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IN SEARCH OF A ROLE MODEL:

The non representation of the female  
artist in second level education

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by

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## INTRODUCTION

My interest in the subject of non-representation of the female artist in second level education has slowly evolved from my own experiences in the art education system in secondary school. I was oblivious to the absence of women in art history classes.

At third level in the late eighties there was much concentration on the great male heroic artists in Ireland such as Mick Mulcahy, Paddy Graham, and Brian Maguire but there was still no reference to even a single female artist. On questioning this absence I was counter questioned by male contemporaries with retorts such as "what female artists?" Regrettably I could not even list the names and works of female artists throughout the centuries. In fact I did not know of any or the reasons for their absence in my education. Why were female artists not mentioned? Were they untalented were they just ignored or had they not been invented yet? This research attempts to settle these questions. As a student art teacher I do not want to see history repeat itself. Art is often described as a mirror held up to the society in which it is produced. If this statement is to have any credence then all art produced within a society must be recognised and acknowledged. To this end, the



role of the female artist must be placed within a comprehensive view of art history. By placing an inclusive perspective on art it is possible to remove the gauze placed by traditional methods of art history inquiry. In using historical distance, an examination can be made using a more incisive method, which can look to the encompassing context in which the artist worked. It is necessary to look to the period during which particular female artists worked in order to understand why their work is only recently being acknowledged. Female art endured under a double bind: their own peers did not regard their work and art historians did little to deal with the exclusion of women from the equation.

The first chapter of this dissertation will question the accepted role of the woman in society and its effect on the treatment of the female figure in art.

The second chapter will examine the education of women and will identify the wealth of female artists available for discussion, commentary and debate, and it will encourage the need of a worthy representation of the female artist in art history education.

The third chapter will document a sequence of lessons relating to





the role of female artists conducted with a group of 5<sup>th</sup> year pupils. It also analyses the reaction responses and what the pupils achieved when this subject was raised. The dissertation will therefore address why the female artist has been negated from art history, and will highlight the benefit to be gained from their inclusion.



## CHAPTER 1

### WOMEN IN SOCIETY: CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

#### (i) **Daughters of Eve**

At the heart of the issue of woman's place and role in society there are a number of factors to be addressed. Populations consist of both men and women, yet the majority of societies have developed in such a way as to favour the dominance of men. The Christian Bible acknowledges woman as created out of man. Eve was created as a helpmate for Adam, to ease his lonely situation. Her creation reflected on male desire for companionship: "this (woman) is now bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh and she shall be called woman because she was taken out of man."<sup>(1)</sup>

Yet almost immediately it is implied that woman destroys the life which man was intended to lead. Eve is seen as dissatisfied with Paradise and as wanting to be as powerful as God. Her vain curiosity is rewarded with a punishment, which would act a guide for the way in which the Church would continue to treat women except in exceptional cases. Thus woman is portrayed from the outset as a disturbance to the peace, capable of jeopardising the status quo in reply to selfish desire and pride. Christianity sets a





precedent which demands that Eve's punishment be meted out to all women to remind them of the dangers of questioning the male prerogative.

Unto the women he said I shall greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception. In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children and thy desire shall be to this husband and he shall rule over thee. (2)

The implication was that women needed to be controlled. One of the strongest institutions in the world has decreed the need for man to rule over woman for fear of what her freedom would lead to. While decrying the role of Eve, Christianity promoted her antithesis: the Virgin Mary. The Virgin Mary was the role women were asked to aspire to, a woman who put aside her own wishes for the greater good. Her lack of sexuality is the point of greater emphasis for the Church. Motherhood is considered the greatest reward for a woman. Despite suffering the pangs of Eve's original sin, motherhood becomes the worthwhile aim at the end of suffering. The Madonna and Child became a visual reminder of the way in which society desired women to act: soft, tender and undemanding; 'the Virgin mother had encouraged women to hallucinate an impossibility as if it were a natural image'. (3)



