

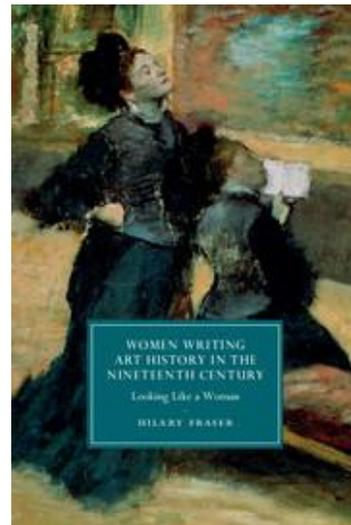
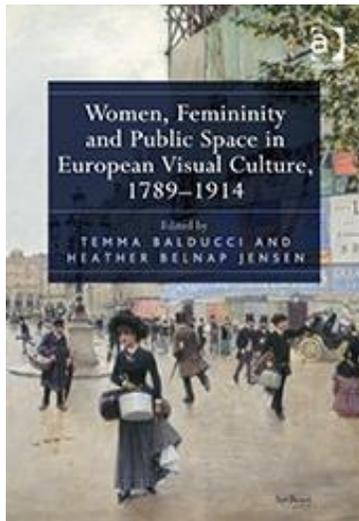
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Illustration and Gender: Drawing the Nineteenth Century

Guest Edited by Kate Holterhoff and Nicole Lobdell



Finding Feminist Art History in the Nineteenth Century

[*Women, Femininity and Public Space in European Visual Culture, 1789-1914*](#). Edited by Temma Balducci and Heather Belnap Jensen. Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014. 317 pp.

[*Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century: Looking Like a Woman*](#). Hilary Fraser. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 230 pp.

Reviewed by [Kimberly Rhodes](#), Drew University

<1>The essays collected by Temma Balducci and Heather Belnap Jensen for the collection *Women, Femininity and Public Space in European Visual Culture, 1789-1914* and Hilary Fraser's *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century* expand our understanding of middle- and upper-class European and North American women's agency and influence as writers, artists, and participants in urban life during the long nineteenth century. They also join a growing body of feminist scholarship interrogating the binarism of the "ideology of separate spheres" that identifies women with the private realm and men with the public domain and structures a large swath of nineteenth-century gender studies. Balducci and Jensen proclaim the urgency of this undertaking in the introduction to their collection: "We contend that the wholesale and uncritical adoption of the separate spheres framework threatens to deny female

agency and fragment a feminist collective — two perilous phenomena for the field of feminist art history” (5). Fraser’s investigation of separate spheres is not stated overtly, but is implicit in her subject matter; being an art historian necessitates engaging directly with public space and discourse. To test and ultimately loosen the reductive categorizations prescribed by the separate spheres model and thereby recognize the manifold cultural contributions of women, Balducci, Jensen, and Fraser employ the productive strategy of disrupting traditional disciplinary boundaries and definitions. According to Fraser, “Acknowledging the generic flexibility of women’s writing about art has the effect of recalibrating our definition of what constitutes art history. And this means the inclusion of many more women — not only those who are recognized as art critics . . . but many far less familiar names” (10). Balducci and Jensen broaden the scope of what is considered “public” to include “museums, parks, cafés, theaters, salons, shops and the streets . . . to explore the many ways in which women did shape and influence various publics: spheres, spaces, discourses” (3) and in doing so challenge the widespread influence of Jürgen Habermas’s gendered theories of the public sphere. Through impeccable scholarship and measured dissent, both books demonstrate that restoring women’s achievements to the historical record, a legacy of second wave feminism, has enduring political, theoretical, and methodological value for current studies of nineteenth-century art and literature. To do so, however, feminist scholars must continue to engage in lively and respectful debate about their methods, as these studies do.

<2>Early in her book, Fraser acknowledges the tense relationship some feminist art historians have with their Victorian predecessors and her own central quest to rehabilitate these nineteenth-century women, not just for mainstream history, but for their feminist descendants, creating a powerful female network that spans the centuries. These historical and political strands of Fraser’s argument weave together when she informs us that Laura Mulvey, best known for her widely influential feminist theories of the male gaze, is the great-granddaughter of nineteenth-century art critic and poet Alice Meynell. When addressing the gap between feminist art historical generations, Fraser points to Deborah Cherry, who “focuses . . . on the failure of nineteenth-century women art historians to exercise influence at this important moment of canon formation” (18). Fraser suggests, in response to Cherry, that attending to how these women wrote about and looked at art and who they wrote for (often popular rather than specialist audiences and women rather than men) is just as important as paying attention to what they wrote about. Doing so allows us to assess their interventionist contributions to art history in its nascency, theorize the gendered gaze, and create a cadre of nineteenth-century women art historians who paved the way professionally and politically for modern feminists. Thus, Fraser is less concerned with presenting a comprehensive list and analysis of women’s art historical writing than with showing how conventional definitions of that category limit our historiographical and theoretical comprehension of women’s contributions to the discipline.

