ‘has participated in the discipline of art history at a crucial stage in its development, and their silence contributed to the structural exclusion of women artists in the history of art and the public collections of the early twentieth century’ (18). Cherry’s position hinted at a narrative of assimilation with the male discourse of art history which did not make nineteenth-century women art historians stand by the politics of contemporary feminist art history. Fraser, instead, makes a plea for historical specificity in order to reflect on how women’s writings on Botticelli, Mantegna or the eighteenth century can be read as strategic acts of resistance against the hegemonic discourse of art history. Her proposition
follows the path inaugurated by Gerrish Nunn for it suggests that we first establish what it is meant by professional art history.

Véronique Chagnon-Burke’s chapter in Guentner’s volume seemingly represents a bridge between Britain and France in that it specifically analyses how, with the flourishing of the press derived from the invention of a cheaper printing process, the demand for journalism increased so that women could earn a living from writing about art (121). The author has looked at how they wrote about women artists in a country which excluded women from the École des Beaux-Arts until 1897. Interestingly, it was the institution of the Salons, and not the École, which granted women artists with a public to show their work, and women writers an audience to learn about it. Thus, during the 1830s and 1840s the feminine press seized the opportunity to create an artistic debate catering for the middle-class younger generation, and Chagnon-Burke suggests that this innocent and allegedly neutral genre became a platform to negotiate women’s access to the artistic professions as well. Her focus turns to Catholic critics in the feminine press to examine their specific arguments about the definition of a woman artist’s talent for the objective of carving out a space which could not be occupied by masculine values. Importantly, Chagnon-Burke and the other authors in this volume reveal that many women critics were also artists in their own right. She persuasively elaborates on how their texts started to describe feminine talent as a ‘capacity to feel and transmit emotions’, which proved especially congenial for portraiture (132). Therefore, by capitalising on an essential definition of gender, these critics laid claim on a genre of their own. Chagnon-Burke also raises a number of interesting questions about the fact that, while women were not admitted to the official ranks of artistic training, competitions and major exhibitions like the Salons were still open to them. It is in this threshold that, she argues, the figure of the copiste could define herself. While the École des Beaux-Arts remained the bastion of male creativity and originality, women started to occupy a specific niche of commercial painting which proved extremely profitable. She writes how

‘Modernist art history stresses the romantic definition of art for art’s sake and has erased from its
history the interesting fact that during the nineteenth century, male and female artists could support themselves through the production of copies.’ (127).

The problematic of the progress narrative of modernist art history also motivates Hilary Fraser’s investigation of women writing art history. She highlights how the emergence of art history cannot be separated from the inundation of artist monographs, gallery catalogues, travel guides and, above all, the consolidation of the art press. These publications did not need to be original, but made art history consumable. The publishing industry represented an important opportunity for women to enter a brand-new professional field which, especially in Britain, was not strictly dependent upon specialised training — unlike its continental counterparts, art history in Britain would not be institutionalised as an academic discipline until the 1930s. The demand coming from old and new specialist journals also presented women with novel opportunities to develop and establish an authoritative voice in the professional field of art history. Fraser does not simply aim at expanding the dictionary of art historians, but stretches the boundaries of art historical writing according to the categories of the genre valid in the nineteenth century. This methodological point is extremely convincing when we consider the fact that Walter Pater is still a reference in the history of Renaissance studies today, even if his writings do not fit the methodological mould of ‘the rigorous study of art’, while Vernon Lee’s Renaissance Fancies (1895) has fallen off the map of art historiography. Indeed, both Lee and Pater, with John Addington Symonds, represented the trinity of Renaissance studies in the late Victorian era.

Art historians are familiar by now with the pivotal role of art history in nineteenth-century women’s Bildungsroman such as George Eliot’s Middlemarch (1872), but what is the position of fictional writing in the historiography of the discipline and its institutions? Fraser’s pages on the poetic duo of lesbian lovers Michael Field (aunt and niece Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper) raise some important questions about the boundaries of art historical writing. Not only did Michael Field’s
Poems participate in the methodological discussions about physiological aesthetics of their time, but they also responded to the popularisation of a connoisseurial mode of art writing which was practiced in their intellectual circles. By positioning their writings on the old masters along the well-established tradition of ekphrasis, Fraser proposes that we look at the collection of poems *Sight and Song* (1892) in the context of intersemiotic translation into verse of the formal aspects of a work of art. This analysis is historically specific, for Michael Field were close to Mary and Bernard Berenson in a period in which he was still grappling with psychological theories (92-93). In fact, the poems treat a series of pedigree old masters’ paintings in Dresden, Paris, London and Florence which in those very same years were being discussed by ‘professional’ connoisseurs in the pages of the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts or Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft*. Moreover, the rehabilitation of Michael Field’s art writing is fundamental to establish a queer genealogy in art historiography. Their writings borrowed from the descriptive language of connoisseurship to extract potent homoerotic associations which challenge the assumption that the old masters were intended to be consumed by a universal straight viewer. As Fraser sums up, their form of art history writing subverts the regime of the male gaze and celebrates the ‘scopophilic pleasure of women gazing upon the beauty of a woman’s body in a paean to female sexuality’ (92).

