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Women Artists Shows·Salons·Societies: Towards a Global History of All-Women Exhibitions

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**Women Artists
Shows·Salons·Societies
1870s-1970s**

**Edited by Hanna Alkema
and Catherine Dossin**

ARTL@S BULLETIN

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Editorial Statement

The *ARTL@S BULLETIN* is a peer-reviewed, transdisciplinary journal devoted to spatial and transnational questions in the history of the visual arts.

The *Artl@s Bulletin*'s ambition is twofold: 1. a focus on the "transnational" as constituted by exchange between the local and the global or between the national and the international; 2. an openness to innovation in research methods, particularly the quantitative possibilities offered by digital mapping and data visualization.

We publish two to three thematic issues every year. If you would like to contribute to the journal with an article or propose a theme for a future issue, please contact the editors Catherine Dossin (cdossin@purdue.edu) and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel (beatrice.joyeux-prunel@ens.fr). We welcome suggestions, ideas, and submissions from scholars worldwide and at every stage in their career.

This issue of the *Artl@s Bulletin* is co-edited with AWARE: Archives of Women Artists, Research and Exhibitions.

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Fabienne Dumont

Women Artists Shows·Salons·Societies Towards a Global History of All-Women Exhibitions

The Women Artists Shows·Salons·Societies project was launched in 2017 as a collaboration between Artl@s and AWARE: Archives of Women Artists, Research and Exhibitions.¹ Combining AWARE's ambitions to restore the presence of 20th-century women artists in the history of art, and Artl@s's desire to provide scholars with the data and tools necessary to question the canonical art historical narratives through quantitative and cartographic analyses, we decided to work on group exhibitions of women artists.

To do so and to reach out to scholars already working on such a topic, we organized a conference in December 2017 at the Jeu de Paume in Paris, thereby marking the eightieth anniversary of the exhibition *Les femmes artistes d'Europe exposent au Musée du Jeu de Paume* which took place in February 1937.² This first event focused on the long period preceding the feminist explosion of the 1970s, when the chronology of women group shows is less clear.³ The call for papers was a great success: we received more than fifty very strong proposals coming from North and South America, Eastern and Western Europe, and also Russia and North Africa. The present issue of the *Artl@s Bulletin* consists of papers presented at the conference, as well as papers which had been considered as alternates.

In June 2018, we held a one-day conference at the Terra Foundation for American art in Paris to focus on exhibitions that took place in Western Europe and North America during the 1970s,⁴ such as the mythical *Womanhouse* staged by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro in Los Angeles in 1972 and the numerous events that marked the year 1975, decreed the "International Women's Year" by the United Nations, but also lesser known shows that punctuated a decade marked by Second-wave feminism.

Last October, Catherine Dossin chaired a panel at the 2018 SECAC Conference in Birmingham (Alabama) that further examined the history of all-women exhibitions prior to the 1970s, through a series of case studies ranging from the Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs in turn of the 20th-century Paris to the All-Women Art Society in 1930s Shanghai and the *Club Argentino de Mujeres* in 1930s Buenos Aires.

In organizing these events, we were inspired by all the research that has been done since the 1990s on women artists' professionalization in the 19th and early 20th century, including Deborah Cherry's *Painting Women* (1993) that provides a comprehensive yet detailed analysis of the lives and careers of British women artists in the Victorian era; Tamar Garb's *Sisters of the Brush* (1994) which

¹ For more information on AWARE: Archives of Women Artists, Research and Exhibitions, see <https://awarewomenartists.com/>

² We would like to thank again the Jeu de Paume for their generous and engaged hospitality, and more particularly Marta Gili, Marta Ponsa, Mélanie Lemaréchal and Adrien Chevrot. Videos of the event can be accessed online at: https://awarewomenartists.com/en/nos_evenements/was-women-artists-shows-salons-societies-expositions-collectives-de-femmes-artistes-1876-1976/

³ For the period starting in the seventies, see for instance the recent essay by Maura Reilly, *Curatorial activism. Towards an Ethics of Curating* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2018).

