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The Exhibitions of the Femmes Artistes Modernes (FAM), Paris, 1931-38

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Abstract

The Société des Femmes Artistes Modernes (FAM) opened up a productive space for women artists who were active in Paris during the 1930s through annual multigenerational exhibitions and international collaborations. I argue that FAM embodied a paradox: on the one hand, it supported artists wishing to question stereotypes of gender, race, class, and nation; on the other, its institutional structure and leadership did not challenge patriarchal assumptions about women’s subordinate role in society. The paper explores this tension by comparing the work and critical reception of several artists in the group who represented the theme of motherhood.

Résumé

La Société des femmes artistes modernes (FAM) a ouvert un espace permettant aux femmes artistes actives à Paris dans les années 1930 de développer leur pratique à travers des expositions annuelles intergénérationnelles et des collaborations internationales. La thèse soutenue ici est que FAM incarnait un paradoxe : d’une part, cette société soutenait les artistes souhaitant mettre en question les stéréotypes de genre, de race, de classe et de nation ; de l’autre, sa structure institutionnelle et sa direction n’ont pas contesté les présupposés patriarchaux concernant le rôle subordonné des femmes dans la société. L'article explore cette tension en comparant le travail et la réception critique de plusieurs artistes du groupe qui illustraient le thème de la maternité.

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Introduction: Researching FAM

I first learned about the Société des Femmes Artistes Modernes, known by its initials of FAM, as a graduate student at Bryn Mawr College in the 1990s. I came across FAM while researching the work of the French painter, Suzanne Valadon (1865-1938), as I wanted to learn more about the diversity of international women artists working in Paris in the first decades of the twentieth century. Only little information was available on the topic at the time. To my great surprise, the archival research I undertook proved that there were in fact hundreds of professional female artists of a variety of nationalities and backgrounds between 1910-1940, who were contemporaries of Valadon and active in commercial galleries and annual salons, including one called FAM. Although nothing had been published on the group, my archival research quickly showed that it was a significant part of the vibrant Parisian art world of the interwar years.

Founded in 1930 by the French painter, Marie-Anne Camax-Zoegger (1881-1952), FAM aimed to organize annual exhibitions in Paris. It also collaborated with other feminist groups on two important international women’s art exhibitions in the 1930s. Over the course of eight years, FAM’s annual exhibitions featured the work of more than 100 female artists from different generations, backgrounds and stylistic movements, many of whom were recent immigrants to Paris from countries as diverse as Argentina, Australia, Poland, Russia and Turkey. The works consisted primarily of paintings and sculptures and reflected women’s diverse approaches to artistic style. Their subject matter ranged from the nude to portraiture, still life, landscape, images of animals and more. Many of the leading artists produced figurative representations of the female body in its diverse sexualities and experiences that included motherhood, while appealing to the patriarchal values of the political establishment in France.

Some FAM members were among the best known female artists of their day in Paris—including the painters Valadon, Marie Laurencin (1883-1956), Tamara de Lempicka (1898-1980) and sculptor Chana Orloff (1888-1968).

FAM held exhibitions annually from 1931 through 1938 in prestigious venues—both commercial and non-commercial—including the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune and the Exhibition Pavilion of the Esplanade des Invalides. In 1937, the group organized a collaborative exhibition with The Circle of Czech Women Artists at the historic Obecnidom in Prague. That same year, FAM played an important role in the organization of Les Femmes artistes d’Europe exposent au Jeu de Paume, the first international exhibition devoted to women artists. This exhibit was held in Paris at the Musée du Jeu de Paume, at the time, the national museum dedicated to contemporary art by foreign artists. FAM published annual exhibition catalogs and its exhibitions were widely reviewed and photographed by the press. As an institution, it was supported by an all-male honorary committee, many of whom held prominent positions in government and culture. The group also regularly staged retrospective exhibitions of the work of deceased women artists. Through the sheer number of participants and the visibility of their collective exhibitions, FAM offered many international women artists of diverse backgrounds and generations more recognition than they would ever garner on their own.

The research that culminated in my doctoral dissertation on FAM, and the book, Women Artists in Interwar France: Framing Femininities (2011) posed a number of challenges. I interviewed the aging descendants of artists and consulted family archives, which often contained gaps in information. I spent years tracking down works in small, regional museums and government buildings in a host of French cities and towns as well as in other regions of Europe. There were no photographs on record for many of the works, and

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1 For a more detailed history of FAM, see Paula J. Birnbaum, Women Artists in Interwar France: Framing Femininities (London: Ashgate/Routledge, 2011). Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine. I am grateful to Ruth E. Iskin, Jennifer L. Shaw and the anonymous peer reviewers of Art@S Journal for their critical feedback on this essay.

documentation was limited. Most of the works I was able to view in person were either part of private collections or hung haphazardly on crowded storage racks in the basements of museum collections. Moreover, it was a challenge to identify specific works exhibited in the FAM exhibitions because the titles of works provided in the group’s annual exhibition catalogs are often vague, such as Portrait, Still Life or Mother and Child. This presented insurmountable difficulties to fully reconstructing each FAM exhibition.

