

They Aren't in the History Books: Women Artists in History

There is something missing in the histories of art. “What is that?” you ask. “Women artists,” will be my reply. While thumbing through older editions of art history books, it appears that art history was made, built, and sculpted primarily by men.

So many beautiful pieces of art have been made by women, and yet, they seem to have been forgotten in the world of art history. The National Museum of Women in the Arts stated that it was not until the 1980s that women artists were starting to be recognized in these history books, and even then, only twenty-seven were depicted (NMWA). It is sad to see that these talented artists were eliminated from art history simply because of their gender.

“It’s simply not done!”

“You cannot be a professional artist!”

In the nineteenth century women as artists were just as frowned upon as women in other forms of employment. Females were expected to follow the very specific rules that were set forth for their gender, and professional art was not on the list of acceptable careers. Per the National Museum of Women in the Arts,

For most of the period, art education and professional recognition for women remained separate and unequal to that of their male peers. In late 18th-century France, the prestigious Académie des Beaux Arts limited female membership to four; the Royal Academy of Arts in England had only two female founding members (NMWA).

Instead of backing down, women fought back. In this paper, I want to discuss three women artists from the nineteenth century that challenged oppression and became successful artists. Each of them is unique in their study of art and in their background. I will discuss Mary Cassatt, who studied under the French Impressionists and put her name on the Impressionist movement both in France and the United States. Next, Edmonia Lewis, who despite adversity, became well known in the art world. She was the first woman of African-American and Native American descent to have achieved international fame and recognition as a sculptor. Finally, I will introduce Olive Rush, who grew up a Quaker and was inspired by genres of art ranging around the globe.

Mary Cassatt

Mary Stevenson-Cassatt, born May 22, 1844, in Pennsylvania was an American printmaker and painter (Mary Cassatt Org.). Her father was a stockbroker, her mother the daughter of a banker (Art Story/Cassatt). Like many women of her time, her family protested her will to become an artist. But Cassatt pushed on. She studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia when she was only fifteen and continued her studies through the years of the American Civil War. The website about Mary Cassatt states that, "...20% of the students [in the school] were female. Though most were not bent on making a career of art...Cassatt...was determined to become a professional artist" (Mary Cassatt Org.). Who could blame her? Art was a career that carried prestige and the ability to publicly express one's creativity.

She left the school in America where she believed she was not receiving a proper education and followed her family to France where she studied under

expert artists and copied the styles and pieces of the masters. One of her acquaintances and teachers was Edgar Degas, an Impressionist painter.

The Impressionist style of painting was already considered rebellious; brought forth by painters with a new eye for style. They saw and expressed light in new ways adding softer shapes in natural colors, blended with views of average people were not what the administrators of the French Salons wanted to depict. They wanted strong details and formal studio settings. Instead of the intricate elements that other artists produced, Impressionist paintings were softer, vibrant, with an unfinished quality about them. In turn, they were faulted for this unfinished quality. In a struggle against the French government's control of art in the salons, the Impressionist painters fought for recognition and popularity. They painted 'en plain air' (on site) and were castaways in the French shows (Viktoria).

As the unique style began to grow in popularity, Mary Cassatt could officially state she had joined their ranks (Weinberg). Cassatt was not only the first woman, but the first American to paint in the softer style; through the instruction of the Impressionist painters, Cassatt's talents grew (Weinberg). Art Story, an organization devoted to art history states:

Cassatt's work combined the light color palette and loose brushwork of Impressionism with compositions influenced by Japanese art as well as by European Old Masters, and she worked in a variety of media throughout her career. This versatility helped to establish her professional success at a time when very few women were regarded as serious artists (Art Story/Cassatt).

She worked primarily with people, using her family as models. Her interests would turn to mother and child portraiture which would set her apart from others, in the sense that her paintings are full of virtue, love, and the bond between mother and child. Her soft paintings depicting the brilliant innocence of childhood and the tenderness of motherly devotion would become her biggest accomplishment.