⁴ We are very thankful to the staff of the Terra Foundation, especially Diego Candil, Ewa Bobrowska, Thomas Hudson, and Rebecca Park, for hosting this event in their Parisian location. Videos of the event can be accessed online at: https://awarewomenartists.com/en/nos_evenements/was-women-artists-shows-salons-societies-exposition-collectives-dartistes-femmes-durant-annees-1970-europe-amerique-nord/

analyzes the formation of the French Union des femmes peintres et sculpteurs in the late 19th century; or Laura Prieto's *At Home in the Studio* (2001) which considers the professionalization of women artists in United States.⁵ These studies, and many others, have not only uncovered pages of the history of art that had gone missing, they have also started painting a different image of the art world—an art world in which women studied, exhibited, and sold their works, maybe not through the channels we know today and tend to consider as the only ones, but through specific, certainly more modest but nonetheless existing networks and structures of professionalization in place for women artists that a social history of the modern period ought to study.

We wish to promote research on women's exhibitions, salons, and societies, because they appear as privileged sites of investigation to study how women artists have constructed, or at least have attempted to construct, their identity as professional artists in different cultural and institutional contexts, and by extension to refine our understanding of the workings of the art world through time and place. Moreover, on a symbolic level, the study of these events and groups gives us access to the shifting ways in which women and society at large have related to and defined these abstract categories that "women," "art," and "women artists" are, since the organization of a women-only exhibition presupposes a narrative about women, the arts, and women artists.

The second reason why we decided to encourage such research lies in the gap between the sheer number of these exhibitions and how little we know about them. When we started thinking about WAS in 2017, we knew that there must have been many collective exhibitions of women artists through the years. Agata Jakubowska and her colleagues at the Department of Art History at

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań had just completed a three-year project on the *History of all-women exhibitions in Poland* that had brought to light the constant presence of women-only exhibitions since the late 19th century and declared them "one of the most constant elements of the history of women's art."⁶ So we knew there must have been a lot of exhibitions, but we did not realize how many. Rather naively, we thought we could rapidly compile a list of major exhibitions, and so we started with France and the United States—the countries where we reside. In a matter of weeks, we had come across hundreds of exhibitions: at AWARE, Hanna Alkema and Julie Sabau identified about 150 exhibitions that took place in France before 1970s,⁷ whereas Catherine Dossin and her student, Brenda Cluver, found about 300 exhibitions in the United States during the same period.⁸

Very quickly though the research became overwhelming. Overwhelming because of the sheer number of these exhibitions—the more exhibitions we uncovered, the more we realized there were still left to discover. But overwhelming also because it is so difficult to find information on these events. They are absent from the main art historical narratives, secondary literature mentions only a few and in passing, and primary sources are scarce and hard to come by. To get an accurate picture of the history of women exhibitions in the United States before the 1970s, for instance, would require a titanic archival work. It would entail digging into the history all the regional associations of women artists, and all the women's clubs which had women artists as members and organized exhibitions, as well as all the regional photo-clubs since, as Thomas Galifot's article on American female photographer suggests, women's presence in these clubs was very strong and many organized women-only events.⁹ Ideally, one would comb through all the local newspapers and women

⁵ Deborah Cherry, *Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Tamar Garb, *Sisters of the Brush: Women's Artistic Culture in Late Nineteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Laura Prieto, *At Home in the Studio: The Professionalization of Women Artists in America* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁶ See her account of this project in Agata Jakubowska, "Exhibiting Women's Art in Post-War Europe," <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol8/iss1/16/>

⁷ Our thanks go also to Sonia Eperonnier and Victor Monnin for their help building a first draft of an international list at the early stages of our reflection.

⁸ As of April 2019, Catherine Dossin has identified about 1,400 exhibitions for the United States between the 1860s and the 1960s.

