Swinth, Kirsten: *Painting professionals. Women Artists and the Development of Modern American Art, 1870 - 1930 (= Gender & American culture)*, Chapel Hill, NC [u.a.]: University of North Carolina Press 2001
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Gendering Modernism's Visual Culture

"Thousands upon thousands of girl art students." Painting Professionals aims to tell the story and evaluate the significance of these women who flocked to art academies, schools and ateliers during the post-Civil War period. The ancient institutional barriers to women in the visual arts are well-known.[1] This makes the large numbers of American women--the "thousands of girl art students"--entering the art world at this time worthy of investigation. How was this possible and what were the effects of such a huge influx of talented, ambitious women into a male-dominated arena?

The author, Kirsten Swinth, examines this important and complex problem from a variety of perspectives. The book relates two intertwined, mutually illuminating narratives: one, that of the explosion of women artists into the mainstream after the Civil War, and two, the radically changed politics of art and culture under early twentieth-century modernism. Telling these two stories side by side reveals in part the gendered roots of modernism and sheds light on the impact of gender politics--in part a result of such large numbers of women artists--on major art-world systems of access and reward, such as academy exhibitions, gallery practices (many still with us today), and art criticism. Swinth argues that the backlash against womens' gains in the profession helped shape a new rhetoric of artistic masculinity in the 1890s. Accompanying this were changes in the institutional support structures for art, enabling a renewal of exclusionary practices that marginalized women in the power circuits, which centered on the art gallery rather than large, institutionally-sponsored exhibitions.

Swinth makes a good case for these changes as part and parcel of the reorientation of high culture around explicitly masculinist ideals of genius, power and virility, ideals that were not simply a result of the industrialization of American society, but were much more directly produced by the challenges presented by the large number of professional women artists. These "disorderly women ... effectively challenged middle-class men's control over 'professional art'" (p. 8). Swinth argues further that recognizing this dynamic is important for understanding the reorganization of high culture at the turn of the century, in order to accommodate modernism. The author shows that, looked at through the lens of gender, this heroic, individualist enterprise had conservative purposes and effects. Liberal, even radical, in terms of style, the new art-world establishment largely relegated women to the margins until the interwar decades.

Swinth is to be commended for looking at ordinary, successful artists, rather than just the famous

"superstars" of the period, such as Mary Cassatt, John Singer Sargent, Alfred Steiglitz, and Georgia O'Keeffe. Though Swinth does discuss Cassatt and O'Keeffe in particular, the discussion comes at the end of the book by way of illuminating the ways in which these (extraordinary) artists worked within and against the gendered structures of early modernism, as laid out in earlier chapters. By looking at more typical artists--Ellen Day Hale, for example--and their contexts, Swinth is able to keep her focus on the institutional structures and professional practices that shaped high culture and early modernism in America. Swinth's book thus provides an important complement, in its focus on women, to Sarah Burns's Inventing the Modern Artist (1996).

Such a task is necessarily complex; change in visual culture and practice is driven by factors within and without the world of art and, as Swinth demonstrates, art engenders changes in the rest of culture. Swinth looks at a variety of sources, including artists' letters and diaries, records of art organizations, exhibitions, art criticism, enrollment patterns in art schools and academies, and the like. Rather than following one or two artists through the period, Swinth instead gives us a multifaceted view of a variety of the conditions affecting all artists, not just women, although those conditions often had differential effects on men and women artists. The book is well-organized, flowing easily from topic to topic. Thus the first two chapters look at the establishment of art schools as loci for professionalism in the arts and the experience of artists in the customary period of advanced study in Paris. Chapter 3 follows the strategies of these artists, male and female, for coping with a weak market for American art upon their return home. The stabilization of the market around the new dealer system had gendered effects, which is the topic of the next chapter, while chapter 5 looks at the discursive practices that promoted the re-masculinized image of the artist. The book concludes with an examination of the attempts of women artists to participate in the art world on these new (modernist) terms.

A revision of the author's dissertation, the book could easily have been twice this length, so rich is the topic. In a few places, this wealth seems to have overwhelmed the author. For example, the changes in art-critical patterns of judgment are gauged in part by sampling reviews of exhibitions a decade apart, in 1880, 1890 and 1900. While this does provide evidence of the changes in art critics' values, this reviewer wished for just a few more data points. Still, this is a quibble--few readers outside art history would probably wish to slog through that much art-writing. Indeed one of the strong points of the book is its accessibility to a variety of audiences--Painting Professionals is of interest to scholars in art history, history, American studies, and women's studies. Another aspect of its accessibility lies in Swinth's eschewing of discipline-specific jargon. The author does not expend much ink on unpacking and interpreting images--as she notes in her introduction, her aim in this project is an institutional and cultural, rather than iconographical, study. While a few images are examined for what they have to say about women representing themselves and each other as professionals, readers who wish to see how particular choices of subject matter, style and self-representation played out for individual artists will have to look elsewhere. This is not necessarily a shortfall. Art history could use more studies that look at the social, cultural and institutional structures in which image-making is embedded and which it also helps to shape.

[1]. See Linda Nochlin's essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" Art News (January 1971).

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