

19th-century women writers on the Old Masters (London, 10 Nov 17)

National Gallery, London, Nov 10, 2017

Maria Alambritis

Knowing 'as much of art as the cat': 19th-century women writers on the Old Masters

This major conference examines the role of English-speaking women as disseminators of knowledge about Old Master paintings and historic painting techniques during the Victorian era

The conference forms part of a collaboration between the National Gallery and Birkbeck, University of London that also includes Chawton House Library, Hampshire, and the Southampton Centre for Eighteenth-Century Studies, University of Southampton. It follows a one-day event held at Chawton House on 25 February 2017.

Aims and scope

John Ruskin famously dismissed the art historian Anna Jameson as knowing 'as much of art as the cat'. However, in recent years there has been an upsurge of interest in women like Jameson as influential interpreters of the visual arts and as writers of art history during the formative years of the discipline. This conference, which capitalises and expands upon this interest, will look afresh at the role of English-speaking women as disseminators of knowledge about Old Master paintings and historic painting techniques during the Victorian era.

While the National Gallery's first Director, Charles Eastlake, and his male colleagues produced scholarly publications, including museum catalogues, aimed at professionals and connoisseurs, women in his circle and in the following generations typically had a wider reach. They could – and did – speak to specialists, but many chose to disseminate information in more creative and demotic ways. Mary Merrifield, for instance, wrote on historic painting techniques and also published articles about women's fashion, in which she used the Old Masters as a sartorial guide, illustrating her points with pictures from the National Gallery's collection.

Among the research questions the conference speakers will engage with are: What was the contribution of British women writers to the emerging discipline of art history, including canon formation, formal criticism and history of techniques and other genres such as exhibition guides and translations? Is there anything distinctive about women's approach to these fields? A second set of issues we will address concerns women's networks and relationships – between sexes, between generations, and with professional counterparts abroad – as well as exploring women writers' institutional affiliations. Finally, we hope to see new insights emerging at the conference about the reception of women writers' published work in art history, not least in relation to its reach and audiences and its critical fortune.

Programme

10–10.20am: Registration

10.20–10.30am: Welcome from Dr Susanna Avery-Quash, Senior Research Curator (History of Collecting), National Gallery and Professor Hilary Fraser, Dean of Arts & Geoffrey Tillotson Chair of 19th-Century Studies, Birkbeck, University of London

10.30–11.15am: Keynote address from Dr Meaghan Clarke (University of Sussex): 'The Women that Shaped Art History: Defining the 'Masterpiece' in the Nineteenth Century'

11.15–11.45am: Refreshment break (provided)

SESSION ONE

Chair: Susanna Avery-Quash

11.45–12.10pm: Professor Julie Sheldon (Liverpool John Moores University): Lady Eastlake's Collaborative Writing on the Old Masters

12.10–12.35pm: Dr Lene Østermark-Johansen (University of Copenhagen): "'This will be a popular picture": Giovanbattista Moroni's 'Tailor' and the Female Gaze'

12.35–1pm: Professor Patricia Rubin (New York University): "'The reverence for old masters is not all humbug and superstition": George Eliot, Lady Eastlake, and the humbug of Old Masters'

1-1.15pm: Q&A session

1.15-2.15pm: Lunch (not provided)

SESSION TWO

Chair: Hilary Fraser

2.15–2.40pm: Professor Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (Georgetown University, Reiss): "'I can only see with woman's eyes...": Mrs Jameson on the Old Masters'

2.40–3.05pm: Dr Zahira Veliz Bomford (Houston, Museum of Fine Arts): 'How Mary Philadelphia Merrifield wrote on the arts: navigating networks in the Victorian age'

3.05–3.30pm: Dr Caroline Palmer: "'A revolution in art': Maria Callcott on Poussin, painting and the Primitives'

3.30–3.45pm: Q&A session

3.45–4.15pm: Refreshment break (provided)

SESSION THREE

Chair: Dr Stephen Bending (Director, Southampton Centre for Eighteenth-Century Studies)

4.15–4.40pm: Professor Patricia Pulham (University of Surrey): 'Venus, Madonnas and Renais-

sance Art: Vernon Lee and the Old Masters'

4.40–5.05pm: Maria Alambritis (Birkbeck, University of London; National Gallery): "'Such a pleasant little sketch...of this irritable artist": Women art writers and the revival of interest in Mantegna for the British public, 1881–1911'

5.05–5.30pm: Dr Francesco Ventrella (University of Sussex): 'Writing Under Pressure: Maud Crutwell and the Professionalisation of Art History'

5.30–5.45: Q&A session

Finish and close of the conference.

Reference:

CONF: 19th-century women writers on the Old Masters (London, 10 Nov 17). In: ArtHist.net, Oct 20, 2017 (accessed Sep 27, 2024), <<https://arthist.net/archive/16535>>.