Fraser is especially keen to demonstrate how women authors developed fictional narratives that challenged the way in which the Pre-Raphaelites turned ‘woman’ into a sign of male creativity (58, 77). The novel *Miss Brown* (1884) by Vernon Lee (pen name of Violet Paget) is perhaps the best critique of the gender politics of the aesthetic movement, and in fact it caused a stir, for the author was alienated from some of those circles narrated in the book. Vernon Lee shows that the protagonist, the aspiring critic Anne Brown, can only play a number of limited ancillary roles: model, artwork, mistress, nurse. Her ability to represent herself is subjected to the language of men, which overwrites her attempts to affirm her intellectual aspirations. Fraser’s analysis of the novel shows the importance of understanding how Victorian women reflected on the possibility of
defining themselves in the art world, rather than being defined as the creation of men. Indeed, as she compellingly suggests, Vernon Lee, Michael Field, but also novelists Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Anna Mary Howitt, anticipated the critique of the Pre-Raphaelite representations of women which was notably discussed by Elizabeth Cowie, Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock in the 1970s and 1980s. Fraser’s investigation is particularly illuminating when she turns to the cultural role of fiction in creating a public sense of the worth of art, art education and art history for women. Many Victorian authors explored how women could occupy roles in the arts other than the model and muse. As Fraser explains, ‘at a historical moment when neither the profession nor the discipline were fully defined, women took to the chance to be undisciplined’ (177). Thus women art writers explored the ambiguous terrain of the middlebrow created by the popularisation of art history as a fashionable discourse embedded in the leisure of the middle-classes.

When we look at nineteenth-century women’s writings about art, we are confronted with a plethora of ladylike biographies and memoirs, which seem to endorse Victorian gender ideology about the civilising mission of women. However, in a passage that seems to echo Chagnon-Burke’s chapter on the catholic art critics, Fraser writes:

> despite the conservative tendencies of this particular sub-genre of writing, some Victorian women’s history [...] was quite radically revisionist and played a significant part, I suggest, in defining traditional notions of the historical and in authorising both the female historians and the female historical subject (100).

The scholarship of Vernon Lee, Anna Jameson, Emilia Dilke, Julia Cartwright and Maud Cruttwell falls in fact in this radically conservative category which contributed to the ‘modernisation’ of art historiography, but also to inscriptions of the feminine in the hegemonic discourse of art history. Fraser discusses how Vernon Lee’s most radical claims are to be found not in the objects of her
scholarship (Renaissance old masters and Greek statues), but in her critique of the aesthetics underpinning her field. In opposition to Ruskin’s teleological and moral interpretation of art, she wanted to stress the individual ‘complexus of dynamics (and perhaps organic) conditions’ of aesthetic experience (102). Ruskin’s aesthetics were in fact in line with Victorian ideology of gender, while the scientific echoes of Darwinism seemed to provide women historians with a less universalist (read male) methodology to explore the matters of aesthetics. Together with Julia Cartwright, Vernon Lee is the only other female voice discussed by Fraser to deeply reflect on issues of historiography and methodology. Fraser elaborates on how each mused on the issue of absence in the archives. Both Lee and Cartwright treated history as representation while eloquently arguing that our perceptions of the past are always positioned in the present (112, 125). Writing on the seventeenth-century writer and salonnière Madame the Sablé, George Eliot indicated that such research has not only historical interest, but ‘has an important bearing on the culture of women in the present’ (135).

Although it is important to challenge the monolithic definition of professional art history, it is a pity that Fraser does not tell us how these works were received at that time by those who considered themselves professional art historians. In fact, Cartwright’s Isabella d’Este (1903) was widely reviewed because it was based on unpublished documents. Cartwright’s work was methodologically novel for the time, an aspect which was acknowledged by the Berensons as well.9 These women art historians spoke to other women but — and this is perhaps what makes it interesting as a feminist strategy — while they were speaking to other men in the field. Fraser also maintains that some of these women scholars embraced professionalism but did not buy into the promise of specialism. Her pages on the Jewish art historian Maud Cruttwell are perhaps the most helpful in examining the path towards professionalisation undertaken by a serious scholar who is still mentioned for having ‘endorsed and perhaps encourage Mary Berenson’s increasing physical size’ in the online Dictionary of Art Historians.10 Hired as a housekeeper by the Berensons in 1894, Cruttwell assisted
Bernard in his research until they benevolently parted ways in 1899, after her signing a contract with George Bell & Sons to write an important monograph on Luca Signorelli. Fraser’s insightful reading of her unpublished letters to Mary Berenson lingers on Cruttwell’s professional anxieties in navigating the world of professional art history and connoisseurship as a woman. Like many art writers of her generations, Cruttwell was able to rely on a female chain of support, but Fraser also shows that some women could understandably be in competition as well (37).