Figure 1: The Boating Party, Mary Cassatt (NGA).

“The Boating Party” was made during what is believed to be Cassatt’s finest period of work. It depicts a woman and a child in a boat, with a boatman paddling on a lake. The painting, created in 1894, shows Cassatt’s unique styles combining both Impressionism and the influence of the Japanese prints she was known to enjoy (NGA). The offset composition, muted details, and close point of view are evidence of these unique qualities.



Figure 2: Little Girl in a Blue Armchair, Mary Cassatt (NGA).

The second painting, “Little Girl in a Blue Armchair” was finished in 1878. This painting, one of my personal favorites of Cassatt’s, depicts a little girl relaxing restlessly in a blue armchair while her little puppy sits nearby. Viewing this painting made me giggle a bit, because the little girl looks more bored than anything, like she just wants to go outside and climb a tree. Cassatt’s ability and nerve to paint a child being none other than a child was a new phenomenon for the world of art. Thus, the piece was rejected by the Paris Exposition Universelle, the city's third World's Fair (Puchko). At the time, portraiture was a formal occasion, with children, in pristine attire, sitting in a pose that portrayed them as more like dolls than children. Cassatt had no children of her own, but did have plenty of family to keep her inspired. When her family and their children would visit, she’d paint them.

In the biography about her later life Art Story.org described her work as such:

...by the 1880s, Cassatt was particularly well known for her sensitive depictions of mothers and children. These works, like all her portrayals of women, may have achieved such popular success for a specific reason: they filled a societal need to idealize women's domestic roles at a time when many women were, in fact, beginning to take an interest in voting rights, dress reform, higher education, and social equality...she shared and admired progressive attitude of Bertha Honore Palmer, a businesswoman and philanthropist who invited Cassatt to paint a mural for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and who felt that 'women should be someone and not something,' (Art Story/Cassatt)

Failing eyesight by the year 1900 would limit Cassatt's work, eventually forcing her to stop painting. Her love for art continued, and she inspired the sale of many pieces of Impressionist art to friends of hers who visited France. The Metropolitan Museum has reason to thank Cassatt in her influence as "Cassatt was...instrumental in shaping the Havemeyer collection, most of which is now in the Metropolitan Museum," (Weinberg).

She would retire to her country home in France, living with her sister, Lydia. Her death in the summer of 1926 left many grieving, but her memory and work still lives on.

Mary Edmonia Lewis

"There is nothing so beautiful as the free forest. To catch a fish when you are hungry, cut the boughs of a tree, make a fire to roast it, and eat it in the open air, is the greatest of all luxuries. I would not stay a week pent up in cities, if it were not for my passion for art." — Edmonia Lewis, quoted in "Letter From L. Maria Child," National Anti-Slavery Standard, 27 Feb. 1864, (qtd. In SAAM).

Here I have begun to introduce Edmonia Lewis. Lewis was a sculptor, and although born in the United States, she worked in Rome. Her true birth year is unknown, but it is said that she claimed to have been born in 1844 near Albany,

New York. Her father was African-American and her mother a Native American of the Chippewa tribe. Lewis lost her parents at the tender age of five (SAAM).

She grew up with the tribe, learning their customs and arts until she was twelve. It was then that her brother, Samuel, a gold miner, sent the money for Lewis to attend schools in New York and eventually Oberlin College in Ohio. It was in Ohio that she changed her childhood name 'Wildfire' to Mary Edmonia Lewis. Life at the school was not easy for her, and she was accused of poisoning two fellow classmates and theft, crimes she did not commit. Lewis was asked to leave the school, never graduating (SAAM).

Lewis traveled to Boston where she met portrait sculptor Edward Brackett and began to train under him. Although she had limited education in sculpting, Lewis began making small medallion portraits of well-known abolitionists such as John Brown and Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. It was with the sales of these small medallion portraits that she could travel to Europe to continue her career (SAAM). In an article on New York history is the following information, "the early nineteenth century was a difficult time to be an American sculptor. There were no professional art schools, no specialized carvers, few quality materials, and only a few practicing sculptors in America. The pilgrimage to Rome was a necessity for those who aspired to be sculptors. If a woman wished to pursue sculpting, she (also) confronted additional obstacles" (Weber).