## (ii) Virgin Whore

Society effectively polarised women into two camps: the Madonna and the Whore. No middle ground was offered between the virtuous undemanding mother and the whore. This view of women dominated all areas of society. Traditional areas of female dominance such as healing were passed into the hands of men and many female practitioners were denounced as witches. The witchhunts of the Middle Ages are very important in showing how the line between women and what was feared as satanic could be blurred at any point. Women were seen as naturalistic and thus as willing vessels for the devil. Their reproductive bodily functions were seen as polluting and taboos evolved about menstruating and pregnant women. It was believed in many cases that social anger was transferred onto older women or midwives who were in the majority of those accused of witchcraft. Society found it easier to blame intangible forces than the ruling system. Christina Lerner's profile of the accused witch could easily be mistaken for present day negative stereotype "she is assertive, she does not require or give love (though she may enchant); she does not nurture men or children, or care for the weak." (4)





The demand on women was continually to be non-actors in their own lives, and the way in which they were to be represented was to be chosen by men. Their central role was to reproduce, but even this was to be within certain ordered constraints. Women had to wait to be chosen as a suitable partner for life and in their own homes were expected to accept and succumb to the opinions of their husbands, just as they had to their fathers. Women with strong opinions were not considered as good choices for wives and so were denied any socially acceptable role. A woman could only project her ideas onto her own small social circle and even then it was generally accepted that these thoughts would not in any way differ from her husbands or fathers. Her value lay in what she did for others, her own self-worth was only seen in these terms.

Therefore female art has always existed in a climate which accepted the female role as infrastructural. High culture (or elements of superstructure) as seen were a male-dominated arena. As in most arenas, a power dynamic plays a role in deciding what will stand historically and it is usually the powerful who choose the way future generations will view their past. Michel Foucault in 1971 reflected that power is tolerable "only on the condition that it mask a considerable part of itself." (5) Male power was



always equated to the future. Men were shaping the world for future generations while women would create those generations. De Beauvoir describes men as "being rewarded for risking life through war and hunting while the essential role of creating the future goes unrecognised." (6)

It is important to question the reliability of the images we have passed down to us. Virginia Woolf wrote "As a woman I have no country." (7) Women through the ages were consistently dispossessed and thus misrepresented. The representation given was decided by the ruling culture. It is essential that art be examined as a product of a particular cultural context and not as an expression of individual emotion – as Linda Nochlin (1971) wrote:

...the making of art involves a self-consistent language of form, more or less dependent upon or free from, given temporally defined conventions, schemata or systems of notation, which have to be learned or worked out, either through teaching, apprenticeship, or a long period of individual experimentation. The language of art ..... is neither a sob story nor a confidential whisper.(8)

Nochlin further states that the reason students cannot mine a deep vein of female art from the past is for the same reason that black art is an unknown canon. Power is the important catalyst which decides how a piece is viewed. Art does not occur in a vacuum – there is a constant bombardment of external influences which will





be manifest in a particular work, even if it is in the overturning of convention.

**(iii) Representations: Ideal vs. Necessary Reality**

As Nochlin states in Women, Art and Power (1988):

Operations which manifest themselves in a much more diffuse, more absolute, yet paradoxically more elusive sense, in what might be called the discourses of gender difference" "representations of women in art are founded upon and serve to reproduce indisputably accepted assumptions held by society in general. (9)

If we take the example of Jacque Louis David's The Oath of Horatti (1791) a clear polarity is made between male energy, tension and concentration as opposed to female resignation. In paintings such as In Memoriam (1858) by Sir Joseph Paton, women move to the forefront, but their emergence is equally orchestrated to show their passiveness. Women accept death, making no effort to defend themselves or their children, and this was the ideal. Women were expected to put their trust in God and always to behave in a manner befitting a lady. In opposition to these images Nochlin reminds us of Goya's (1746-1828) Disasters of War series. One work shows women desperately defending their children from attack. It is called And They Are Like Wild Beasts. In this title an association is made between the strong



woman and the dangerous threat of a loosed, frustrated animal. Therefore, when women take charge of the situation it is necessary to disassociate them from the way in which women should act and to categorise them as something less than human. What is seen as admirable in a man is somehow abhorrent and unnatural in the female. It is acceptable for men to fight wars and defend their families but although women are usually more closely bound to children than men, their right to defend them is seen as flying in the face of natural order. The strength is in the very obviousness of the images used.