Cruttwell is especially interesting for Fraser because, like her other mentor and friend Vernon Lee, she used fiction to explore the art world of her time, and in particular the circles of connoisseurship. Her novel *Fire and Frost* (1913) is now indispensable to identify, beyond the characters in disguise, the gender dynamics within the Anglo-Florentine community of connoisseurs and aesthetes (41). The novel, Fraser asserts,

> enables her to address the question of her professional life as a female art historian in ways that are virtually completely expunged from her critical work [...] fiction offered an alternative medium of expression to the more ideologically circumscribed discourse of art history, one that enabled women to rehearse with greater freedom issues relating not only to the gender politics of their profession and the writing of art’s histories, but to sexuality, visuality and intersubjectivity (42).

Fraser’s provocative claim elicits a series of important questions which art historians must attend to when they turn to the actual content of Cruttwell’s art historical writings, some of which are still in use among Renaissance scholars. Her monograph on Verrocchio (1904), for instance, challenged many attributions made by the director of the Berlin Museum, Wilhelm von Bode. Fraser’s seminal research indicates the necessity to engage with a closer study of Cruttwell’s methodology to fully appreciate how the professional writing of art history too, alongside fiction, may have provided a
Jewish lesbian art historian, coming from quite humble social circumstances, with a language marked by difference.

In France, the field of professional art history and criticism produced interesting narratives to circumvent the reproduction of nineteenth-century definitions of identity. Wendelin Guentner’s discussion of the writings of ‘Marc’ de Montifaud, the male pseudonym used by Marie-Amélie Chartroule de Montifaud, highlights a very complicated position in French art history. A staunch atheist, Montifaud created a scandal with the publication of a historical study on Mary Magdalen (1870) in which she argued that Magdalen’s view of the angel at the empty tomb and the later sightings of the resurrected Christ were drug-induced hallucinations, as it was oriental custom of the time to consume opium (296). The argument may sound ludicrous, but Montifaud wanted to produce an ethnographic, if orientalist, explanation to claim that Christianity justified the divine being of Jesus by this event. In the Salon criticism she wrote for the magazine L’Artiste she also embraced an agnostic and scientific reasoning to explain the role of art in countering the forces of degeneration. In fact, as Guentner explains, her defence of the Greek ideal was not merely a conservative academicism, but it was aimed at supporting a materialist approach to naturalist aesthetics. ‘Given her own perception of the times — the author suggests — it is not surprising that Montifaud believed in the “performative” force of art criticism, that is, its ability not only to express but to affect change through that expression’ (204). And Guentner here stresses the use of a biological vocabulary in her criticism. Her defence of Alexandre Cabanel’s Birth of Venus (1863) or Édouard Manet’s Le Bon Bock (1873) rested on the ability of these artists to convey a regenerating view of the body, or in creating a ‘gallery of types’ (215). But in 1874 she withdrew her support of Cabanel, because the women in his paintings had become sickly and anaemic (209). Montifaud found that the decadence of the hypercivilised French artist was to compete with the Germanic ‘modern man’. Adopting the jargon of degeneration for her criticism of the salon of 1868 she wrote that
types today betray a racial obsolescence in the lines and stature which alter in them this native character of grandeur. Intensity is lost under the feminisation of individuals, and Plato, who made force and beauty conditions of admission to the members of his republic, would have disavowed some modern generations (215).

Guentner argues that such critical jargon was exacerbated after the French defeat by the Prussians at Sedan in 1870. She then turns to ‘Marc’ Montifaud’s public male role as a critic, a masculine persona she literally performed in front of the camera (Fig. 1), to wonder if this cross-dressing could be taken as an attempt at masculinisation to counter the feminisation of the modern generation described in that passage. Unfortunately Guentner does not elaborate on this, especially in consideration of the fact that George Sand too used to appear wearing male clothes in public (Chagnon-Burke, 288).¹¹

Adopting a nom de plume was not a novelty for women. In fact, the condition of anonymity was a characteristic of early-nineteenth-century art criticism, one which has complicated research on women art writers for decades. Yet, while women’s voices were rendered anonymous by the standardised house styles of the periodical press, they did not remain silent. Heather Belnap Jensen’s chapter in Guentner’s edited volume turns to what women art critics thought about themselves at the beginning of the century in order to understand a specificity about anonymity that has very little to do with modernist views of authorship. Writing in 1818, the famous librettist, actress and critic Amélie-Julie Candeille acknowledged that anonymity was both a restriction and strength for women art writers:

the veil of anonymity in which female journalists take care to envelop themselves still blunts the marks of their satyr. Happy are the women who are never obliged to lift this favourable
The certitude of going about in the shadows gives to the pen of a woman so much self-assurance and lightness! One can judge this by their correspondence. It is there, if one dares to say, that their genius displays itself in its entirety (76).^{12}