My goal in my book was to recreate this little-known chapter in the history of French modernism as much as possible by showing how such a diverse group of artists aimed through their work and exhibitions to promote their project to a wide, international public that had long marginalized women in the arts. At the same time, I argued, FAM’s institutional structure conformed to the traditional values of the political establishment. I made a strategic decision to focus on a critical analysis of how the participating artists approached the most prominent and acceptable themes of female embodiment in their work: motherhood, the self-portrait, and the female nude. The artists acknowledged these themes as tropes of Western art history as well as important signifiers of femininity, and interpreted them as significant points of departure for their own professional practice. My book contextualizes their work and critical reception and provides insight into a broad range of contemporary positions on gender, diaspora, and modernity. It also shows how the FAM artists themselves were able to offer new visions of modernity and female embodiment in their work, both individually and in dialogue, while navigating governmental ideologies of femininity and social class.

The objective of this article is to situate FAM as an important case study in the emerging field of feminist exhibition studies that explores the social, cultural and institutional conditions that have historically informed women’s art practice. I propose that the group’s institutional structure and promotion of multigenerational exhibits strategically opened up a productive space for international women artists who were active in Paris in the 1930s to gain visibility. However, seen from today’s vantage point, FAM embodied a paradox. On the one hand, it offered a supportive framework for female artists to exhibit works that question stereotypes of gender, race, class, and nation that circulated in France during the 1930s. On the other, it did not consistently challenge widely-held assumptions about women’s subordinate role in society.

The Founding of FAM

In her work as the founding President of FAM, Marie-Anne Camax-Zoegger demonstrated the contradiction between traditional social mores and progressive goals for women in the arts that permeated the French art world during the interwar period. Prior to her founding of the group in 1930, the Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs (UFPS), founded in 1881, was the earliest public art institution for women in France. It was also the first to provide female artists with an exhibition forum supplementary to the annual mixed Salon.3 One of the major aims of the UFPS was gender equality—to win the same educational privileges and rights for women artists as men had, including entrance to the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts.4 They accomplished this goal in 1903, the year women were first allowed to compete for the Prix de Rome. While their motives remained feminist, many of the women who took part in the UFPS exhibitions in its first decades were committed to creating "l’art féminin," a separate...
feminine art that would preserve conservative values and artistic traditions.\(^5\) Noted for their depiction of traditional subject matter such as flowers, landscape, portraiture, and the idealized female nude, these women's works usually upheld the traditions of academic realism, including naturalism and neoclassicism.

Camax-Zoegger, who participated in several of the UFPS’s exhibitions in the 1920s, was among the first group of women to benefit from the Union’s activism by studying painting at the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts in the studio of Professor Ferdinand Humbert (1842-1934; the studio first welcomed women in 1900).\(^6\) From an artistic family that supported her career choice from a young age, she began exhibiting her work at the Salon de la Société nationale des beaux-arts in 1909. The following year, she married Alfred Camax, an industrialist whose social and financial standing allowed her to focus on her work while also raising their five children. Several of her impressionistic landscapes, floral paintings and scenes of her children in nature were purchased by the State for museums including the Musée du Luxembourg and the Petit Palais. Her work was later displayed in mayor’s offices, police stations, schools and even the Elysée Palace.

Camax-Zoegger first had the idea for FAM while involved in a smaller organization known as the Syndicat des femmes artistes peintres et sculpteurs founded in 1904 by Marie Thélïka Rideau Paulet (1853-after 1939), a miniaturist and figurative painter, as an alternative to the UFPS. Not surprisingly, the artists affiliated with this group (like their colleagues in the larger UFPS) were often viewed in the press as society ladies whose “modest” works lacked stylistic innovation and thematic interest.\(^7\) In addition to salons, the group sponsored social meetings, poetry readings and dance performances.\(^8\) While critics in the 1920s made only a brief mention of their annual exhibitions, a number of them commented upon the name, Syndicat—which signifies a labor union more than it does a professional association of seemingly genteel women artists.\(^9\) Camax-Zoegger joined the Syndicat in 1925 after exhibiting sporadically with the UFPS, and began to make overtures toward reforming it following her election as president in 1928. She wanted to create a more dynamic group that would embrace the modernity of women artists of the day and garner the respect of the official French art world.