⁹ Thomas Galifot, "Autour de Frances Benjamin Johnston, Gertrude Käsebier et Catharine Weed Barnes Ward : stratégies séparatistes dans l'exposition des femmes photographes américaines au tournant des XIX^e et XX^e siècles," <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol8/iss1/1/>

magazines of the entire country over a century—an endeavor that seems almost impossible and possibly pointless. And this, only to grasp the phenomenon of all-women societies and shows in the United States, where archives are usually well preserved and easily accessible. What about the rest of the world? There are too many and there is too little information on them to ever catalogue them. But maybe we do not need to identify all the all-women exhibitions, as we do not need to know all the mostly-men ones. Once we realize that women-only exhibitions are not exceptional events in the history of modern and contemporary art, but a large-scale phenomenon, the cataloguing process loses its importance.

The chronological and geographic ubiquity of women-only shows and societies is somewhat puzzling considering the negative reception they continuously received. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that, at least until the 1970s, most women-only exhibitions were regarded as insignificant or even as a failure.¹⁰ At best they were ignored by critics,¹¹ at worst they were vilified with caustic comments, and in most cases they were simply dismissed as “feminine.”¹² Furthermore, the harsh critiques did not just come from misogynist male critics, they were also found in feminist publications. As Deborah Cherry noted, British feminists were disappointed in what they saw as the low quality of the Society of Women Artists’ shows.¹³ These shows were indeed commonly attacked on the right and on the left for the amateurism of their participants, many of whom were indeed not full-time artists since they were married with children or still at school;¹⁴ for the repetitiveness of the subjects matter and lack of stylistic innovation; and for the compromising presence of craftworks and handiworks. The fear

of being accused of dilettantism and the stigma of craftswomanship pushed many woman’s societies to apply very strict criteria when selecting members or organizing exhibitions, as did the Società delle Artiste for its 1906 *Mostra Nazionale di Belle Arti* in Milan. Still, the press dismissed the show as another woman (i.e. not very serious) event.¹⁵ If the critical reception of these shows was so adverse, why did women artists keep on holding them? According to the art critics, there was nothing redeeming about them, so why waste time and energy organizing them?

Obviously asking such a question is to misread the situation by seeing it through the eyes of a (misogynistic) art critic who evolved in the (systemically sexist) main art world, instead of looking at it from the perspective of women artists. From their perspectives, these shows clearly served important purposes of visibility and professionalization that we ought to understand. One of WAS’s goals is thus to better comprehend what benefits women found in the separatist strategy that made them go back to it again and again from the 1860s to the 1960s, despite harsh rebukes and snide comments.

Beyond promoting the work of individual scholars on a specific society, salon, or show, WAS’s underlying ambition is to pull together all this individual research that is being conducted all over the world and collectively write a global history of all-women exhibitions. Such a move from individual research to a collective undertaking shifts our perspectives in ways that we found particularly helpful to investigate the women’s art worlds.

¹⁰ As Thomas Galifot’s essay suggests, photography might have been a space where women exhibitions could receive more favorable responses—maybe due to the novelty of the medium and its ambiguous status within the fine arts. *Ibid.*

¹¹ Marina Mazze Cerchiaro, Ana Paula Cavalcanti Simioni, and Talita Trizoli emphasize the silence of the critics about the exhibition *Contribuição da mulher às artes plásticas no país*, despite the prestigious venue (São Paulo Museum of Modern Art) and its broad overview on Brazilian creation (be it feminine) in their essay “The exhibition *Contribuição da mulher às artes plásticas no país* and the silence of Brazilian art criticism,” <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol8/iss1/14/>.

¹² In her essay, Georgina G. Gluzman analyzes the links between the positive critiques the painter Raquel Forner received for her work, which was praised as “manly,” and her reluctance to participate in women-only exhibitions: “An exhibition of one’s own:

the *Salón Femenino de Bellas Artes* (Buenos Aires, 1930s-1940s),” <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol8/iss1/9/>. See also Baiba Vanaga’s conclusion about the reception of the women artists in the Baltic scene at the turn of 20th century, in her article: “The Exhibition of Former Students of the Elise von Jung-Stilling’s Drawing School in Riga in 1904,” <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol8/iss1/6/>.

¹³ Cherry, *Painting Women*, 67.

¹⁴ On the situation of female art students, see Vanaga’s study of the Elise von Jung-Stilling’s Drawing School in Riga, mentioned above, which was the subject of one of the first women-only exhibitions in the Baltic region.

