

Art of Domesticity: Domestic Arts from the 19th Century to Today

Art Criticism and Gender

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| Grades: | High School (9-12) |
| Subjects: | Visual Arts |
| Time Required: | 1-2 class periods |
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Lesson Overview:

Students will first review the four steps of art criticism: describe, analyze, interpret, and judge. Likewise, they will understand that art criticism has traditionally been misogynistic and will keep that in mind with their art criticism in the future.

Featured Artwork:

- #461B, *Today Sows Tomorrows Where Yesterday Grew II*, nd by Janice Lessman-Moss, Silk, Linen, digital jacquard, hand woven, TC2 loom, and painted warp and weft, 64 x 28.5 inches
- *Full Circle* by Kari Russel-Pool, 2006, Flame worked glass affixed to plate glass floated off a painted background, 30 x 28.5 x 3 inches
- Glass Vase by Louis Comfort Tiffany
- Hand Painted Teapot by Unknown Artist, Porcelain

Learning Objectives:

- Students will understand and be able to use the four steps of art criticism.
- Students will know about some of the gender disparities in art criticism.

Materials Required:

- Copies of Excerpts from Cindy Nemser’s article “Art Criticism and Women Artists”
- Copies of Introduction Panel of *The Art of Domesticity*
- PowerPoint *The Art of Domesticity – Art Criticism*

Steps:

1. Pull up *The Art of Domesticity – Art Criticism* PowerPoint and follow the slides discussion questions and activities
2. Stop on indicating slide and have students read excerpts from Cindy Nemser’s article “Art Criticism and Women Artists” and the Intro Panel of *The Art of Domesticity*.

3. Continue the PowerPoint slides to continue discussion after students are done with the readings

Standards Addressed:

Ohio's Learning Standards for Visual Arts

High School:

HSP.1CR-Evaluate various sources for visual reference

HSP.3CR-Identify visual literacy Strategies as a means to communicate concepts

HSP.1RE-Increase relevant vocabulary to describe and analyze components related to visual art

HSP.3RE-Utilize art criticism methods when responding to works of art

HSP.4RE-Identify the relationships between community or cultural values and trends in visual art

HSP.1CO-Understand how works of art reflect diverse communities, viewpoints, and perspectives

HSP.2CO-Recognize contributions of the visual arts in everyday life

HSP.3CO-Examine personal and social contexts related to works of art

HSP.4CO-Examine various aesthetic theories and visual culture

The Art of Domesticity Introduction Panel:

The decorative arts have long been part of the domestic environment. For centuries, a woman's artistic talents were applied to projects that were deemed favorable to them—knitting, sewing, porcelain painting, and weaving—and that could be done within their home. Seen as craft, they were not considered to be the same level as the fine art produced by their male counterparts. In the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, a few movements transferred the ideas of “craft” to fine art. Two of the largest movements were the Arts and Crafts movement and the Bauhaus. The Arts and Crafts movement began as a reaction to mass produced domestic items. It favored the handmade designs of the past. The Bauhaus of the early twentieth century also looked at the integration of craft and design into everyday life. Women were involved in both movements, although they were still relegated to duties that fitted their gender—such as weaving and sewing.

The domestic environment has long been perceived as the proper place for women. It was the woman who decorated the home and created a space of sanctuary for the hard-working man who daily encountered the public space. In that sense, the domestic on display in this exhibition is both the environment and the object.

Today, female artists have turned those “domestic” skill into fine art. The four contemporary artists in this exhibition use traditional craft media to create works of art. They look beyond the idea of the domestic interior in some cases, and in other cases, they create large, intricate works of art out of materials once considered to be craft.

Excerpts from Cindy Nemser's article "Art Criticism and Women Artists"

Source: *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, July, 1973, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 73-83, University of Illinois Press.

"Along with art history, art criticism has played a vital role in measuring and evaluating the extent of the achievements of women artists. Art critics of both sexes, however, being no different from other human beings, have stereotyped notions as to what constitutes women's art. My intention is to uncover these stereotypes and to bring them into the open. Perhaps when exposed to the clear light of reason, they will be laughed out of existence. Then we can begin anew to judge women's art." (73)

"Art history and art criticism are almost unanimous in assuming that if a woman artist has any contact with a male artist, be the husband, lover, friend, or acquaintance, she must either be his pupil or deeply under his influence." (74)

"Included in the category of captivation is, of course, the concept of witchery. Female artists are often referred to as witches and associated with occult powers and practices." (75)

