

Women Modernists In New York

O'Keeffe, Stettheimer, Torr, Zorach



By Jessica Skwire Routhier

PORTLAND, MAINE — “Why have there been no great women artists?”

American art historian Linda Nochlin posed the question 45 years ago in the January 1971 issue of *ARTnews*. It was deliberately provocative. Nochlin did not believe or argue that no woman artist had ever achieved excellence in her own work. Her point was that the art market and the discipline of art history — including, by implication, museums — had embraced a theory of “greatness” that, with few exceptions, not only favored the work of male artists, but effectively excluded that of women. Although her essay took a broad view of Western art history, going back to classical antiquity, she was keenly aware of the ways in which her own generation, as well as the one immediately preceding it, continued to face the same, centuries-old



“Spring Sale at Bendel’s” by Florine Stettheimer, 1921. The riot of color and the sinuous figures are hallmarks of Stettheimer’s work, as are the wit and gentle satire in this scene of otherwise genteel women exulting and arguing over bargains. Oil on canvas, 50 by 40 inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art



“White Cloud (Light House)” by Helen Torr, circa 1932. The lighthouse here is inspired by a real one on Long Island, but Torr greatly simplified its shape and architectural details in order to align it with her Modernist aesthetic. Oil on canvas, 26¼ by 18 inches; private collection. —Josh Nefsky photo

challenges, despite the promises of expanded freedoms for women and for artists.

The generation preceding Nochlin is the subject of “O’Keeffe, Stettheimer, Torr, Zorach: Women Modernists in New York,” on view at the Portland Museum of Art (PMA) through September 18. Organized by the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Fla., where it first appeared, the exhibition, say organizers, invites visitors to explore works by some of the most significant Modernists in American art history: Georgia O’Keeffe, Marguerite Thompson Zorach, Florine Stettheimer and Helen Torr, all painters. And yet of these four — setting aside for a moment the fact that Zorach is widely known and revered in Maine — it is really only O’Keeffe who, historically, has been seen as “most significant” among Modern painters.

O'Keeffe, in fact, is often held up as a rare exception to Nochlin's rule: a woman artist of undeniable greatness, a standout in a time of revolutionary changes in art that were, seemingly, otherwise dominated by men. But O'Keeffe was not so much the exception or the isolated genius that she may seem. She was far from the only woman making art in the Modernist idiom and participating actively in the machinery of the New York art world. In fact, the four featured artists were part of a community of creative, ambitious people who boldly and permanently redefined the parameters of art in America. As women, O'Keeffe, Stettheimer, Torr and Zorach also redefined — each on her own unique terms — their stake within this brave new art world.

Exhibition curator Ellen Roberts of the Norton notes that this show contributes to the larger discourse about the history of women in art by offering an enhanced focus on one particular time and place: New York between about



"Jack-in-the-Pulpit No. 3" by Georgia O'Keeffe, 1930. O'Keeffe's series of Jack-in-the-pulpit paintings shocked audiences with their frank sexuality. O'Keeffe half-joked that she wanted her paintings to be "so magnificently vulgar that all the people who have liked what I have been doing would stop speaking to me." Oil on canvas, 40 by 30 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington

1910 and 1935. “The case study model works really well,” she explains, arguing that these artists’ individual — but interrelated — stories collectively reveal some essential truths about how women in art worked and were perceived at the time.



Pegasus handbag by Marguerite Thompson Zorach, circa 1918. Zorach dyed her own wool yarn in order to achieve richly colored effects. Wool embroidery on burlap or linen, 15 by 7¼ inches. Smithsonian American Art Museum

One central idea, Roberts says, is that the gender of these artists, for the most part, had little effect on the subject or appearance of their works, which are as vigorously “modern” as anything from the era. However, “gender does affect the way their art was seen, and that is true of all them in different ways.” The importance of the show, she says, lies in the fact that “if you don’t recognize that and tease out the way their gender affected their initial criticism, then that initial criticism still affects the way their art is seen today.”

Marguerite Zorach, for instance, was often seen as secondary to her husband, William, even though she had effectively introduced him to Modernism during their student years overseas, and her early, kaleidoscopic paintings were every bit as innovative as his. Painted in 1914, “The Garden,” long a mainstay in the PMA’s permanent collection galleries, is an ambitious synthesis of Fauvist color and form with an American setting. Later, Zorach adopted textile arts as a way to better integrate her artistic life with her responsibilities as a parent.

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“Asbury Park South” by Florine Stettheimer, 1920. Curator Ellen Roberts writes that New Jersey’s Asbury Park was “one of the few places in [Florine Stettheimer’s] segregated society where African Americans could go to the beach.” This joyful, multicultural scene is oil on canvas, 50 by 60 inches. Collection of Halley K. Harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld, New York. —Josh Nefsky photo

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