¹⁵ See Chiara Iorino, “Non più Cenerentole! The Società delle Artiste at the 1906 *Mostra Nazionale di Belle Arti* in Milan,” <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol8/iss1/5/>.

A new field of research

First, we are no longer thinking in terms of isolated events within a national history or even within the history of women artists; we are thinking in terms of a field of research. The idea that all-women exhibitions should be considered its own field of research rather than a category within the history of exhibitions arose during our first conference. This event was extremely congenial, for the presenters enjoyed having the opportunity to exchange with other scholars working on women-only exhibitions. Even though they work on different countries and/or different periods, they face similar challenges in their research and pursue similar questions. Beyond the details of their local contexts, be they Poland in the 1900s or Brazil in the 1950s, the papers had a lot in common, including some specific elements such as the importance of matronage, matrilineage, and women's magazines that distinguish, not to say isolate, them within the field of exhibition history.

Female patronage and female beneficence are a key aspect of the history of all-women exhibitions. It appears that these exhibitions were not only intended to provide a space for women artists to exhibit their works, but also for other women to participate in the art world as patrons and collectors. While it would not have been appropriate for wealthy women to visit an official salon on their own, meet with male artists, and collect their works, it was perfectly proper for them to patronize women-only exhibitions, have tea with women artists and purchase from them. It was even more appropriate since it could be regarded as the good deed of a wealthy woman supporting a working woman, in a spirit of sorority. And if the artist herself belonged to the upper-class, the charitable dimension could help circumvent accusation of professional ambitions, by turning the

exhibition into a fundraising event for a charitable cause.

The connection between all-women exhibitions and charity work is well illustrated in Natalia Budanova's essay on the first associations of women artists in the Russian Empire, as it highlights their roots in high-society women's desire to support women's economic and social emancipation, and exposes the inescapability of the altruistic discourse even for associations such as the Moscow Union of Women Painters which was specifically conceived as a non-charitable organization.¹⁶ The importance of upper-class women's patronage is also made clear by Francesca Lombardi in her essay on the two Esposizione internazionale femminile di Belle Arti which took place in Turin 1910-1911 and 1913 and were placed under the sponsorship of the women of the royal family. Records actually show that the biggest buyers were the Queen mother and other female members of the family.¹⁷ Likewise, Queen Maria of Yugoslavia offered her matronage to the 1930 and 1935 exhibitions of the Women's Art Club in Zagreb, as evidenced by Darija Alujević and Dunja Nekić.¹⁸

Joanna Gardner-Huggett's article on the Chicago's Women Art Club similarly demonstrates how the Club was relying on wealthy female clientele—white women living on the North Shore of Chicago, friends and neighbors of some of the artists, who sometimes also belonged to that privileged milieu, and also members of the Town and Country Arts Club, which supported the initiative by awarding prizes. Interestingly, it seems that these Chicago women artists fared better than their male counterparts in terms of sales.¹⁹ We can indeed imagine that, while serious collectors would go to Paris or New York to buy art for their collection, wealthy women would buy art locally to decorate their house. From this, we could further assume

¹⁶ Natalia Budanova, "Women Artists to Victims of War – The First Exhibition of the Moscow Union of Women Painters and its Reception by the Contemporary Press," <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol8/iss1/7/>

¹⁷ Francesca Lombardi, "L'Esposizione internazionale femminile di Belle Arti (Torino, 1910-1911; 1913). Note su genere, arte e professione in Italia all'inizio del XX secolo," <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol8/iss1/2/>

¹⁸ Darija Alujević and Dunja Nekić, "The Women's Art Club and Women's Group Exhibitions in Zagreb from 1928 until 1940," <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol8/iss1/11/>

vol8/iss1/11/. Royal matronage of women artists was also exemplified by Marie-Antoinette and the Empress Eugénie [see, for instance, Henri Rollet, "Le féminisme de l'impératrice Eugénie," *Revue du Souvenir napoléonien*, no. 358 (April 1988): 49-56 and Heidi A. Strobel, "Royal 'Matronage' of Women Artists in the Late-18th Century," *Woman's Art Journal* 26, no. 2 (2005): 3-9.] as well as Queen Victoria [Cherry, *Painting Women*, 102-104].