Lewis would have to face these obstacles and overcome them. If working with clay and marble was considered undignified because it required physical effort and pants, she was up for the challenge. If working as a sculptor required the study of human anatomy, Lewis would do it, even if it meant studying nude models. A blog written about Lewis by a New York Historical Society recites a quote from Lewis regarding her need to travel to Rome for her work, "...I was practically driven to Rome...in order to obtain the opportunities for art culture, and to find a social atmosphere where I was not constantly reminded of my color..." (Weber). Thus, she adopted Rome as her home.

Not much more is known of her younger years and life with the tribe. Her school years were rather short lived, her time in Boston temporary. It was in

Rome that her artistic talents expanded, and she began building a name for herself in the world of neo-classical sculpture. She was small of stature, standing only four feet tall, but insisted that she carve the marble herself, never relying on hired assistants. She felt strongly art should be completed by the artist (Rivo and Weber).

She gained commissions for busts of prominent people like Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant or poets and authors like Anna Quincy Waterston. In her free time, Lewis would return to her history and create marble renderings of Native Americans and African Americans. This was her way of fighting against the oppressions of her people and showing the nation that the treatment of these people was unjust. The Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard states, “Lewis rendered unique treatments of African American and American Indian themes and figures. Her first large scale marble sculpture “The Freed Woman and Her Child” (1866), was the first by an African American sculptor to depict this subject” (Rivo). The location of this sculpture is unknown, but its cultural significance was undeniable.



Figure 3: "Forever Free", Edmonia Lewis (Lewis)

Another of Lewis' sculptures that has told a story is entitled, "Forever Free" (1867), taking its name from a line in the Emancipation Proclamation, "All persons held as slaves shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free" (Rivo). This sculpture depicts a man and woman casting off the shackles of enslavement. This piece, according to the Hutchins Center, "evokes the well-known abolitionist emblem engraved by Patrick Henry Reason..." (Rivo). A piece which depicted an African American woman on bended knee, stripped to the waist, her head tilted toward the sky, and her clasped hands raised revealing heavy chains attached to her wrists. This piece is heart wrenching. However, looking back to the piece by Edmonia Lewis there is a similar pose in the woman, she is on bended knee and replicates the same gesture. The Hutchins Center tells us that her piece shows the woman unchained, fully clothed, full of dignity and grace that was denied to African Americans by slavery (Rivo).

This was one of Lewis' signature pieces, but her fight for equality did not end there. She did many pieces with depicting both African Americans and Native Americans that showed strong women overcoming injustice. "I have a strong sympathy for all women who have struggled and suffered," she once told a journalist (Rivo). Lewis fought for humanity through her work. It was her way of showing the world the injustices that were being imposed on her people and others in similar situations. Through her art, her story remains. Today, protest art is strong in showing the world the injustices being brought down upon people. Perhaps Edmonia Lewis was ahead of her time in depicting the world's wrongs through pieces that have been handed down through history.

Edmonia Lewis worked until into the 1880s when the neoclassical style began losing its popularity to be replaced by modern art. There is not much documentation as to whether Lewis remained in Rome or returned home as commissions for her work began to dwindle. It is assumed that she remained in Rome until her death in 1911.

Olive Rush

A muralist, illustrator, and advocate for Native American Art Education, Olive Rush was born in June of 1873 in Indiana. As a Quaker, artistic pursuits were considered unnecessary vanities, however, Rush was encouraged by her parents. An article done by the *Pasatiempo*, an art publication, on Olive Rush's legacy tells us that she was artistically talented beginning at a young age (Abatemarco). Her parents' generation was affected more by early prohibitions or leanings of Quakers who felt some aspects of the arts did not appropriately accompany their spiritual beliefs. Her parents both had artistic leanings, but never really expressed them significantly because of the strong feelings of their Quaker upbringings" (Abatemarco). Having the support of her parents, Rush's talent grew as did her love of the west and folklore after having been told endless stories about the west from her father who had traveled in his younger years. The open spaces and Native American civilizations fascinated Rush (Siegel).