An entry from the journal of Camax-Zoegger’s fifteen-year-old daughter, Jeanne Camax (Pottier), outlines her assessment of her mother’s goals in reforming the Syndicat:

Formation of the “Group”: Exhibition of 17 May to June 1, 1930. Mom, once elected President of the Syndicat des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs, had only one idea: to rejuvenate the Syndicat and make it the strongest group of all the women’s art exhibitions. For this we must attract modern artists who are highly respected and occupy an important place in the modern art world... It’s very difficult because these artists don’t like women’s groups. They want to be the same as and as strong as men. And especially at no price do they wish to exhibit with other artists who are different from them, and especially those drawn to the detested genre: old paintings of coconuts tied up like postcards.\(^10\) Her daughter’s account assumes that Camax-Zoegger realized she had an opportunity to challenge the popularized image of “l’art féminin” as superficial and lacking seriousness. The passage suggests that Camax-Zoegger wanted to revitalize the organization by attracting artists with a substantial exhibition history and reputation in the modern Parisian art world. Jeanne Camax’s journal also offers a specific definition of the “modern woman artist” as one who advocates for equality with men and resists being grouped with female artists who they consider as amateur.

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\(^5\) Garb, "Revising the Revisionists" and Sisters of the Brush.
\(^7\) See Arsène Alexandre, “Femmes peintres,” Le Figaro, October 7, 1926.
\(^8\) Gonnard, “Marie-Anne Camax-Zoegger.”
\(^9\) Raymond Sélig, “Marie-Anne Camax-Zoegger,” Revue du Vrai et du Beau (1930), Camax-Zoegger Archives, Echo de Paris, April 26, 1929; Petit Parisien, April 27, 1929; Le Matin, April 29, 1929; Le Figaro, May 1, 1929.
At the same time, central to Camax-Zoegger’s vision was to appeal to the conservative social values of the establishment and thus gain its support. This paradox was expressed by her own published statement in the journal *Art et Artisanat* in 1935:

I will first say that I am infinitely proud to be French, to be from this chivalrous country that allows for women to exist in the arts. I founded the Society of FAM in July of 1930 with the goal of displaying, in harmony, the most beautiful works by the artists who are the most characteristic of the School of Paris.... In forming the Femmes Artistes Modernes, I was attempting to present a group of artists truly committed to our great modern art from our modest, feminine cadre.¹¹

In establishing a legacy based on culturally assigned characteristics such as modesty, imitative skill and emotion, Camax-Zoegger suggests that FAM conformed to certain social expectations of femininity. In their reviews, some of the group’s most reputable critics and enthusiastic supporters engaged with the critical category of “l’art féminin.” They stressed feminine flaws and lack of equality with male counterparts.¹² It was not uncommon for critics to collapse accounts of the artists’ work with adjectives connoting heterosexual male desire for the artists themselves (“delicious paintresses” who create “seductive works”).¹³ Nonetheless, differences of opinion over the question of what the social construct of the woman artist meant in the public sphere existed among critics, as well as within the group itself, indicating that its identity was not monolithic.

For example, in her 1935 book, *Quelques Femmes Peintres*, the French painter and FAM member Madeleine Bunoust (1885-1974), questioned the link between femininity and sensitivity in the work of female artists:

Women, it is often said are too sensitive, too emotive to be great artists... This hypersensitivity—our weakness, if it is in fact one—is it truly unique to feminine genius? From Michelangelo to Modigliani to Pascin, what a diversity of male temperaments, what an abundance of very high-pitched sensibilities, and of exacerbated sentimentality! ¹⁴

While like Camax-Zoegger, Bunoust aspired to confront negative stereotypes of feminine art as superficial, she pointedly challenged the common need to assign gender identities to various artistic practices, including those considered avant-garde.

### Institutional Structure

Camax-Zoegger maintained ultimate control of the selection and recruitment of FAM members, and her choices reflect the tension between traditional and progressive social values signified by the group. In 1930, she solicited the help of her colleague Clémentine-Hélène Dufau (1869-1937), a well-established French figurative painter whose work she admired, in order to recruit over 50 contemporary artists—painters, sculptors, printmakers, and a few decorative artists—whose work had been influenced by a variety of modernist tendencies.¹⁵ Most of these women, including Dufau herself, had chosen previously not to participate in all-female exhibition societies like the UFPS or the Syndicat. Instead, while some were active in the official Salon, most regularly exhibited their works at the Salon d’Automne, the Salon des Tuileries and the Salon des Indépendants.¹⁶ They also frequently had solo exhibitions in the galleries. Dufau was best known for her state-commissioned female allegorical murals on the theme of the Sciences for the Salle des Autorités at the Université de Paris – Sorbonne (1900) as well as for her 1898 poster, commissioned by the late-nineteenth-century French feminist Marguerite Durand (1864-1936), to launch the Parisian women’s daily newspaper, *La Fronde* (1897).¹⁷ Dufau’s association with Durand, clearly one of the great champions of feminist

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¹³ Demeure, Chantecler, January 31, 1931.


