

Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock
Routledge & Kegan Paul 1981 ISBN 0-7100-0911-9 £5.95

The publication of this long awaited book marks the beginning of a new direction in the evaluation of womens' place in the history of art.

'Old Mistresses' as the name suggests, is concerned with the status of women artists discarded by the conventions of art history to a separate and subordinate position. By revealing and challenging the inherent assertions of art history — that great art is created by a succession of male geniuses independent of social and historical contexts — the book provides a new conceptual framework which feminists can use to reinterpret the relationships between dominant ideologies (defined as values and systems of beliefs in dominant groups in society), women artists and the institutional production of art.

The book builds upon previous contributions by feminist art historians which have reclaimed our 'hidden heritage' of women artists and their struggles for recognition but is critical of the way this groundwork has been carried out within the limiting framework of conventional art history. Parker and Pollock argue that by emphasizing the educational, institutional or psychological obstacles, by proposing an alternative set of criteria by which to judge women's work, or by presenting it in a linear chronological yet unhistorical manner, previous studies have not challenged the continued separation of the category 'woman artist' from artist. Parker and Pollock however establish that: 'Women artists are not outside history or culture but occupy and speak from a different position within it.'

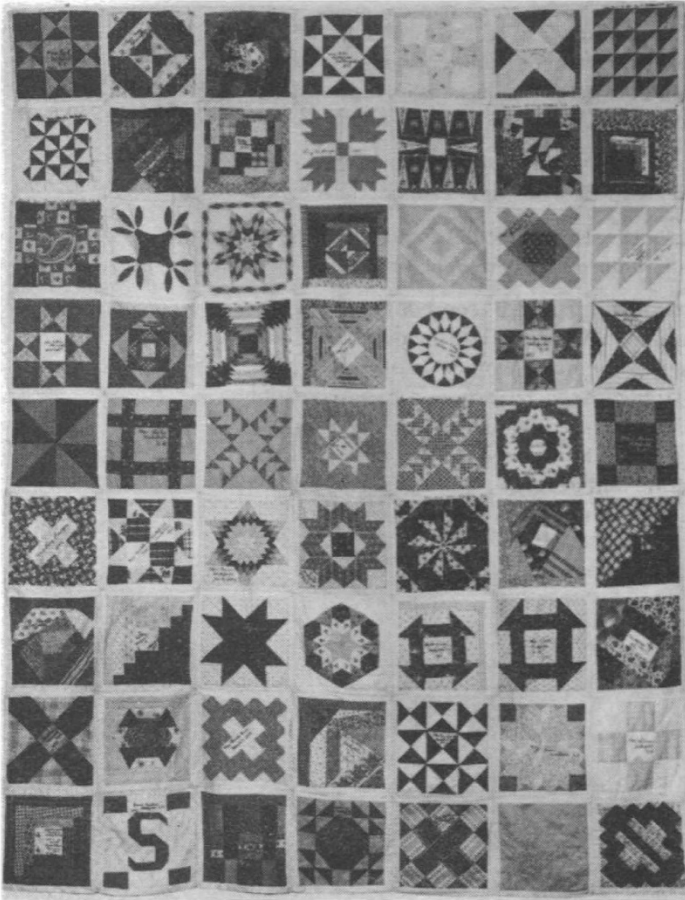
During particular historical periods the dominant ideology has determined both the production of women's work and its reception. This was manifested through a number of conceptual manoeuvres. The major concept Parker and Pollock tackle is femininity. Art historians invariably attribute notions of femininity to a woman's work which they then claim to be typical of all artistic creation by women. The authors, however, demonstrate that femininity is a socially defined term, and further, it is frequently reduced to biological attributes in a way which systematically conflates creation with procreation. Consider the following quotation from the *Art Journal* of 1871:

Women by *nature* are likewise prompted in the treatment of sculpture to motives of fancy and sentiment rather than realistic portraiture or absolute creative imagination (p.10)

The corollary of this notion of femininity was the claim that since women were essentially considered to be 'graceful, delicate and decorative', their work was incommensurate with mainstream (male) art and could thus be regarded as marginal.

Secondly, by stressing the primacy of stylistic innovation, art history has dismissed women's art as derivative and therefore insignificant. But Parker and Pollock also demonstrate that women *did* manipulate these dominant forms of representation (i.e. styles and genres) to express new meanings which communicated something of their own experiences. Artemisia Gentileschi (early 17th century) for example is cited as an artist who, using a contemporary and influential style, nevertheless reinterpreted established biblical subjects, adding her own nuances to the depiction of female protagonists. Also, although often restricted to the 'lesser' genres, women have explored these and contributed to their development — as in the case of Sofonisba Anguissola (mid 16th century) in portraiture. Similarly, the use of pastels, regarded as a 'lesser' medium in the 18th century, was transformed by the work of Rosalba Carriera into an acknowledged means.

This leads to a third consideration, namely the distinction between 'arts' and 'crafts'.



The discipline of art history decrees that work carried out in the domestic sphere does not have the same value as that intended for public consumption — nor does it have the same intellectual content. This implies a division of labour between craft work carried out by amateurs (women) as a pastime or family duty, and art by professionals (men) to provide an income. Indeed, a critic writing in 1974 and cited in the book, summarises this hierarchy of art and craft in the following highly revealing way:

I am going to forget, *in order to really see them*, that a group of Navaho blankets are not only that. In order to consider them as I feel that they ought to be considered — as Art with a capital 'A' — I am going to look at them as paintings — created with dye instead of pigment, on unstretched fabric, instead of canvas — *by several nameless masters of abstract art.*

In the book, the section covering the history of embroidery and quilting is particularly well-researched and fascinating to read.

The final section of the text deals with 20th century. The authors propose that more than in any other period, women artists have been written out of history, and that stereotyping of them still persists. One major effect of the emphasis on femininity has been to distance women from the (supposedly) male preserve of artistic genius. In the past, women's art had provided a feminine foil to dominant art forms, not as an alternative but as a negative. The role of women artists has therefore been a contradictory though a strategic one:

Women's practice in art has never been absolutely forbidden, discouraged or refused, but rather contained and limited to its function as the means by which masculinity gains and sustains its supremacy in the important sphere of cultural production.

The authors expose the means by which the male establishment determines both the criteria of greatness, and who has access to the means to achieve it.

Art is not a mirror. It mediates and represents social relations in a schema of signs which require a receptive and preconditioned reader in order to be meaningful.

That patriarchal ideology is reproduced at the level of language and iconography is demonstrated in the section on the nude. The traditional codes of art are shown to be so strong that the many women artists who have tried to rupture existing meanings through strategies (such as 'reversals') have encountered serious problems in achieving a radical interpretation.

But it is at this level, the authors argue, that women artists must try to negotiate a new position and develop a strategy for women's art practice which will affect both the conditions of production and the conditions of reception.

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