She left home, and began her art studies at Earlham College, a school associated with the Corcoran Gallery of Art and at the Art Students League, before becoming an illustrator in New York in 1895. Rush's work was published in magazine such as St. Nicholas, Woman's Home Companion, and Good Housekeeping (Siegal). Eventually, she expanded her study to Europe, studying under American Impressionist Richard Miller. While visiting galleries in Europe, she saw works by many women artists. Included among these works were murals painted by Mary Cassatt and other female artists such as New York sisters Lydia Field Emmet and Rosina Emmet Sherwood (Abatemarco). Some of the creations she saw while traveling in Europe would inspire her styles later. She often visited New Mexico in the early years of the 20th century, securing a solo show in 1914 at the Museum of New Mexico's Palace of the Governors. It was here that Rush developed a love for painting murals and frescoes. Indiana Magazine of History states:

...it unusual for women artists to receive commissions to paint large murals, but the artists (as those mentioned above in Europe, for example) ...painted real women engaged in useful fields of work—a bold rejection of the conventional, flat allegorical images of women most often created by male artists. (Siegal)

Like Cassatt, Rush stepped outside the conventions of women in art and developed her own style. One of her paintings, 'Evening Flowers,' a portrait of a little girl sitting on the ground, was included in the Fall 1915 benefit for women's suffrage at the Macbeth Gallery in New York," (Siegal). While painting her wall pieces and frescoes, Rush included and encouraged help from the local Native Americans.

Falling in love with New Mexico, she made it her permanent home by 1920. She was forty-seven, and her life as an artist was still going strong. Due to the popularity of her frescoes and murals, Rush was asked to teach students at the Santa Fe Indian School. Rush accepted and assisted the students in creating a fresco on the walls of their dining area. Her words regarding the experience were nearly as artistic as her creations, "My part was merely to effect a correlation of

the designs suggested. I felt like a musical conductor who goes to an orchestra of highly trained musicians,” she stated (Siegal). Rush continued her work with the students, and in 1933, she and her students had created a series of murals for Century of Progress exposition in Chicago. Her love of teaching and the Native American traditions helped her when she wanted to establish The Studio at the Santa Fe Indian School, a program that would train hundreds of Native American artists in the years to come. As art historian Wanda M. Corn has argued, such visual images of contemporary women “stretched the boundaries of the imaginable for their young female viewers,” (Siegal). Rush was becoming a role model for up and coming female artists. With her encouragement the younger generation would eventually gain the confidence they needed to become professional artists themselves (Siegal).

Olive Rush never gave up her Quaker beliefs, nor did she relinquish her generous nature that she'd been taught as a child. She volunteered during WWII, sending clothing to the needy, and advocating for peace. In May of 1947, her heartfelt efforts helped her to acquire an honorary Doctorate in Fine Arts, presented by Earlham College, where her life in art had begun. In her acceptance speech, Rush stated, “The message of Art is to turn the mind from the special, the fragmentary, the personal to the universal...” (Siegal). Rush's words would continue to inspire her and her students until her death in 1966. She was a loving, caring, and strong woman who stood for what she believed in. Her art had its own daring flare about it, while still portraying the peaceful Quaker ideals that she had grown up with. Through her work and her loving demeanor, Rush's reputation as a considerate woman would grow, and it's with her words I close, “You must learn your own best way of living and creating. You are an individual in art as in life” (Raphael).

Conclusion

Each of these artists were unique and fought for equality in what was once considered a “man's world.” These women have given their hearts and souls for their work. They have fought for their families, friends, and future generations. In

my studies of art history and as an artist myself, I can only hope that I can help tell their stories, forever giving them their rightful place in the history books.

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