<3>Fraser devotes her first chapter to “The Profession of Art History” to establish a disciplinary context and locate women in the field, which was just becoming clearly organized in the nineteenth century. Not surprisingly, she finds that while John Ruskin and Walter Pater dominated art history and criticism, most women writing about art worked from the margins, even those who established solid reputations such as Anna Jameson. Fraser sees this as an advantage of sorts: “writing from the margins confers a kind of freedom that those who inhabit centres do not have. . . . Writing from the sidelines,

from the verge, their work is . . . more often at the cutting edge, more likely to refuse conventional categories” (29). To address the fluidity of form necessitated by the unequal distribution of power in art history, novels, ekphrastic poetry, travel guides and translations thus occupies as much discursive space as more conventionally formatted art historical writing in *Women Writing Art History*. Fraser proves to be as iconoclastic as she claims her nineteenth-century subjects were and brings to the surface many under-explored art historical texts and lives in subsequent chapters. To underscore her commitment to disrupting the boundaries of art history, Fraser moves from discussion of the discipline of art history in the nineteenth century to examination of “The Art of Fiction” in Chapter Two and “Girl Guides: Travel, Translation, Ekphrasis” in Chapter Three. She returns to more conventional art historical writing in the fourth and fifth chapters.

<4> Canonical and lesser-known authors of novels featuring women artists and art historians intermingle in “The Art of Fiction,” including Charlotte and Anne Brontë, Maud Cruttwell, and Anne Thackeray Ritchie. According to Fraser, “Fiction offered an alternative medium of expression to the more ideologically circumscribed discourse of art history, one that enabled women to rehearse with greater freedom issues relating not only to the gender politics of their profession and the writing of art’s histories, but to sexuality, visuality and intersubjectivity” (42). In novels, Fraser discovers frank discussion of the institutionalized sexism of the nineteenth-century art world, the assertion of the female gaze for visual pleasure, and other pressing themes picked up by feminist art historians a century later; these observations provide evidence for her claim that “it is by reading the art of fiction . . . that we can make the most effective counter-claim against the charge of women’s ‘silence’ or at best their docile acquiescence in the gender blindness of art history in the nineteenth century” (44).

<5> Fraser finds convincing support for both her central argument and her decision to broaden the range of her textual examples in her selection of travel guides, translations, and ekphrastic poetry for Chapter Three. Travel guides comprise some of the earliest art historical writing by women and, although most of the works of art they discuss were made by men, offer insight into women’s peripatetic public lives, their power to influence popular taste in art, and the way that gender impacts how they look at and write about art. Fraser uses Mariana Starke’s section about the Campo Santo frescoes in Pisa from *Information and Directions for Travellers on the Continent*, published in many editions between 1820 and 1838, together with several other texts, to make these points. Starke’s guide stoked great interest in the frescoes through her vivid prose, acute formal critiques, and emotionally fraught “feminine” poetry. The frescoes were grievously damaged in a fire during World War II, so Starke’s guide has the added significance of providing pre-fire descriptions of the pieces, preserving them for art historical posterity through her text. Evoking Walter Benjamin’s theories of translation, Fraser cleverly connects linguistic translation with ekphrastic prose and poetry in the second section of the chapter. Central to her discussion here is the 1892 poetry book *Sight and Song* by Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, who published their collaborative work under the single name Michael Field. Bradley and Cooper, a lesbian couple, travelled through Europe visiting public art collections and reporting on their activities to their friends Bernard Berenson and his partner Mary Costelloe while creating the poems for *Sight and Sound*. Their journeys, letters, and finished work allow Fraser to evocatively explore “lesbian sexuality in the field of vision” (84).

<6>The final two chapters of *Women Writing Art History* concentrate on more traditionally defined art historical writing and intersect directly with chapters in *Women, Femininity and Public Space*, thus they are outlined briefly here and analyzed with more depth in the following section of this review. In Chapter Four, irresistibly titled “Women’s Periods,” Fraser picks up where she left off in her first chapter by trying to find patterns in the historical categories of art chosen by such female art historians as Anna Jameson, Emilia Dilke, Vernon Lee and Julia Cartwright and by suggesting that some of these preferences, especially Dilke’s attraction to French Renaissance and eighteenth-century art, were driven by rebellion against their male peers and mentors (especially John Ruskin), revisionist impulses, and radical feminist politics. “Feminine Arts,” the last chapter, analyzes the remarkable fact that many women art historians championed new forms of art media such as photography and sought to raise the status of household arts to the level of the fine arts.

