

The Transformation of Women's Art to Feminist Art in the 20 Century

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ABSTRACT

In the twentieth century, great changes have taken place in both the political and economic patterns of the world. World art has also undergone a lot of changes. The modern art center has gradually shifted from Europe to the United States, and people's views and thinking about art have also undergone tremendous changes.

In the 1960s and 1970s, feminist art officially emerged. This article will start with Klimt, a Secessionist painter, to Frida Kahlo, and then discuss the performance of today's feminist artists, so as to analyze the changes in feminist art since the twentieth century. It can be concluded that with the progress and development of society, artists began to try different modes of artistic expression that were different from traditional concepts. The improvement of women's status and the change of people's ideas began to allow women to become artists and create works of art. As a result, women have a position and a right to speak in the field of art, and can export their own personal consciousness and ideas. Since then, the field of art can also become a tool for feminism to promote equality in the world.

Keywords: 20 century art, Gustav Klimt, Frida Kahlo, feminist art

1. INTRODUCTION

The 20th century was a period of vigorous development of feminism. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution and changes of social culture, the feminism movement began to recover in the 1960s. Represented by Simone de Beauvoir's work *Le Deuxième Sexe*, which has become the bible of feminism for the Western female world. Feminist art is a type of art associated with the feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Feminist artists tend to create a dialogue with themselves through their artworks, emphasizing social differences arising from female and other gender cognition and articulating the premise of inequality in the world. Through feminist art, artists try to bring a positive impact to the world's feminist movement and promote the equality of the world.

Before the 20th century, influenced by social environment and cultural factors, art works were not only dominated by men, but also full of objectification of women and examination of male perspectives. Women in the works of male artists are more like inanimate bodies without personal consciousness, appreciated and entertained. As a second gender imprisoned and suppressed in social life, women are not only not allowed

to become artists, but also have the possibility of being deprived and possessed. Before the advent of feminist art, there was only female art, which had the female portrait as objects.

The 20th century was an era of drastic changes in the art world. The center of modern art gradually transitioned from Western Europe to the United States, from Fin-de-siècle Vienna to Cubism and Futurism, and then from Dada and Surrealism to Minimalism and Popism. Both the artwork itself and the world's perception of art had changed dramatically. So, this study will attempt to answer the following questions: How did women use art to promote the development of feminism from the mid-to-late 20th century to the beginning of the 21st century? How to avoid the male gaze and female objectification in art? How to break free from the body on the canvas, truly self-examination and convey individual consciousness. That is, how did women's art transform into feminist art? This paper will start with three artists—Gustav Klimt, who depicts sex and women's portraits, Frida Kahlo, who paints extraordinary self-portraits, and other artists in the present who expressed self-awareness through art works to analyze the roles of women and feminism in their artworks, and the transition from women's art to feminist art.

2. KLIMT: THE FEMALE PORTRAITS NOT ONLY WITH SEX

2.1 Non-traditional Female Figures

There is no doubt that Gustav Klimt is a painter of women. In his life's work, whether it is the early academic works, or the golden-covered portraits after forming a unique decorative self-style, women, sex and death are the main themes of his works throughout. Most art historians think that he was a maniac who had affairs with almost all female models. From the current feminist point of view, his works are full of sensualized women, which is a strong objectification of women. However, unlike the women in traditional works, the women in Klimt's works are vivid, individual, and full of personal consciousness.

Historically, the female body was regarded as an object of desire, existing for the pleasure of men. Women were more often the subjects of art, rather than artists themselves. The artists used and depicted the nudes of female models, using their bodies in religious or scenography. However, women themselves were not allowed to see nudes, which to some extent hindered the possibility of women becoming artists. Female painters were only able to depict works in a decorative manner, and they were unable to approach human body depictions. Before the 20th century, works of art depicting women could be roughly divided into two kinds of methods: complete objectification and complete deification. In the art world of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, purely objectified women were still the mainstream in artistic situational works. The musical "Sunday in the Park with George" once restored the scene painted by the artist George Seurat at the end of the 19th century. Women, as objects in the picture, had the same value as the rest of the set and were not allowed to have personal consciousness and emotions. Another way of depicting women was to completely deify women. Women often appeared as religious or mythological characters and are portrayed as pure and pure saintesses, unable to express emotions, desires and worldly concepts.