¹⁹ Joanna Gardner-Huggett, "Women Artists' Salon of Chicago (1937-1953): Cultivating Careers and Art Collectors," <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol8/iss1/12/>

that, outside the major art centers that attracted international collectors, women artists might have benefited from a small (female) local market that provided them with a perhaps modest but steady income. The comfort of this local patronage would have in turn kept women artists within a local context that could not foster national, let alone international, recognition.²⁰

Matrilineage offered women artists another supportive environment in which their works could exist more comfortably. As several of the following essays show, it was a common strategy for women artists' associations to organize retrospective exhibitions of celebrated women artists, as a way to link their works to those of their more famous predecessors. Paula J. Birnbaum evokes, for instance, the tributes paid within the Femmes Artistes Modernes (FAM) annual exhibitions to Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt or Jacqueline Marval²¹, while Fabienne Dumont evidences the same strategy used by the Union des femmes peintres et sculpteurs with presentations of artworks by Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Marcelle Cahn at the 1978 salon.²² Similarly, Laura Iamurri discusses the process of historicization that was at the core of *Il Complesso di Michelangelo*—an overview of Italian women's artistic achievement through the 20th century, presented at the Galleria Giulia in Rome in 1977.²³

Besides matronage and matrilineage, women's magazines are another common thread that runs through all the research on all-women exhibition and thereby defines it as its own field. In fact, the development of women's magazines in the 19th century seems tightly connected to the apparent increase in women's patronage and involvement in the visual arts during that period, as these

magazines promoted to their readers a life-style in which art played an important role.²⁴

Not only were women's magazines promoting to their readers paintings and prints in the same way as they sold them steel corsets and rice powder; they also presented artistic pursuits as socially acceptable to women. As Tamar Garb shows, in her study on the Union des femmes peintres et sculpteurs, even conservative publications, such as *La Famille*, liked to feature works by women artists because they presented empowering images of mothers and children. She also explains that these publications highlighted women artists because, far from seeing women artistic work as socially threatening, they regarded it as an expression of women's skills and natural creativity.²⁵ Such findings find echo in many other researches, including Gloria Cortés Aliaga's study of all-women exhibitions in Chile, which exposes the close working relation between women's magazines and women artists,²⁶ and also in Doris Sung's study of the Chinese Women's Society of Calligraphy and Painting, which shows how the group used the news media to not only publicize their activities but also to shape their public images as women artists in 1930s Shanghai.²⁷

The connection of women's magazines and women's associations and exhibitions were made even tighter when women associations published their own magazine. Roberta Serra's examination of the advertisements within the Bulletin de l'Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs, for instance, reveals a world of private studios run by women for women, and other services specific to women artists.²⁸ Some female magazines took particular interest in women artists and sponsored prizes or even exhibitions, as when the magazine *La Donna* organized two international exhibitions in Turin,

²⁰ For general overview of female patronage since the end of the 19th century, see for instance Julie Verlainé, *Femmes collectionneuses d'art et mécènes* (Paris: Editions Hazan, 2013).

²¹ Paula J. Birnbaum, "The Exhibitions of the Femmes Artistes Modernes (FAM), Paris, 1931-38," <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol8/iss1/10/>

²² Fabienne Dumont, "À l'assaut ! Explosion d'expositions de femmes artistes en France pendant le mouvement féministe," <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol8/iss1/18/>

²³ Laura Iamurri, "Femmes artistes italiennes du XX^e siècle : « Il complesso di Michelangelo », Rome, 1977," <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol8/iss1/17/>

²⁴ On this relation, see for instance Jennifer Criss's discussion of the role of women's magazines in introducing Western women, including women artists, to Japanese artifacts and Japanese. Jennifer T. Criss, "Japonisme and beyond in the art of Marie

Bracquemond, Mary Cassatt, and Berthe Morisot, 1867-1895," Ph.D. dissertation (University of Pennsylvania, 2007).

²⁵ Garb, *Sisters of the Brush*, 46-47.