¹⁶ For a complete list of the names of all of the artists who exhibited with FAM between 1931 and 1938, see the Appendix in Birnbaum, *Women Artists in Interwar France*, 231-241.

causes in France at the turn of the century, appealed to Camax-Zoegger. Camax-Zoegger personally visited the studio of each woman on Dufau’s list to solicit her participation in the newly reformed all-female exhibition society.\(^{18}\)

Some of the more senior and well-known contemporary artists, such as Suzanne Valadon, at first refused to participate in FAM, perhaps not wanting their names associated with the popular notion of “feminine painting” which called forth negative stereotypes. Once Camax-Zoegger showed Valadon a reproduction of her own landscape painting that hung near Valadon’s work in the national collection of the Musée du Luxembourg, Valadon was willing to reconsider. She agreed to exhibit with FAM in 1933, and the two women became close friends.\(^{19}\) While little documentation of the group’s transition exists, many former Syndicat members left the organization before its final exhibition in 1930.\(^{20}\) Certain critics went so far as to point to the distinction between what they viewed as two separate groups of female artists—one classical and amateurish in their display of flower paintings and portraits, and the other modern and “daring in color, execution, and composition”—thus reflecting the changing of the guard.\(^{21}\)

Another way in which FAM’s institutional structure embodied contradictions was in its publication of an official list of statutes. These stipulations, single-handedly written by Camax-Zoegger, named an all-male Honorary Committee to guarantee the credibility of the group to the conservative public she had targeted. She described these men as “morally committed to using their influence to support the artistic endeavors of the Society.”\(^{22}\) Among those she invited to join this committee were the many state and municipal arts officials under President Albert Lebrun, including André Dezarois, curator of the Musée du Jeu de Paume, Paul Léon, directeur général des Beaux-Arts and a member of the Institut de France, and a selection of well-reputed authors and critics, from Arsène Alexandre (then inspecteur général des Beaux-Arts) to Louis Vauxcelles. These officials appeared regularly at exhibition openings and were photographed by the press beside Camax-Zoegger, her children, and other members of her group. The group’s patrons generally reflected the French cultural élite by privileging men of the grand bourgeoisie, whose birth, sex, culture, and wealth gave them easy access to education and the requisite professional credentials. However, some of the most widely exhibited participating artists—including Valadon, Laurencin and Orloff—came from working-class backgrounds and were associated with the avant-garde movements that prided themselves on their bohemian origins and distance from the bourgeois values of the conservative or academic French art world embraced by the group. The statutes also required that each artist member of FAM pay dues to the organization, which covered the costs associated with the annual exhibitions, including rental of the venues and production and distribution of a catalog, invitations and any other printed materials.\(^{23}\)

FAM’s curatorial practices can be considered through a feminist lens. The terms by which specific works of art were selected for FAM’s annual exhibitions differed from both the official Salon and the progressive Salon d’Automne in that no formal selection committee or jury was appointed to vote on whether to accept a particular work. It appears that at times Camax-Zoegger herself selected a work at a prearranged visit to an artist’s studio; at other times, the artist was free to make her own selection.\(^{24}\) While Camax-Zoegger appointed official officers of the group, they did not play a role in


\(^{20}\) Geneviève Barrez, interview by the author, March 5, 1993, Paris, France. This shift in membership is reflected by comparing the names of participants in the 1929 and 1930 Syndicat exhibition catalogs, Camax-Zoegger Archives, Paris.

\(^{21}\) “Around the Art Galleries,” New York Herald Tribune, May 27, 1930; Ladoé, L’Art et les Artistes, June 1, 1930.


\(^{23}\) While Camax-Zoegger wanted to secure the prestigious galerie Bernheim-Jeune, rue Saint-Honoré, for the group’s transitional exhibition of 1930, she could not afford the rental fee of 20,000 francs for fifteen days. The 1930 exhibition was held at the galerie Pleyel, which cost 5,000 francs for fifteen days. See Jeanne Camax, “Formation du Groupe,” 62-63, cited in Paula J. Birnbaum, “Femmes Artistes Modernes: Women Art, and Modern Identity in Interwar France,” Ph.D. diss., Bryn Mawr College, 1996, 43-46; n.35, 154-55.

\(^{24}\) Geneviève Barrez, interview by the author, March 5, 1993, Paris, France.
the selection process. It is not evident why some works of art were exhibited and others not, but many of the works had been exhibited previously at the independent salons and in group and solo shows in galleries. Styles varied and prizes were not awarded, making judges unnecessary. Works of art were not for sale. The ambiguity and fluidity of the selection process suggest that Camax-Zoegger’s control over the group was not absolute. She did, however, take full charge of the installation of each exhibition, without any curatorial assistance. She made strategic curatorial decisions, such as positioning Valadon, the best-known living member of the group, as a source of inspiration for younger female painters, including Lempicka (who often competed with Valadon for prominent wall space) as well as Valadon’s own students, the figurative painters Odette Dumaret (1913–1991) and Germaine Eisenmann (1874–1970).

