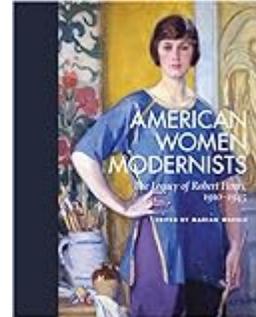




Sarah Burns. *American Women Modernists: The Legacy of Robert Henri, 1910-1945.* New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005. xii + 274 pp. \$68.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8135-3683-5; \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8135-3684-2.



Reviewed by Valerie Ann Leeds (Independent Scholar and Adjunct Curator of American Art, Flint Institute of Arts, Michigan)

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The Modern Woman Artist and the Female Art Students of Robert Henri

American Women Modernists: The Legacy of Robert Henri, 1910-1945 is a publication that highlights the work of women artists taught by the noted American painter and teacher, Robert Henri. Though principally a portraitist, Henri is popularly associated with the Ashcan School, a group of artists who were often identified with depicting urban subject matter in a realistic vein. In truth, however, urban subjects represented only a small portion of the oeuvres of these artists. Neither did many of Henri's female students choose to depict the city, though most were educated in New York City and some remained there. Still, they were encouraged to paint their surroundings. This volume, produced in conjunction with an exhibition organized by the Brigham Young University Museum, includes seven essays by authors whose specialties include art history, American studies, and cultural studies, each introducing different aspects of the contexts in which Henri's female students lived and worked.

Marian Wardle, the exhibition's curator, authored the opening essay, "Thoroughly Modern: The 'New Women'

Art Students of Robert Henri," which serves as an introduction and overview of the project. Sarah Burns's essay examines the Henri students whose creative pursuits led to work in design and the decorative arts. Helen Langa focuses on some women printmakers and their artistic innovations. Betsy Fahlman examines art education in this period and the differences in opportunities and success of women artists as compared to their male counterparts. Erika Doss explores how the social pressures of their day affected art made by the female artists. Gwendolyn Owens investigates the state of the art market and the discrimination against female exhibitors during the early twentieth century and its impact on the reputation and careers of female artists. In the final chapter, Lois Rudnick explores the general social and cultural environment of the early twentieth century and its influence on the choices made by women; this contribution has little direct reference to the art or artists covered in the other essays, but adds to the contextual understanding of this era. Her essay also addresses the notion of modernism, redefining its meaning to extend beyond stylistic concerns and include progressive and forward think-

ing. The essays are followed by a major section of over four hundred biographical sketches of women who have been identified as Henri students, compiled by Stephanie Andrews McNary. This last section represents the single most important contribution of this publication and will be an important reference tool.

The book is a valuable resource that covers much uncharted terrain and introduces a wealth of new material. Among the strongest essays are those on the women printmakers and women in design, craft, and the decorative arts. Beyond these individual texts that contribute to a growing body of literature, the publication as a whole suffers from a lack of focus. Another problematic aspect of this endeavor is the overall quality of works reproduced; with some exceptions, few images selected for reproduction meet the level of quality and originality demonstrated by male contemporaries. Although there may be practical reasons that could explain the choice of lackluster examples, the result of presenting so many weak images is that the reader comes away with the impression that these women's importance has more to do with their gender than with their artistic abilities. Admittedly women's exhibition and career opportunities were more restricted than those of men, but the question of why there was not more exceptional work produced by Henri's female students (if that indeed is the case) warrants further inquiry. Of the over four hundred female students who studied with Henri, the essays and reproductions examine less than 10 percent of the identified artists, with no explanation about the choice of those artists highlighted, so it is difficult to make any real assessment.

To this writer, the case made for Henri's singular influence on his female pupils is unconvincing. Admittedly, Henri was known to have given great encouragement to all his students, both male and female, and he advocated freedom of expression and exhibition opportunities for all artists, seemingly with little overt regard for their gender. Yet, many of these women studied only briefly with him, and only a few primary sources are cited by the authors that attest to his direct influence. In addition, Henri's widely available publication, *The Art Spirit*, outlines many of the specifics he taught in his classes and attests to his steadfast roots in the realist camp, in his teachings, as well as in his own art. His ideas about realism and painting from life were published widely and would have been accessible even to people who were not his students.[1]

This effort contains other lapses, such as important

omissions in the bibliography of sources specifically relating to Henri and, in several of the essays, important facts about Henri's life and career are misrepresented or missing, such as his friendships with students, the organization of exhibitions, his trips abroad, and the degree of his involvement with the Armory Show. Had additional sources been more carefully consulted this might have provided the authors as well as readers with a more in-depth portrait of Henri as a teacher and friend, and given us a more nuanced understanding of this important figure's practice, teaching, and philosophies. Extant correspondence between Henri and several of his female students who became his close friends, such as Helen Niles, Alice Klauber, and Margery Ryerson, are listed as sources, but seem not to have been consulted by the authors.

Since this book makes much of Henri's relationship with his female students, it would seem logical that his relationship to male students would also merit close scrutiny for comparison's sake. No mention is made of the extensive existing correspondence between Henri and George Bellows and Henri and John Sloan, which could have provided the contrast.

Throughout the essays broad assumptions about the social limitations of women are made. For example, in Fahlman's essay about art education, she notes that it was not appropriate for female students to be friends with a male instructor. As the new century matured, however, strictures on women's behavior loosened and Henri was indeed very close friends with a number of female students and in fact led trips abroad, mostly populated by his female students, as outlined in the biography section of the text. Also much is made of the fact that women artists gave up careers, often for their husbands or families; this was widely accepted as the social norm of the day, but was by no means mandated. There were female artists who rebelled against these conventions when they were ambitious and driven enough or when their personal circumstances either permitted or required them to do so, as did women in other professions.

The essays in *American Women Modernists* contribute to our understanding of the many obstacles that still faced women in the early twentieth century and also outline the progress, innovations, and successes that women artists were nonetheless able to achieve. Unfortunately, there is not enough besides the "modern woman," female students studying with Robert Henri, and the discrimination they suffered, to link these disparate essays. Henri's legacy seems to be only a tangential theme in some of

the essays and the portrait of him in the text is a thin specter of the lively and charismatic personality that is so clearly evident in his extensive writings. Since this publication was produced in conjunction with an exhibition, it is therefore most surprising that there is no catalogue of works in the exhibition. Despite these criticisms, *American Women Modernists: The Legacy of Robert Henri* and the identification of over four hundred female students, many of whom became professional artists, is a testament to Henri's contributions as an inspiring educa-

tor and raises some interesting points upon which future scholarship can rest.

Note

[1]. Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit: Notes, Articles, Fragments of Letters and Talks to Students, Bearing on the Concept and Technique of Picture Making, the Study of Art Generally, and On Appreciation*, compiled by Margery Ryerson (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1923).

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