After the creation of the Secession, Klimt became the representative of the "new artist" in the European art circle, which not only caused huge controversy, but was also sought after by many people. During the last years of the 19th century, a group of upper-middle class women, feminists among them, began to sponsor fashion reform in Vienna. Many were associated with the Secession group of artists, architects, and designers led by Gustav Klimt[1]. He made numerous expensive and exquisite portraits of women, and also left many sketches depicting the female body. In his works, women are full of eroticism. He not only depicts women's nipples with bold colors and depicts women's erotic faces, but also creates many works of female masturbation scenes (Gustav Klimt, *Mulher Sentada*, 1913). Female

masturbation has always been a taboo topic in patriarchal society. Male masturbation is allowed as a social joke and a topic exclusive to men. But to this day, female masturbation remains a shameful and sinful social topic. Women are not allowed to please themselves. At the same time, he opened up another taboo subject, that of pregnant women (Gustav Klimt, *Hope II*, 1907-08). Elements of the painting indicate that the main figure has life experiences that are not only powerful and beautiful, but also tragic and fraught with loss, thus making her an individual and not an object. The artist's closeness to many women indicates his awareness of their plight. His portrayal of fertility in this painting offered a new perspective on womanhood in art with a depiction of a woman as autonomous and empowered. Criticism from second-wave feminists often follows Klimt's work. However, his continued representation of the female body should be read as a glorification of the body rather than an objectification of it[2].

2.2. Non-feminist Female Figures

However, Klimt's images of women cannot be called feminist. He broke the traditional art form to rebel against confinement, and actually expressed his artistic concept in a rebellious way. As mentioned above, women were often objectified and deified in traditional works of art. In Klimt's works, the so-called objectified women had personal consciousness and emotions, and were allowed to show women's unique personal expression, but it can be seen from his depiction of female images in mythological and religious works that Klimt is still a painter of women, not an expressor of feminism.

The pursuit of the truth is a symbol of secession. Klimt's Goddess of Truth holds a mirror of truth and her face is full of erotic expressions (Gustav Klimt, *Nuda Veritas*, 1908). And Judith in his works is no longer a sublime and holy image. Her cheeks are blushing, her breasts are bare, and the whole painting is filled with an erotic atmosphere. And the head she held in her left hand was obviously a trophy she got through beauty and temptation (Gustav Klimt, *Judith and the Head of Holofernes*, 1901). Klimt was not a feminist artist, but more, he broke the traditional and his own artistic boundaries by breaking through the identity of a female in art.

It can be said that, like the feminist painter, Klimt's expression in the picture was also to break the inherent deformity of the world, and expose his own consciousness in the works of art, so as to express his own personality and self-consciousness. And Klimt's anti-traditional and sexually explicit artworks also promoted the art circle's recognition of female consciousness and female sexuality, thus attracting some feminists to join the group of Secession, which to some extent promoted the development of feminist art in the 20th century.

3. FRIDA: THE FEMALE PORTRAITS FOR HERSELF

3.1. The Female Faces that can be Seen

What it means to be Mexican in the mid-twentieth century—modern yet pre-Columbian; young yet old; anti-Catholic yet Catholic; Western yet New World [3].. And in the 20th century, women occupied a great position in Latin American art far beyond that of European art. But this does not represent the status of Latin American female in society. Because of Latin American patriarchal ideology, almost all types of art belong to women, who can freely express their emotions through art works. Frida Kahlo's own experience was mixed and dramatic. Frida Kahlo's own experience was mixed and dramatic. She started her famous self-portrait journey after an accident at the age of 18, painting became a way for Kahlo to explore questions of identity and existence[4]. A self-portrait is an autobiography of a painter, but this record is definitely not superficial. It contains the artist's strong sense of self.