A Matrilineal History of Art

Camax-Zoegger demonstrated the contradiction between traditional and more socially progressive roles and expectations for women in the arts in her work as an artist, as well as the leader of FAM. In 1931, she publicly exhibited an oil painting known as The Little Painter, 1923 (Fig. 1), at the inaugural exhibition of FAM, held at the Théâtre Pigalle. The painting depicts seven-year-old Geneviève Camax, fourth-born of the artist’s five children, absorbed in the act of painting amidst a richly impastoed landscape. A host of Parisian art journals reproduced the painting alongside their reviews of this new women’s exhibition society and many critics indicated that it was a personal favorite. This work initially appears to engage in a tradition for marketable genre scenes that romanticize childhood, dating to the nineteenth century. However, it also raises complex questions about female creativity and Camax-Zoegger’s negotiation of her roles as mother, group founder, feminist, and artist—and the possible relations between them. The Little Painter symbolizes the group’s commitment to embracing the ongoing history and production of many generations of female artists who painted their offspring through retrospective exhibitions; yet by representing Geneviève as a painter, it also acknowledges the possibility of a mother’s professional aspirations for her daughter. Perhaps Camax-Zoegger orchestrated its prominent role in the publicity surrounding the inaugural exhibit of FAM to convey the group’s claims to create a matrilineal history of art through this new organization.

Figure 1. Marie-Anne Camax-Zoegger, The Little Painter (Le Petit Peintre), 1923, oil on canvas, 120 × 70 cm. Private Collection.

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25 Bessie Davidson was Vice President; Émilie Charmy was Secretary; Louise Germain (1874–1939) was Treasurer.
26 Geneviève Barrez, interview by the author, March 5, 1993, Paris, France.
In her work as both painter and salon organizer, Camax-Zoegger publicly endorsed widespread beliefs in a reciprocal relationship between creativity and motherhood. She chose to feature retrospectives of the work of deceased female artists who frequently portrayed this theme at the annual FAM exhibitions—including the Impressionists Berthe Morisot (1841-1895) and Mary Cassatt (1844-1926). An installation photograph from the 1935 FAM exhibition at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune shows how Camax-Zoegger juxtaposed her own portrait of her adolescent daughter, Odile (Portrait of Odile, ca. 1930, private collection, Paris) with one of Cassatt’s earlier impressionistic pastel portraits of a young woman seated in a similar position before a table bearing a vase of flowers. These two works by Cassatt and Camax-Zoegger become the enacted versions of a young woman’s proper coming-of-age and support the group’s transmission of a matrilineal history. However, the group also included retrospectives of artists whose works challenged gendered stereotypes of bourgeois femininity. For example Camille Claudel (1864-1943), the prominent sculptor whose works engage explicitly with sexuality and desire, was featured in several of the group’s annual exhibitions.

In forming FAM, Camax-Zoegger tried to reconcile two different stereotypes that emerged following World War I and its resulting loss of life and shift in gender roles. On the one hand, the group embraced the work of artists such as Lempicka, Émilie Charmy (1878-1974) and Mariette Lydis (1890-1970), who were attracted to the theme of the “garçonne,” the modern, sexually liberated woman (epitomized by the protagonist in Victor Margueritte’s controversial novel, La Garçonne, 1922). On the other hand, Camax-Zoegger regularly chose to feature works representing the “mère de famille nombreuse,” or prolific mother of many offspring, as epitomized by her own commitment to painting her five children. As part of their campaign to entice women to choose the latter path, the Ministry of the Interior decreed the first Festival for Mothers of Large Families (La Journée nationale des Mères de familles nombreuses) on May 9, 1920, and shortly thereafter a decree of the Ministry of Hygiene established medals of honor to mothers of large families: bronze for mothers of five, silver for mothers of eight, and gold for mothers of ten.

Mother’s Day became an official celebration in 1926. Female and male artists alike were impacted by the prevalence of popular pronatalist imagery throughout the interwar years—reproduced in journals and displayed on urban billboards—warning the French public not only of depopulation, but also of the threat of women’s employment that was thought by conservative politicians and journalists to be taking jobs away from able-bodied men. In founding FAM in 1930 as an institution that promoted her own perspective on a matrilineal history of art, Camax-Zoegger negotiated these two extremes of femininity established by 1920s pronatalism.

In 1933, FAM chose to feature a posthumous retrospective of the then recently deceased French painter, Jacqueline Marval (1866-1932), whose bold nudes address themes of modernity and sexuality. Marval might not have been pleased had she known that her work was to be featured

21 Claudel’s works were included in FAM exhibitions in 1934, 1935, 1936 and 1938.
22 On the controversies surrounding the publication of Margueritte’s novel, see Anne Marie Sohn, “La Garçonne face à l’opinion publique : type littéraire ou type social des années 20 ?” Mouvement social 80 (1972); Mary Louise Roberts, Civilization Without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), 46-62; Christine Bard, Les Garçonne; Modes et fantasmes des Années folles (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), 64-87
26 See LG Gros, Paris-Midi, May 14, 1933. Marval’s retrospective was accompanied by retrospective exhibitions of three other recently deceased artists, the painters Maria Blanchard and Beatrice How, and the sculptor, Jane Poupelot. For information on
posthumously in FAM, as the French art historian René Édouard-Joseph claimed in his 1930 encyclopedic treatise of contemporary art in Paris that during her lifetime, she refused to participate in all-female exhibitions:

Jacqueline Marval is not a woman painter. She’s simply a painter. She never understood why artists were assessed based upon their sex. She always refused to exhibit exclusively with her female colleagues. She did not believe that an art salon should evoke a feminist congress. She was bothered by the category of “women only.”

