

Women's Work

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Faculty Guide

The exhibition *Women's Work* features art created exclusively by women from the McClung's Art & Culture Collection. It showcases notable artists from East Tennessee, like Adelia Armstrong Lutz and Mary Etta Grainger. There are also well-known American artists like Elizabeth Nourse, Elizabeth Catlett, and Maria Martinez. The exhibition ties these diverse makers together by, in part, exploring unifying motivations of these women to produce art. It also examines how their opportunities were altered by their geographic location and community support systems. They each faced societal constraints informed by the time and place in which they lived, and their art reflects those restrictions. *Women's Work* shows how women created new worlds for themselves through their artmaking. Their overlooked legacy and scholarship are given a fresh perspective through this exhibition.

Pre-Tour

To prepare for a visit to the exhibition, faculty may ask students to consider, explore, and define some key terms:

Patriarchy
Folk
Feminism
Marginalization
Traditional

Gender
Craft
Art market
Canon
Sexism

During your Visit

Women's Work is comprised of art by several women from the McClung's Art & Culture Collection, and it represents a variety of media and artforms. Throughout all these artistic works, we have identified key overarching educational themes to guide the learning experience. One or more of these themes could be used to focus a conversation and/or subsequent assignments. Below you will find a brief summary of each theme, guiding questions to consider, and a prompt for going beyond the exhibition within the theme.

Theme 1: For, By, Between Women

An overarching focus of the exhibition is the relationships forged between women—as supporters, patrons, partners, friends, family, or lovers. However, queerness before the modern era is difficult to define because historical relationships and language is deeply coded and closeted. Some of that shroud can be lifted by analyzing artwork made by the women in the exhibition, and the way they describe one another through written documents or by examining life choices. For instance, in the late 1800s, some women of means from the US moved to France to find more social and professional freedom. There, those who would be described as gay, genderqueer, lesbian, bi or pansexual today, could also express their sexuality and gender identity more freely. Some same-sex romantic relationships were documented, while others remain innuendo.

In addition to romantic connections or gender expression, the exhibition explores how women elevated one another as patrons or friends by supporting and championing each other’s art and life choices. Though critical to the advancement to some of the artists presented here, this support is imperfect. White, wealthy women would collect or offer patronage to other women of similar backgrounds. They excluded support for women who were not upper class, and even more starkly, for women of color. However, poor women and women of color would create their own community structures and creative exchanges to enhance each other’s lives and artmaking.

- Why is labeling queerness for historical women so complicated? Where do you see cues in art or in life choices that could uncover these hidden pasts?
- Why is applying contemporary LGBTQ+ labels to historical figures fraught? How does this impact our understanding of queer history?
- How has “taste” been driven by white women in this exhibition? Where do you see examples? Where do you see counterpoints?
- How else does community play a role in the work and lives of the artists in this exhibition? Do you see community advancing women today? Why or why not?

Beyond the exhibition: Despite many major strides made by women’s movements, sexism still perpetuates barriers and creates limitations for women in their personal and professional lives. Additionally, since its inception the women’s movement and feminism has been fraught as it was founded largely by cis, white women in the USA or Europe. Consider both of these points. Where do you see the continued marginalization of women’s contributions? Where do you see barriers being broken? How is the work and life of a cis woman verses a trans woman valued by society at large? What about women of color verses women who are white? Where do you see explicit exclusion verses implicit bias based on race, gender identity, and/or gender expression?

Theme 2: The Best Revenge is Her Paper

The value and importance of visual artwork has been defined largely by the formal art market—which has been built upon patriarchal and colonial structures. As in other creative arenas, art by white men is more revered than the visual culture produced by women or people of color. Artmaking by white men is largely heralded as an intellectual choice and academic pursuit, which is thereby more desirable in the art market. Women who create artwork, even if they are academically trained, historically have been considered hobbyists, functionalists, or generally less interesting based solely on the gender of the maker rather than the quality of the output. In addition, subjects that feature the perspective womanhood, especially family or motherhood, are considered more pedestrian in the hands of a woman than the same subjects in the hands of a man. These prejudices are so ingrained in the artworld that women—and *especially* women of color—still: Are less frequently collected, bring lower prices at art markets or in galleries, are excluded from art historical canons, and are featured less in major art fairs, exhibitions, and museums.

- If you didn't know all of these artworks were created by women artists, what would your guess of the creators' gender be based on the content and subject of the pieces? Why? Do these works read as specifically feminine in perspective?
- Who do you think these pieces were made for and why? What clues you in to their purposes?
- Are any of these artists' names familiar to you? Why or why not? If not, why do you think that is? Does the quality of their work seem lesser than that of their male contemporaries?
- When considering the disparities in value and visibility, does merely collecting more art by women create equity? What else do museums and other art institutions need to do to rectify the gender imbalances in the art world?