²⁶ Gloria Cortés Aliaga, "Actividades femeninas: Women's collective exhibitions in Chile between 1914 and 1939," <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol8/iss1/8/>

²⁷ Doris Sung, "Women Artists as Valuable Citizens: An All-Women Art Society in 1930s Shanghai," paper presented at the 2018 SECAC Conference, on October 19, 2018 in Birmingham, Alabama.

²⁸ Roberta Serra, "The Reception of the Salon of the Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs, between Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century France," paper presented at the 2018 SECAC Conference, on October 19, 2018 in Birmingham, Alabama.

which were then extensively discussed in lavishly illustrated articles. In her examination of this early female biennale, Francesca Lombardi was thus able to rely on the wealth of *La Donna's* archives,²⁹ which is rather unusual in a field of research where archives are usually so scarce and fragmentary.

A distant and global reading

This question of archives leads to our second point, namely the methodological possibilities that open when one starts thinking not of studying one specific exhibition but of writing a history of these exhibitions, and one shifts from a local and close reading of one event or one group to a global, distant reading of a historical phenomenon.

The potential of a distant reading of all-women exhibitions is very important because there is so little information available on them. The lack of archives is a recurring complaint among specialists of all-women groups and exhibitions. In most cases, the catalogue is all we have left—a list of names, titles, dates, and addresses. And while it is sometimes possible to identify a name or an artwork, and even gather additional information from a newspaper article, more often than not no substantial information can be found on the participants or the works. For an individual scholar working on one exhibition, this is obviously discouraging, and one understands why there is so little research on such events. But this is where the methods and tools powered by Artl@s can help. When we have put together a great number of all-women catalogues in our database, we will be able to analyze it spatially and quantitatively. We should also be able to engage in prosopographic studies and network analyses, and thereby contribute to the reconstruction of the women's art worlds.³⁰

We might even be able to trace the international circulations of artworks and artists. While it is

certainly true that the majority of women who exhibited in all-women exhibitions tended to work locally and that all-women societies tended to function mostly in their local scenes, we might be underestimating the international dimension of women artists' professional activities. The intention of the two editions of the *Esposizione internazionale femminile* as exposed by Francesca Lombardi was to give a broad panorama on women's art in Europe and bring together women artists associations from Vienna, London, Germany or the Netherlands.³¹ The same was true for the *Exhibition of the Little Entente of Women*, discussed by Darija Alujević and Dunja Nekić, which was held in nine cities of Eastern Europe in 1938 and demonstrated a feminist agenda that bears witness to women's transnational networks.³² In her study of the Association of Greek Women Artists in the 1950s and 1960s, Glafki Gotsi expands on women artists' international ambitions and transnational strategies.³³ All these studies, and many others, speak of international exchanges among individuals and associations, so we know they took place. Yet, they are difficult to recover and thus understood through close reading only. A distant reading of a large number of catalogues might uncover large scale female transnational circulations and lead us to rethink our narrow view of the women's art worlds and their webs.

A different value system

Such a systematic and distant study of all-women exhibitions over a long period should indeed result in a better understanding of women artists' careers and trajectories, and foster a female-specific definition of what it meant to be a successful professional artist at different times and places.

The historical significance of an artist is usually established based on where he studied and

²⁹ Lombardi, "L'Esposizione internazionale femminile di Belle Arti."

³⁰ On Artl@s's use of exhibition catalogues, see Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, and Olivier Marcel, "Exhibition Catalogues in the Globalization of Art. A Source for Social and Spatial Art History," *Artl@s Bulletin* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 80-104. On the Artl@s project, see Catherine Dossin, Nicole Kong, and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, "Applying VGI to Collaborative Research in the Humanities: The Case of ARTL@S," *Cartography and Geographic Information Science* (2016). DOI: 10.1080/15230406.2016.1216804

³¹ Lombardi, "L'Esposizione internazionale femminile di Belle Arti."

³² Alujević and Nekić, "The Women's Art Club and Women's Group Exhibitions in Zagreb from 1928 until 1940."