Yet FAM as a group seized the opportunity to appropriate Marval and her reputation for painting strong female nudes and portraits as part of their collective contribution. In staging such retrospectives, FAM sought to construct and transmit its own history of women artists that featured women’s diverse range of experiences and interests, all while seemingly endorsing pronatalism and traditional social values as part of the narrative.

In 1934, Camax-Zoegger became vocally involved in the pro-family debate when she responded in the French arts newspaper Comoedia to a Swiss government minister’s declaration that “women’s most important role will always be that of wife and mother” and that such obligations would necessarily preclude them from ever becoming “artists of genius.” The editors of Comoedia, following an excerpt from the minister’s speech, solicited responses from thirty of France’s most revered women artists, nearly all of them participants in FAM. Camax-Zoegger was one of only two women who responded thus:

Maternity and art are two different things that do not detract from one another. There are very important women artists who are not married, and there are others who are married and who are admirable mothers. I believe that the more a woman is cultured, the more she is able to raise children. Maternity does not diminish her art, and art does not suffer one bit from the experience of mothering.

While supporting the talents of female artists who chose not to become mothers, Camax-Zoegger espouses her belief in a reciprocal relationship between maternity and art, where a woman’s artistic practice enhances her identity as a mother, and motherhood does not detract from her creativity. She goes on in the article to acknowledge that for many female artists throughout history, including Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1755-1842), Berthe Morisot and Suzanne Valadon, their own children were in fact their most accessible and regular models. For these female role models, she claimed, neither artistic talent nor professional commitments detracted from their ability to raise children successfully. In her role as founder and president of a women’s art salon, as in her letter to the editor, Camax-Zoegger emphasized her group’s place within a specific lineage of French women artists who frequently depicted their own children. Her curatorial choices, however, suggest her openness to showcasing a diversity of perspectives on questions of pronatalism as well as conflicts between professional and family life.

In 1938 Camax-Zoegger welcomed President Albert Lebrun and his wife to the FAM exhibition. There, at the Galerie Charpentier, across from the Élysée Palace, she posed with the first lady before Tamara de Lempicka’s Mother and Child of 1931 and other paintings by the artist on the theme of motherhood (Figs. 2 and 3). The reproduction of this photograph in a number of Parisian newspapers shows how popular FAM had become and how important the

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37 Jean Albaret’s original speech upon the lack of “women artists of genius” was presented upon the occasion of the opening of the 1934 exhibition of the Swiss Society of Women Painters, Sculptors and Decorative Artists in Geneva (“La Société Suisse des Femmes Peintres, Sculpteurs et Décorateurs”) and was printed in the Swiss newspaper, La Suisse, October 1934. An excerpt was reprinted a month later, following a brief editorial introduction, in the weekly French arts review, Comoedia, November 8, 1934. For information on this Swiss women’s art organization, see Rocio Palmadis, “La Société suisse des femmes peintres, sculpteurs et décorateurs, Section vaudoise, 1901-1934,” M.A. Thesis, University of Lausanne, 2010.

role of maternal imagery was to its public image.\textsuperscript{39} It also shows how FAM was sanctioned by the State, implicating the group in official policies towards women and reproduction. For example, in 1938, the French government passed the “Code de la Famille,” a complex legislation that created further incentives for working women to procreate—from fully paid maternity leave to generous grants for mothers of multiple children—while also banning the sale of contraceptives. Lempicka’s paintings of motherhood and their prominent placement in FAM exhibitions must be considered in this larger social-historical context.

At first glance, Lempicka’s 

\textit{Mother and Child} seems to conform to a canonical Christian iconography of the Madonna and Child. The intense blue of the mother’s eyes and of the robe that partially covers her head is reminiscent of an Italian Renaissance Madonna, as are her classical profile and posture. However, her Madonna’s eyes are rolled upward, mimicking the ecstatic expression traditionally worn by Mary in Renaissance images of the Annunciation.\textsuperscript{40} With her full, chiseled red lips pursed and her glassy eyes transfixed, Lempicka’s young mother/Virgin appears absorbed in a religious experience while communing with her child.