Candeille’s claim does not stem from an aspiration to equality with men, but from a strategic position of difference. And while she indicates that anonymity may have been an advantage for women, she also suggests that art criticism is not expressed only in print, but in private letters and journals as well. According to Belnap Jensen, Candeille’s manuscript *Notice biographique* (1829) demonstrates the pivotal and vital role that she occupied in the fashioning of ‘Girodet’. Not only was Candeille able to advise the artist on a number of artistic decisions, as already suggested by Thomas Crow, but she also influenced collectors and art institutions for the advancement of his career. Candeille was much more than just Girodet’s muse, she also acted as critic, art dealer and impresario. Belnap Jensen’s study of Candeille is particularly compelling because it pushes the art historiographer to rethink the very archive of art criticism beyond the printed page. However, Belnap Jensen does not recognise that, alongside being a document of the strategic difference of women’s art criticism, Candeille’s letters must also be read in a context of equality with men.

Johann Winckelmann and Frederich Schiller, for example, expressed some of their most famous thoughts on art and aesthetics in letters which, as in Candeille’s case, were later edited; and it is interesting to notice, as Belnap Jensen adds, that Candeille made annotations to Winckelmann’s writings on ancient art (283).

Belnap Jensen’s important remarks on private writing are supported by Hilary Fraser’s proposition that we also need to look at letters and diaries to fully appreciate the conditions from which art history emerged as a discipline during the nineteenth century. Anna Jameson’s *Diary of an Ennuyée* (1826) originally published anonymously under the title *A Lady’s Diary*, was an uncommon mixture of gothic fiction and travel writing in which everything the heroine sees during her travels
becomes an intensive exercise in ekphrastic writing. This example, among many, shows that women explored art historical writing through genres in which their authoritative voice was already established. In this direction Fraser also focuses on the discourses of photography, dress and the home that constituted the modernity of women’s aesthetic criticism (136-174). Feminist art historians Anthea Callen and Rozskika Parker have eloquently argued for a deeper understanding of the modernity of such diverse productions as embroidery, crafts or the domestic scenes in Mary Cassatt’s paintings. Fraser’s analysis of the ‘minor arts’ follows the feminist deconstruction of the hierarchies of art history and looks at writings on home decoration as a symptom of modernity, rather than as its instrumental ‘other’.

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, many women art critics seem to have disappeared from the art press. Some, like ‘Marc’ de Montifaud, swapped the feminine press for the feminist one. Others, like Judith Gautier moved to musical criticism. Chagnon-Burke points out that women no longer seemed to cover the Salons and explains that, by 1881, the Salon had lost its prestige. The anti-academic stance championed by impressionist and postimpressionist artists required a different support system which, slowly moved towards an individualised connection between gallerist, artist and critic (252). For Guentner, instead, this ‘vanishing act’ is also justified by the fact that women art critics, most of whom were trained artists as well, were now seeking admission to the École des Beaux-Arts. In Britain the situation was very different. Fraser shows that Alice Meynell and Elizabeth Robins Pennell are very busy in the 1890s as contemporary art critics and as key figures in the formation of artistic taste (164), ‘female art critics write less about the Old Masters and more about the contemporary art scene’ (137). But it is important to remember that some women art historians (Cruttwell, Cartwright) left the pages of generalist journalism because they could join the newly established professional magazines like The Connoisseur (1901), and The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs (1903).13 Confronted by an increasing degree of specialism, mixing contemporary art criticism with art history became less viable an option for both men and women.
art writers. But in order to understand this shift, it was important to consider, as these scholars have done, the entwinements between the art critic and the art historian during the nineteenth century, and that is why these two books have been reviewed together.

In conclusion, these two books on women art historians and critics provide further evidence for what we already knew about the role of women artists in the art world of the nineteenth-century: the problem lies not in the historical lack of contributions, but in the historiographical silencing of women’s work and voices effected by the problematic gendering of modernity in the twentieth century. As argued by Andreas Huyssen, the historical heterogeneity of the modernist project has not been reflected in the universalising accounts of the modern.14 It is crucial that feminist art historiography does not partake in this ‘vanishing act’ by leaving narrative of modernity unchallenged. Hilary Fraser, Wendelin Guentner, Heather Belnap Jensen and Véronique Chagnon Burke have given us enough material to continue the reassessment of women’s critical voices while we also need to rethink the boundaries of feminist art historiography.