³³ Glafki Gotsi, "A 'Guarantee of Clustered Energy and Collective Promotion': The Association of Greek Women Artists and its Exhibitions in the 1950s and 1960s," <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol8/iss1/13/>

exhibited, which prizes and recognition he received, and who collected and wrote on his work. In such a value system, women are by default disadvantaged because they could neither study in the right schools nor exhibit in the right places. Retrospectively, we, as art historians, uphold the discrimination by not giving any importance to the women-only events to which they participated. When assessing the reputation of an artist, we indeed never take into account these women's societies, salons, and shows, with their annual exhibitions and prizes. Worse, we do not consider membership to all-women associations or participation to all-women exhibition enough to establish someone as a professional artist.

As Denis Laoureux explains very well in his study of the *Cercle des femmes peintres de Bruxelles*, professionalization requires exhibiting at the main salons. As a result of such a mindset, 21,8 % of the artists who exhibited at the Cercle between 1884 and 1899 should be regarded as amateurs because they did not show in official salons.³⁴ Georgina G. Gluzman evidences a similar situation for 1930s-1940s Argentina, where women artists were not accepted at the National Salon and created a "space of their own" to increase their visibility.³⁵ This, to us, is very problematic. While we cannot change history, we are in control of the way art history treats women. We thus propose that we adopt a broader definition of a professional artist, such as the one Susan Butlin offered in her dissertation on the professionalization of Canadian women artists: a professional artist is someone who received a significant art training and who exhibited or belonged to art associations, without any consideration of whether they were women-only or not.³⁶

From there, we can start comparing the relative importance of the different women's schools, salons, and shows, and establish a new value system specific to the woman's art worlds, that will allow us to better understand the trajectories of

women's careers and the strategies they used that are lost to us if we only consider them from the male's art world's point of view. The case of Olga Boznańska, presented by Ewa Bobrowska in her study of the *Cercle des artistes polonaises*, is particularly interesting as we see how she most certainly used the all-women shows to advance her career—far from shying away from them, she embraced them because in such a space she could occupy the spotlight rather than the dim light of male dominated shows.³⁷ While Boznańska was obviously an exceptional case (most successful women artists in a mixed context were reluctant to exhibit in a separatist exhibition), other artists must have likewise adopted different strategies and trajectories to advance their career, specifically within the women's art worlds.

A different modernity

Not only do we need to shift our value system when it comes to the professional career of these women, we also need to rethink our definition of what it meant to be modern and progressive. As mentioned earlier, all-women exhibitions have always been criticized for the insipidity of the works and uninspiring personalities of the artists. And indeed, the catalogues of these exhibitions often present us with flowers, still-lives, and portraits which had little to woo art critics and feminists. But could it have been different, considering the nature of these events?

In her study of the Women's Art Club of Chicago, Joanna Gardner-Huggett presents the interesting case of Macena Barton, one of the Club's organizers. While some of her works were very modern in terms of style and feminist in subject matters, she never exhibited them at the Club, where she always presented more traditional works. Like Barton, many modern women artists, when exhibiting in all-women events, showed middle of the line, unproblematic works that could appeal

³⁴ Denis Laoureux, "Le Cercle des femmes peintres de Bruxelles : un collectif, quatre expositions (1888-1893)," <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol8/iss1/4/>.

³⁵ Gluzman, "An exhibition of one's own."

³⁶ Susan Butlin, "A New Matrix of the Arts: A History of the Professionalization of Canadian Women Artists, 1880-1914," Ph.D. dissertation (Carleton University, 2008).

³⁷ Ewa Bobrowska, "Les Polonaises s'organisent : les premières expositions de femmes artistes polonaises à l'orée du XX^e siècle," <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol8/iss1/3/>.

to the gentle patrons of these events. The social expectations placed on both women artists and women patrons were such that, what would have been acceptable in mixed exhibitions, would have been disgraceful in the context of a women-only show. The Women's Art Club of Chicago was simply not the place for Barton to exhibit her nudes.³⁸