<7>Amy Von Lintel’s and Elizabeth Mansfield’s essays for Balducci and Jensen’s collection overlap with and extend some of the material covered in Fraser’s book, demonstrating the editors’ commitment to broadly defining the public sphere to include scholarly and textual practices that demand engagement with public spaces like museums and that circulate through various reading audiences. By creating a social context for traditionally defined art historical material that includes close scrutiny of class issues, audience, and the business of publishing, the essays complement Fraser’s more theoretical readings of similar material. Both Von Lintel and Mansfield show the necessity of interdisciplinary engagement with the vital question, “Why have there been no great nineteenth-century women art historians?”⁽¹⁾ Fraser’s approach through literary criticism offers a compelling variety of texts to consider and challenges the canon of art historical writing. The art historical expertise of Von Lintel and Mansfield highlights the disciplinary context of the texts at hand, illuminating the history of the discipline more vividly.

<8>In “‘Excessive industry’: Female Art Historians, Popular Publishing and Professional Access,” Von Lintel uses a feminist lens to track the publication histories of Mary Margaret Heaton’s *Concise History of Painting* (1873) and Nancy Bell’s *Elementary History of Art* (1874), asserting that “how these writings were printed, illustrated, packaged and circulated to the public has been overlooked as a significant factor in understanding the role of women in nineteenth-century art history” (117). This is fresh and important territory not as explicitly covered by Fraser and other writers on the same topic that shows how the growth of the popular publishing industry increased both professional opportunities for women and the genres of books available to non-specialist audiences. The correspondences between “Excessive Industry” and *Women Writing Art History* are also compelling for their identification of patterns in this growing field of inquiry; both works point to ekphrastic writing as a dominant mode of expression for women and note that many women art historians also worked as translators, a testament to the necessity of foreign language skills in the discipline of art history.

<9>In her essay “Women, Art History and the Public Sphere: Emilia Dilke’s Eighteenth Century,” Mansfield considers an art historical oeuvre also extensively analyzed by Fraser. Issues of class preoccupy both feminist interpreters of Dilke’s erudite and still highly regarded art historical writing on French art, but with different emphases. While Fraser is most interested in what she perceives to be the gap between Dilke’s personal politics, which skewed far left, and her scholarly choice to write about art

closely aligned with the French aristocracy, Mansfield centers her study on how Dilke's gender and middle-class background shaped her professional decisions. Fraser suggests that Dilke's radical politics are found not in her subject but in how she writes about it: "Dilke's interest in the economic framework within which artists and craftsmen worked is everywhere apparent" (128). Mansfield concludes that Dilke's approach to her material emerged from both her desire to distinguish herself from John Ruskin, the Goncourts, and Walter Pater and her typically bourgeois "ambivalent embrace of liberalism" (200). The reader of both these convincing accounts comes away enriched with deeper knowledge of Dilke's scholarship and aware of the value of feminist analysis that is both intersectional and judicious in its combination of social, art historical, and biographical evidence.

<10>The other fourteen essays in *Women, Femininity and Public Space* are less engaged with Fraser's central questions of gender and genre, but are just as accomplished and valuable to art history and gender studies as Von Lintel's and Mansfield's and cover a wide range of geographical and chronological territory. The essays on women artists, for example, provide a historical foundation for Fraser's interest in how fictional and actual women artists embody the gender politics of the nineteenth-century art world and extend our grasp of the feminist art historical literature. The Baroness Hyde de Neuville, Emma Brownlow, Louise Abbéma, Emily Carr, female copyists at the Uffizi, and women artists in Vienna appear in essays by Laura Auricchio, Pamela Gerrish Nunn, Miranda Mason, Samantha Burton, Sheila Barker, and Julie Johnson respectively. The essays related to the representation of women in public spaces in periodical culture, paintings, and prints by Heather Belnap Jensen, Justine De Young, Karen Leader, Temma Balducci, Vanesa Rodriguez-Galindo, and Erin Eckhold Sassin put the visual and social construction of gender at the forefront of discussions of women in the public sphere. Daniel Harkett and Annalisa Zox-Weaver consider the mingling of public and private in the intellectual and personal lives of Juliette Récamier and Gertrude Stein to subvert the binary divisions of the separate spheres framework.

<11>*Women, Femininity and Public Space* and *Women Writing Art History* ask fundamental questions about how feminist scholars should critically engage with the nineteenth century in the twenty-first century. How do feminist networks span centuries and defy the "wave" model of feminist genealogy? Which tools and methods are the most enduring and how do we revise them responsibly? Will interdisciplinary scholarship yield more complete knowledge of women's lives than studies from a single discipline? The provisional answers the authors provide will both spark debate and inspire innovative scholarship.

Endnotes

(1)This question is a variant of Linda Nochlin's "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," an essential piece of feminist art historical writing conjured in both books under review here. Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists," *ARTnews* (January 1971): 22-39; 67-71. ([^](#))