"[W]hen other aspects of woman's biological nature form the basis for her artistic attributes, the character of women's art becomes less and less praiseworthy. Because woman is looked upon as either the receiver or preserver of life rather than its creator, anything she does originate is believed to come out of a 'passive, unconscious' kind of creativity." (75-76)

"Since woman by nature is consigned to passivity, conversely she is viewed as open to attack from all external elements. This vulnerability explains the use of such words as emotional, sensitive, immediate, spontaneous, nervous, hysterical, words which are sprinkled so overgenerously throughout the art criticism of women's works." (76)

"Women artists are not always to be found in a state of distraction. Yet when they revert to their natural passivity, a worse danger besets them. They are likely to turn narcissistic, and critics view this unpleasant female tendency with great severity." (76)

"Technique and style are also seen as heavily influenced by the woman artist's enclosed female nature. In the Crayon (1860), J. Durand notes that woman is 'best suited to all kinds of engraving techniques because she easily conforms to the sedentary life,... that motionless activity which the engraver's pursuit demands.'" (76)

"Viewed as narcissistic and limited in range, women artists are also seen by many critics as unwilling or unable to make the great sacrifices supposedly necessitated by devotion to one's art... James Fitzsimmons confirms this notion when he writes in an unpublished letter (1971) that 'up until today, few women have been (or are) serious about art in the right way. High art is not 'something one does' or a 'spare time avocation.'" (77)

“Categorizing women artists as captivating, emotional, narcissistic, and narrow in scope, critics are hard put to explain their worthy achievements. This predicament explains the frequent use of the word intuitive in dealing with women's art. The *Webster's New World Dictionary* defines intuition as the "immediate knowing or learning of something without the use of conscious reasoning." Granting woman intuition is the perfect means whereby her solid attainments can be acknowledged without giving her full credit for them.” (77)

“As we examine the various biologically engendered stereotypes critically associated with women artists, we discover a personage who is classified as noncreative, imitative, captivating, passive, emotional, narcissistic, narrow-minded, selfish, intuitive, and elemental. Though some of these qualities are highly desirable, by now our picture is so confused and contrary it is laughable.” (77)

“The art of men has also been defined, to a large degree, by critical cliches derived from male physiognomy and sexual biology. Strong, grand, powerful, forceful, assertive, bold, rigorous, creative, direct, tough - these are words that abound in critical accounts of men's art works. Male artists also get the benefit of being designated as intellectual, intelligent, conscious, logical, and structured. Now, as we have seen, women's art is seldom described in terms of this male-oriented vocabulary; yet our male-dominated society values these qualities most of all. Therefore, it is not surprising to discover that when woman's art is compared to man's in such phallic criticism, woman is always the loser.” (78)

“Now, since woman's art can never be as good as man's, the only way for her to make any progress, according to another form of phallic criticism, is to attempt to make an art that looks like his.” (79)

“Conversely, if an artist improves as she comes closer to assuming male qualities, it follows that the more "female" her art becomes, the more offensive it is.” (79)

“Critics will praise a woman striving to paint like a man as long as she does not succeed too well. If her emulation comes too close for comfort, then the woman artist will be condemned for denying her female natures.” (79)

“Women artists who are viewed as willing to accept male instruction and apply it to an art that reflects the stereotyped version of feminine nature are most acceptable to male chauvinist critics of both sexes.” (79)

“Various types of masculine criticism can be combined to put down the work of men as well as that of women.” (80)

“Greenberg first insults the minimalists by calling their sensibilities feminine. Then he imputes to them the need to dissemble their femininity, which makes them sneaky and even more feminine. But Truitt is willing to stake herself on the truth of her sensibility, feminine or not; she at least openly acknowledges her female nature and therefore is more admirable than those

unmanly minimal deceivers, and she does this in her painting, the aspect of her work of which Greenberg most approves.” (80)

“If we look back on the image of the woman artist presented to us by the art critics cited in this essay, we see that she has been typecast in accordance with the accumulated clichés associated with her female biology. Some female artists no doubt have succumbed to these stereotypes and have produced the sexually clichéd art expected of them. However, this capitulation on the part of certain women artists does not give critics carte blanche to view women's work, or men's either, with any prejudged set of criteria based on a set of outworn sexual prejudices.” (80-81)

“One hopes ‘feminine’ will not always continue to retain its pejorative connotations, but these associations will only be altered when society as a whole alters its attitude toward women in general. Until then, it is best to bear in mind Lawrence Alloway's sensible assertion that “the notion of feminine and masculine sensibilities revealed by art is a prejudicial cliché.” (81)