Not only was the setting and audience of all-women exhibitions discouraging any audacity in terms of content and style, but the education of women and rules of property governing their lives could not foster much audacity among female artists. Their upbringing and lifestyle led them to create traditional artworks, both in subject and in technique. When studying women artists, it is important to keep in mind that women's confinement to the woman's world dramatically limited their world views and artistic practices, and that only a few exceptional women in exceptional circumstances were able to break away from such limitations.³⁹

The weight of expectations placed on women artists, even modern artists, is well documented in Paula J. Birnbaum's essay on the association FAM. While the group claimed the adjective modern and was founded on the rejection of the more traditional Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs, the artists of FAM could not escape the demands of a patriarchal society. In the context of 1930s France and the pro-natalist movement, they were expected to be women before being artists. As Birnbaum explains, their role as *mère de famille* was to take precedence over their artistic activities, at least in the public eye. Hence the great number of mother and child paintings exhibited at FAM. While some members of FAM, like Tamara de Lempicka, were only reluctantly adhering to such ideals, most of them, including the founder of the group Marie-Anne Camax-Zoegger, seemed to have embraced the ideal of the *mère de famille nombreuse*, and made their children the subject of their paintings, not only because it was a way to

comply to social expectations but also simply because their homes and children were their lives.⁴⁰

The same tension is described in the essay on the *Salón femenino del arte* actual that took place in Barcelona in the 1960s and 1970s. In the context of Franco's Spain, where a women's role was severely restricted to traditional and narrow limits, women artists had to be extremely careful. Their professional ambitions could not appear to take precedence over their role as wives and mothers; this would have been regarded as unwomanly, thus politically subversive. To gain the right to exhibit their works, they had to present themselves as housewives pursuing feminine artistic pursuits. In such a context, their works were not and could not have been too progressive, too critical, or too original in form and content. Yet, the mere fact that they exhibited together was extremely modern and, in many ways, more progressive than whatever their male colleagues could ever do.⁴¹

With all this being said, what are WAS's ambitions for the future? After organizing a few events and publishing this special issue of the *Artl@s Bulletin*, where do we see WAS's endeavors going?

As we have hinted, we first want to build a community of scholars and work together to develop a common terminology and even possibly a common and consistent methodology to study these events, because the ones used in the field of exhibition history are inadequate.⁴² None of these exhibitions "made art history" or can be thought as "exemplary,"⁴³ and the discursive silence that surrounds them require art historians to come-up with new questions, new research strategies, and new discourses.

Our second and most ambitious goal is, as we said, to help write a global history of all-women

³⁸ Gardner-Huggett, "Women Artists' Salon of Chicago."

³⁹ Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", *ARTnews*, January 1971: 22-39, 67-71.

⁴⁰ Birnbaum, "The Exhibitions of the Femmes Artistes Modernes."

⁴¹ M. Lluïsa Faxedas, Isabel Fontbona, and Patricia Mayayo, "Se rendre visible dans l'Espagne de Franco: le «Salón femenino de arte actual» (1962-1971)," <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol8/iss1/15/>

⁴² See for instance the special issue "En revenant de l'expo" of *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne* no. 29 (Fall 1989) with articles by Yve-Alain Bois, Pierre Rosenberg, Hubert Damisch, Rosalind E. Krauss, etc.

⁴³ No all-women exhibitions appear in either Bernd Klüser and Katharina Hegewisch, ed. *L'art de l'exposition: Une documentation sur trente expositions exemplaires du XX^e siècle* (Paris: Éditions Du Regard, 1998) or Bruce Altshuler, *Exhibitions That Made Art History* (New York: Phaidon, 2008).

exhibitions from the 1860s to the 1960s. When we say write we do not have in mind an actual book; rather we are referring to the construction of a collective narrative. Eighteen months into the project, we can already see a certain narrative take shape with some key moments. For instance, the story does not start in the late 19th century when the first all-women associations appeared, and the first all-women exhibitions took place. It starts earlier when the concept of a separate woman's world is established and women's access to education increases. Segregated art class and female teachers are an essential part of this story as they created a favorable environment in which women informal networks transformed into association and exhibitions.

It is to this long story that Artl@s and AWARE hope to contribute through the programs we organized and will organize, and through the tools and resources we will make available to the public, including this issue of the *Artl@s Bulletin*.

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