Critics who wrote about Lempicka’s \textit{Mother and Child} in the context of the 1938 FAM exhibition admired the artist’s technique and distinct style of portraying women.\textsuperscript{41} Some felt that the small, iconic painting seemed different from traditional Madonna imagery associated with spiritual motherhood as symbolized by the Virgin birth.\textsuperscript{42} Perhaps they were struck by the dramatic realism of the Madonna’s right hand, which looks predatory rather than mollifying in its embrace of the sleeping child. Also, by emphasizing the figure’s

\textsuperscript{39} The painting was exhibited along with two other works, one being the \textit{Round Madonna} (Beauvais, Musée de l’Oise, dated incorrectly by the Museum at ca. 1940 because it was exhibited at the 1938 FAM Salon). The third work, identified by one critic as a “portrait of a child,” has not been identified.

\textsuperscript{40} For an example of an Italian Renaissance painting of the Virgin Mary with her eyes rolled upward see Cosimo Tura, \textit{Enthroned Madonna and Child with Angels} (from the Roverella altarpiece, ca. 1480. National Gallery, London).

\textsuperscript{41} An anonymous American critic went so far as to state that Lempicka’s paintings “were completely different from any of the other works” in the exhibition, yet did not elaborate upon the nature of such differences. See Anonymous, \textit{New York Herald Tribune}, March 16, 1938. See also: Yvanhoé Rambasson, \textit{Les Heures de Paris}, March 30, 1938; Georges Turpin, \textit{Ville de Paris}, March 26, 1938. Pierre Berthelot described the small, iconic painting as both “peculiar” and “poignant” in the pages of the journal \textit{Beaux-Arts} following its first exhibition in the artist’s 1931 solo exhibition at the Galerie Colette Weil. Pierre Berthelot, “Exposition Lempicka – Colette Weil,” \textit{Beaux-Arts} (June 1931).

\textsuperscript{42} On the history of the Virgin Mary’s spiritual and dematerialized motherhood symbolized by the virgin birth, see Marina Warner, \textit{Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary} (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 192–205.
pulsating veins and human nature, Lempicka appears to question the myth of the Madonna's impregnation by the Word, suggesting that the myth is a repression of her sexual identity as woman and mother. In another painting created three years earlier (Fig. 4), Lempicka emphasizes the mother's contemporary appearance and social class—clad in earrings and plush pink robe—and detached emotional expression. This mother is both the garçonne and the mère de famille. However, the model's aloof countenance challenges social expectations that motherhood and breastfeeding are joyful and spiritual experiences for all women. Lempicka's works exhibited with FAM acknowledge the maternal experience as one of physical and psychological tension and complexity.

FAM exhibited work in its annual salons by women who made different choices regarding how much they wished to challenge traditional ideologies of bourgeois womanhood, nationalism, and the role of motherhood. For example, Camax-Zoegger was drawn to the work of Maria Blanchard (1881-1932), who was of mixed Spanish, French, and Polish origins and produced foreshortened post-cubist paintings of impoverished African and Hispanic mothers and children (Fig. 5).  

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Blanchard died in 1932, and a number of her works were exhibited in the inaugural FAM exhibition in 1931, and then again posthumously in 1932 and 1933.44 Often painted in the tradition of the Nursing Madonna, with either one or both breasts exposed, Blanchard’s maternity scenes also reflect her deep involvement in Catholicism in the final years of her life. Yet rather than reproducing the stereotype of the prolific and nurturing Marianne as Mother France, Blanchard’s paintings take a different stance. They emphasize the physical realities of working-class motherhood, evidenced by the woman’s bare feet, awkward posture, dejected facial expression, and the modest domestic setting signaled by the pitcher and bowl.

In another painting (Fig. 6), Blanchard offers a rare interpretation of the motherhood theme in the history of modern European painting, where African women were usually depicted as sexual objects in the form of the exotic, reclining Venus, or as attendants to a more prominently depicted white woman, as in Manet’s *Olympia*, 1863. She focused on the complexions of her African models

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44 Blanchard’s works were included in the first official FAM exhibition in 1931 (cats. 15 and 16); the 1932 exhibition (cats. 16 and 17); 1933 (cats. 6-8). Her name was listed in all of the consequent exhibition catalogs under the category of “deceased members” (Membres Sociétaires Décédées).
by adding artificial-looking white tones over the warm browns, making their skin appear translucent and suggestive of mixed racial identities. Perhaps she was uncertain about asserting blackness at a time of increasing racist attitudes toward North African émigrés in France.\textsuperscript{45} Or, maybe she experimented with the representation of skin tones as a means to challenge sexually objectified imagery of the black female body in European art.

Blanchard’s work was perceived by FAM critics as tender, yet also tragic, considering common knowledge that the artist was physically disabled and unable to have children herself.\textsuperscript{46} As in so many popular works about female artists who represented motherhood but did not themselves have children, from Cassatt to Frida Kahlo (1907-1954), biography is often read into the interpretation of Blanchard’s work.\textsuperscript{47} Many also associated Blanchard’s Spanish background with a kind of primitive foreignness and uncultivated emotionality that they believed was apparent in her work.\textsuperscript{48} Marc Vaux, a famous photographer of many artists of the École de Paris, went so far as to state that Blanchard, one of his very first clients, physically resembled the twisted figures that accompanied the Infantas in Velasquez’s Las Meninas, 1656.\textsuperscript{49} It was not uncommon for critics to physically objectify émigré artists who participated in FAM in terms of their preconceived ideas about the crude and uncultured aspects of the foreign female body.\textsuperscript{50} In contrast to this reigning discourse, Blanchard’s works boldly resist bourgeois norms of gender, race and class in post-war France by providing personal commentary on questions of community and colonialism.