Beyond the Exhibition: The art canon refers to the typical list of artists that art taught as a part of art history. This list is largely Eurocentric and comprised of men. How has sexism shaped your knowledge of art and art history? Who were you taught are “important” or who are your favorite visual artists? How many artists of color can you name verses white artists? What about women artists of color? How has capitalism shaped other artforms, like music or film? How has it impacted women artists in those industries over their male counterparts?

Theme 4: Folk/ Craft/ Traditional/ Fine

Folk, craft, and traditional have long stood as coded language in the art world to denote art that is “lesser than” fine art, so much so that such labels can be considered by some as derogatory or insulting. Visual creative cultures filed under these words have been considered less elite, intellectual, intentional, personal, evolved, or valued. This artistic bigotry is deeply rooted in classicism, racism, and—as this exhibition highlights—sexism. Art made with certain materials that are considered craft-oriented (such as fabric or clay), or with functionality as a focus (like bowls or blankets) have long been considered less interesting than art made for “art’s sake” (like oil paintings or marble statuary). Similarly, the Eurocentric romanticization of the artist as a lone (preferably male)

practitioner and as cult of personality, excludes art that may have been created by a community or through cultural traditions that do not highlight an individual over the group, especially if those traditions are held by women or people of color. This has especially impacted women whose communities and cultures were oppressed by colonization.

- When examining the artwork in this exhibition, what artforms impressed you and what surprised you? Do you see a divide in your preferred style, subject, or material? What do you think is defining your preferences and interests?
- Consider the overlap of regionalism and classicism in art from the United States. How has it shaped the desirability of one art form over another?
- When you think of “fine” art what images come to mind? Would you consider any of these works “fine” art by your personal definition? Why or why not?

Beyond the exhibition: Cultural and creative output from the southeastern United States has long been used to develop and maintain stereotypes. Food, art, and music from the geographic south has a false, historic link to low class individuals and ignorance. Things like bar-b-que, banjo music, and quilt making are cultural touchstones that are not exclusive to the southeastern region. However, they can be used as a dismissive southern signifier. How has cultural production been used to belittle its makers? Where else do you see the weaponizing of culture happening and against what community? How does it perpetuate racism as well classicism? How is it used to create political divides? Where are cultural and racial stereotypes playing out today that could also be linked to ‘Southern’ identity? Is there even such a thing as ‘Southern’? What about “Appalachian?” How are those stereotypes being reclaimed, broken down, or elevated by people who were previously relegated to them? What is the positive and negative impact?

Theme 3: New Women

The trajectory of the artists in this exhibition parallels the women’s movement for social and professional equity from the late 1800s to now—what some scholars have called first, second, and third wave feminisms. (Note that fourth wave feminisms and/or post-feminism is not represented in the exhibition, but could provide a lens for critique and discussion.) Artists like Elizabeth Nourse, a “New Woman” of the 1800s, is retroactively considered a first wave feminist. She eschewed social mores of her time like marriage and child rearing to pursue her art and live freely. Elizabeth Catlett, whose work considers racial injustice as well as gender inequity could be considered through a third wave lens. Other artists in this show like Harriet Whitney Frishmuth, who also eschewed marriage and traditional gender roles in order to pursue her art, lived their lives in direct defiance of the patriarchal norms that were established for women within their given timeframes. Elizabeth Gould and Maria Sibylla Merian, the two naturalists featured in this exhibition, were creating scientific works at a time when their work was completely revolutionary for women. Not only were these

women creating detailed, scientifically accurate field books and drawings, but they were doing so in the field, a place that would be considered a man's space for decades to come.

- How do these benchmarks of societal change show up in the artwork you see in the exhibition? Look at the changes in the collection of the museum as well as the subject matter and materials explored by the artist.
- Are there certain pieces or artists who stick out to you as overtly feminist? Why? What is it about their pieces that reads this way?
- How do some of these pieces relate to modern political art? Are they more implicit or explicit? Consider the time period and social/cultural norms of when they were made.

Beyond the exhibition: While white women left to go to Europe for societal freedom, Elizabeth Catlett, an African American artist, went to Mexico. There, Catlett found the social support and community she needed to continue her artmaking and pursue her intellectual and political interests. However, her exodus, unlike that of her white peers, was politicized and decreed as anti-American. She was even stripped of her U.S. citizenship. Compare and contrast the attitudes and climate surrounding Catlett's expatriation with that of the Parisian New Women of the late 1800s. Where do you see similar rhetoric today?

Big Picture

Many of the themes explored in this exhibition are the result of the same societal and prejudicial exclusions that perpetuate systemic racism today. As we observe or participate in the social justice movement of Black Lives Matter, where do you see women of color being elevated and pushing against societal barriers? How is art making—visual or otherwise—playing a role in protest? Where and how else do you see the trajectory of art following or being defined by this major societal movement?

Simultaneously, as we experience the COVID-19 pandemic, disparities that have always existed in society have been magnified. Where do you see impact of the pandemic disproportionately impacting women? What about women of color? What about women of varied socioeconomic statuses? Is art and creativity playing a role in coping? How so or why not? What art forms seem to resonate the most within the communities you are observing? Why?