At the same time, women's faces, heads, and hands—the parts that best reflect women's consciousness and thoughts—are frequently overlooked in the work [5]. Frida's work, on the other hand, is accustomed to weakening the erogenous parts and highlighting the details of the head and face to emphasize the initiative of women as artists. (Frida Kahlo, *The Broken Column*, 1944)

Kahlo was a pioneer of the feminist movement. Her works are full of female perception spirits that inspire many female artists. She completely got rid of the line of sight brought by the male gaze, and used herself as an active observer to think about her own existence. Kahlo's work has been celebrated internationally as emblematic of Mexican national and indigenous traditions and by feminists for what is seen as its uncompromising depiction of the female experience and form. She was also regarded as an icon for Chicanos, feminism, and the LGBTQ+ movement.[6]

3.2. the Portraits for Herself but not the World

Compared with Klimt, Kahlo's works had truly broken the convention of the male gaze, showing the de-emphasized and weakened details and their own pain in traditional painting in front of world art with strong colors. Frida showed her own tragedy and pain, more of which is her own expression and sympathy for the character of the portrait and others who have the same experience rather than painting to awaken more women in distress and promote the development of equality in the world. The feminism in Frida's works is manifested in the secondary creation of feminists.

Admittedly, Frida Kahlo was a true feminist artist. However, as a feminist icon, the secondary creation of her works is the pinnacle of her feminist expression. In addition to expressing self-consciousness, feminism needs to show the world the reality of women's plight, the cruelty of oppressors, and the absolute necessity of gender antagonism in the face of gender inequality.

Just as putting the same weights on both ends of a scale can't change the inclination, only pushing feminist artworks toward equality with men — the same focus, the same perspective and expression — doesn't change the current state of gender inequality in the world. If we want to increase the weight on the female side, more critical, more revealing works need to stand on the stage of world art. It is the re-creation and iconographic admiration of Frida Kahlo's works, rather than the works themselves, that produced such an effect.

4. THE EXPRESSION OF FEMINIST ART IN THE CURRENT WORLD

From the mid-to-late twentieth century to the present, the world movements for feminism and sexual minority have had a long and continuous development. Female artists began to approach their work differently and showed their ways of fighting women's oppression through art. Beginning in the 1970s, different curators began to organize feminist exhibitions, giving more feminist artists the opportunities to show their works.

In 1975, Laura Mulvey's article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* formally proposed the term “male gaze”. Since then, the gaze that objectifies women in the field of film and art has a specific name, and the neglect of female subject consciousness in the fields of art has specifically become a kind of inherent gender bias of men. With the male gaze, more feminist artists began to express themselves. Like the work *Untitled Film Stills* from American visual artist Cindy Sherman which consists of portraits she embodies the characters in a few Hollywood films. The characters represent clichés or feminine types ‘that are deeply embedded in the cultural imagination.’ [7]

At the same time, feminist artists offered a more direct critique of the reality of social inequality. They not only break the tradition, nor just express their personal consciousness, but directly show the social status quo and promote the development of women's rights. *Guerrilla Girls' work Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?* in 1989 was a response to the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition "An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture" (1984). The roster of this exhibition had 165 artists, including only 13 women. When the protests yielded little success, the *Guerrilla Girls* wheat-pasted posters throughout downtown Manhattan, particularly in the SoHo and East Village neighborhoods. [8]

Various other types of modern art have also begun to appear in feminist art, such as Judy Chicago's famous work *The Dinner Party*, Mary Beth Edelson's *Some Living American Women Artists/Last Supper*, and more.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper focuses on how women's art changed into feminist art in the 20th century. From Klimt, who defied convention and confronted women's identity, to Kahlo, who conveys personal consciousness and female emotion, to the increasing number of feminist art works in the world, the role of women in art has gradually shifted from being materialized and dominated by male gaze to feminist art dominated by female artists.

This contains the inevitable reasons for social development, and it is also the result of each generation of women's continuous attempts to express themselves. Only when the world continues to develop towards equality and gives women more opportunities to express themselves, will feminist art have more room for development.

However, this article only selects representative artists in the development of feminist art, ignoring many female artists who have made outstanding contributions to feminism in the history of art today. Their contributions to promoting gender equality cannot be ignored. More research on feminist art also needs to be filled in the world of art history.

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