\textbf{Conclusion}

By displaying such diverse works beside one another, in prominent settings, FAM provided a highly successful institutional model for a women’s art salon. When viewed collectively, their works—while produced over a period of several decades but displayed from 1931 to 1938—offered a range of responses to governmental policies and ideologies pertaining to gender and depopulation, race and immigration, and class and nation in the interwar period. Differences among artists in the group as well as the critics who responded to it allowed for multiple—and at times conflicting—responses to social pressures on women during the interwar period.

The works of many artists who took part in FAM were collected by national and regional museums during the interwar years, yet most of them have remained largely invisible to the average museum-goer. Recent exhibitions like elles@centrepompidou (2009-11) and Multiple Modernities, 1905-1970 (2014) featured works by some of the artists who were members of the group. FAM, however, was not consecrated after the group dispersed during World War II, and was largely forgotten.\textsuperscript{51} The master narrative of mid-twentieth-century modernism excluded women from the École de Paris, an art-historical narrative that museums worldwide have preserved and fortified. The story of FAM reminds us that there were progressive feminist artists and leaders in the first decades of the twentieth century in France who boldly joined together and offered their own complex responses to many of the same issues that face artists, art historians, and curators today. Some of the artists whose work was exhibited by FAM struggled with the limitations of gender stereotypes and


\textsuperscript{46} Blanchard had kyphoscoliosis. In a 1934 monograph, Isabelle Rivière, a popular women’s fiction writer and close friend of the artist, wrote: “She would have thrown to the wind all of her canvases and all of her talent and all the world’s glory in order to have her own little child in her arms.” Isabelle Rivière, Maria Blanchard (Paris: Editions R.-A. Corrêa, 1934), 16–17.

\textsuperscript{47} The fact that Blanchard had no child or permanent home of her own is considered by critics, both contemporary and decades later in the 1990s, as implicit from her “tragic” manner of painting mothers and children. See F.K., Maria Blanchard (1881–1932), color brochure (Geneva: Petit Palais, Musée d’Art Moderne, 1996).

\textsuperscript{48} For example, the artist’s friend and colleague, the French painter André Lhote, related Blanchard’s works to the “purely plastic hallucinations” of the Spanish painter El Greco, revealing her “naïve, Spanish tendency to fixate upon the strangeness of a unique situation, to dramatize the mundane.” André Lhote, “Les Arts: Maria Blanchard,” La Nouvelle Revue Française (May 1, 1932): 924–25.

\textsuperscript{49} See Madaule, Maria Blanchard, 39; cited from J.P. Crespelle, Montparnasse Vivant: Marc Vaux, 250,000 peintures (Paris: Ed. Bachette, 1978).


\textsuperscript{51} Elles@centrepompidou; Multiple Modernities 1905-1970 ; from the collections of the National Museum of Modern Art (Paris: Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre de création industrielle, Centre Georges Pompidou, 2013).
separatism, and whether to believe in such a thing as “women’s art.” Their work also grappled with the politics of gender, sexuality and motherhood, as well as race, ethnicity and nationalism. While there was dissension within the group concerning these politics and the exact nature of their mission, I have argued that the friction over these questions is precisely what made it so productive. As an institution, FAM was committed to creating a new and more gender-inclusive art history, even if some of its institutional practices and strategies seemed to accept a patriarchal social hierarchy.

Today, at a moment when some museums are beginning to make amends by exhibiting more works by female artists than they did previously, the legacy of Camax-Zoegger and FAM offers a powerful example of how a group of determined women artists challenged the status quo. At the same time, however, a full account of women’s art exhibitions and salons, including FAM and many other like-minded groups active from the late nineteenth century onward, has not entered history. The story of each group is difficult to reconstruct. Archives either do not exist, or they are incomplete or difficult to access, making scholarship challenging. It is my hope that recent efforts to “create, index, and distribute information on women artists” will promote awareness of the importance of preserving archives that are publicly accessible, and that ideally have an online component. This, in turn, will enable future scholars to make women’s contributions to art history more visible to an international audience through a variety of outlets, including publications, museum acquisitions, collections, exhibitions, public events, digital humanities projects and more.

52 To address this historical gap, Camille Morineau co-founded the non-profit organization, AWARE: Archives of Women Artists, Research and Exhibitions in 2014 with Margot Mérimee Dufourcq, Daphné Moreau, Nathalie Rigal, Elisabeth Pallas, Alexandra Vernier-Bogaert and Julie Wollenstein: https://awarewomenartists.com/.