

Patricia Trenton, ed. *Independent Spirits: Women Painters of the American West, 1890-1945*. Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. xiii + 304 pp. \$41.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-20203-0; \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-20202-3.



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Published on H-Women (July, 1998)

Canvas Pioneers: Women Paint the American Frontier

Independent Spirits represents the confluence of various rising streams of scholarship: studies of visual culture, women and gender, the new Western history, the social history of art, and public history. Designed as a companion volume to a 1995 exhibition at the Autry Museum of Western Heritage in Los Angeles, this collection of essays reveals the lives and work of over a hundred women who produced art in the American West in the early twentieth century. Most of the artists discussed here remain invisible in surveys of American art, despite the increasing attention accorded to women in the visual arts. Many are even absent from recent feminist art histories. This is because not only their sex but also their regional isolation served to marginalize them. The majority were only locally celebrated, not members of better studied art centers like New York. Yet, clearly, sufficient materials have survived to chronicle the lives and work of these women.[1] The book is lavishly illustrated.

Virginia Scharff's introduction, "Women Envision the West, 1890-1945," provides the historical and historiographical context for the anthology. Scharff asserts that women in the American West enjoyed a long legacy of

artistic accomplishment; as long as humans have inhabited those lands, there have been women artists in what is now the "American West." But the turn of the twentieth century marked a particularly crucial period, witnessing a sort of creative explosion in Western women's artistic activity. Increased access to art training and feminist challenges to gender conventions expanded women's opportunities for becoming professional painters. Scharff incisively describes the geographic and cultural mobility that differentiated the West. "In virtually all cultures, femininity has carried with it the injunction to spatial constraint," she writes, but "the power to move from one place to another, to learn, work, and wonder, made art possible for some women in the American West." Access to remote places eased this process.

This idea of the West as a physical and psychic space suffuses the rest of the essays in the collection. The essays take a regionalist approach, dividing the West itself into more specific geographical and cultural units. In "Searching for Selfhood: Women Artists of Northern California," Susan Landauer argues that despite incidents of discrimination, overall, San Francisco-area women

painters enjoyed more opportunities and greater inclusivity than their Eastern counterparts. Southern California appears to be an even most fertile ground for producing women artists. In "Islands on the Land," Patricia Trenton writes on women traditionalists working in Southern California, while Ilene Susan Fort focuses on women modernists in "The Adventuresome, the Eccentrics, and the Dreamers." Both agree with Landauer's conclusion that the West afforded golden opportunities for professional women painters. As Fort posits, "Southern California, especially Los Angeles, was suitable territory for these liberated women."

Vicki Halper's essay, "Northwestern Exposure," portrays a rigid gendered division between art (female) and commerce (male) in Washington and Oregon. By contrast with their Californian counterparts, these women artists felt culturally isolated. They found themselves traveling East to study art and gain their professional credentials until the 1930s, when the Federal Art Project invigorated the region and laid the groundwork for institutions to develop (e.g., the Spokane Art Center in 1939). In the Southwest, too, women imported their professional training and experience at first, as described by Sarah J. Moore in "No Woman's Land: Arizona Adventures" and Sandra D'Emilio and Sharyn Udall in "Inner Voices, Outward Forms: Women Painters in New Mexico." The region lured women artists from elsewhere, not only with its dramatic desert landscapes but with the "exotic" human subjects living there, e.g. the Hopi for Kate T. Cory and the Pueblo for Mary Greene Blumenschein.

Women artists played roles that were crucial to their communities yet remained distinct from men's roles. In these regions, women generally acted as the "gentle tamers" of Western lore, that is, the primary organizers of local cultural institutions; and this position, in turn, gave them a place in local art communities that they could translate into influence for exhibition space and professional inclusion. Susan Landauer and Becky Duval Reese explore the Texan context in "Lone Star Spirits." Women in Texas painted in a wide range of themes and styles, at first specializing in more genteel genres like still life and miniature portraits but turning to landscape by the 1920s and abstraction by the 1950s. As artists, educators, club-women, and collectors, each generation eased the way for the next to surpass it. Joni L. Kinsey, in "Cultivating the Grasslands: Women Painters in the Great Plains," is particularly interested in how women artists were able to work in genres (such as landscape) typified as masculine.

The essays overall reflect the great diversity of cul-

tural contexts that existed on the American frontier. But among these essays, only Scharff's introduction investigates what may bind these different artists together as Western women painters. How much did the women of the Sketch Club in San Francisco, the members of the Santa Fe art colony, and the landscapists of the northern plains have in common? Did traditionalists and modernists share a single group identity? Is this an identity that had meaning for them, or is it only perceptible and useful to us in the late twentieth century? The focus on regions-within-region obscures patterns in women's lives and work that may have crossed those primarily geographical boundaries. One craves a clearer articulation of the contrast (or lack thereof) with women artists' experiences in other regions, not merely the nebulous "East" but New England, the South, and the Midwest, and with other urban art centers in those other regions.

Other connections worth pursuit include the relationship between painters and other visual artists. D'Emilio and Udall take up this line of inquiry in their essay on New Mexican communities, and it leads them toward a more ethnically inclusive narrative of women artists.[2] Even beyond art, these portraits would fit well into the larger story of women's professionalization.[3] In addition, more research and thinking about gender and race needs to take place, especially given the multicultural site under study here. Women painters of color, such as Pauline Powell and Narcissa Chisholm Owen, began to break into the ranks of professional art at the turn of the century. What about the Native American and Mexican American women who preceded them in other Western arts of "pottery, textiles, etc." before 1890? And how did gender and race intersect in women artists' depictions of Native American subjects? Such questions demand sustained analytical scrutiny.

The biographical mosaic of *Independent Spirits* lays the groundwork for future work in this field. There are signs that western women artists have captured both the public and the scholarly imagination. For example, a course developed by Susan Ressler of Purdue University and Jerrold Maddox of Pennsylvania State University will use the internet to explore "Women Artists of the American West: Past and Present" in Fall 1998 <<http://www.sla.purdue.edu/waaw>>. The Georgia O'Keeffe Museum has been attracting sizable numbers of visitors since it opened in Santa Fe last July. From the forgotten to the canonized, these women contributed to the envisioning of the American frontier. Now at last they are being recognized as a significant part of how the West should be studied and remembered.

Notes

[1]. See for example Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990); David Lubin, *Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art, Power, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); Ellen Wiley Todd, *The New Woman Revised: Painting and Politics on 14th Street* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[2]. Joan Jensen, *One Foot on the Rockies: Women and Creativity in the Modern American West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995) explores these kinds of connections across media, genre, and discipline.

[3]. The growing body of scholarship on American women and professionalization in this era includes Su-

san Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Virginia Drachtman, *Sisters in Law: Women Lawyers in Modern American History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Regina Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Gloria Moldow, *Women Doctors in Gilded Age Washington: Race, Gender, and Professionalization* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Margaret Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America: Struggles and Strategies to 1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

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Citation: Laura Prieto. Review of Trenton, Patricia, ed., *Independent Spirits: Women Painters of the American West, 1890-1945*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. July, 1998.

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