#### **(iv) Representations: Rightful Ownership**

The theme of the submissive nature of women reflected the way in which society and artists themselves treated women. Women who posed for paintings became the artist's property as much as the canvas on which they worked. Paintings such as J  an L  on G  r  me Oriental Slave Market represent a double set of cultural standards. Power relations are not only shown as the superiority of men over women but additionally the superiority of white over black. It is effectively a justification of two forms of colonisation; the colonisation of superior races over inferior races and the





colonisation of the female space as the property of the male. By expressing the otherness of this scene, by setting it in an unfamiliar place the artist distances his own circumstances from those in the painting and yet effectively reveals to us a worldview. Another of Gerome's works The Artist's Model shows a doctor-like figure, an older distinguished man single-mindedly engaged in creative activity. His interest is shown as only in the representation of Beauty. The female model is only a tool which is used for a higher purpose, not a channel but rather like a piece of equipment which is of no real consequence until a competent person chooses to use it. This again emphasises the perceived need for the female space to be utilised by an external factor if any potential is to be wrought.

**(v) Representations: Womans Work is Never Acknowledged**

Women's work was always effectively construed as leisure rather than real labour. Prostitution was excluded from the realm of real work as it was not seen as honest toil while unpaid domestic labour was also left unrecognised. Portrayals of women working such as The Gleaners by Francois Millet (1857) envisage women as almost growing out of the earth. It is in sharp contrast to a work



such as Käthe Kollwitz's Losbruch (1867-1945) which shows a woman leading a peasant revolt. It is important to note that Kollwitz as a female artist felt she could identify with this revolutionary figure. It is a strong painting where the central protagonist stands almost as a beacon to those in the background. Most depictions of assertive women were derogatory and gave resonance to disgust against the asserted female opinion.

In the nineteenth century art for the first time began to designate a separate arena for artists – it was associated with creativity and purity. The artist was a figure who stood out as resisting society and its demarcations. It is important to acknowledge the evolution of culture – the diluting down until what was rebellious and outrageous became accepted practice. The success of any power dynamic is found when the accepted ideology is acknowledged by all parts of a given cultural spectrum, therefore even in usurping the standard a perceptible nod is made in its direction. Likewise the role of women in society has undergone and continues to undergo a complete transformation. However real change can only ever take place as quickly as an individual culture is willing to assimilate. Other theoretical conceptions of women's position in society are Red Queen-like, “now here” the Red Queen remarks





in Lewis Carroll's Alice Through the looking Glass "you see it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place." (10) It is only now that the portrayal of women in art history is being examined as a barometer of the cultural context in which a particular work was created.



## FOOTNOTES CHAPTER 1

1. Genesis Chapter 2 Verse 23 The Holy Bible.
2. Ibid., Chpt. 3 Verse 16
3. Linda Nochlin "Women, Art and Power" in Women, Art and Power and other essays (London: Thames and Hudson 1991) p.3
4. John R. Gillis, "Mothers giving birth to motherhood" in A World Of Their Own Making: A History of Myth and Ritual in Family Life (Oxford University Press 1997) p.156-157
5. Nochlin, "Women Art and Power" p.3
6. Sherry.B.Ortner "Is female to male as nature is to culture" Feminist Studies 1(2, 1972): pp 5-31 p10
7. Isaak Jo Anna, Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter (London: Routledge, 1996) p.156
8. Nochlin, "Women Art and Power" p.149
9. Ibid., p.1
10. Robert Foley Hominid Evolution and Community Ecology: Prehistoric Human Adaptation in Biological Perspective (London: Academic Press 1984) p.85





## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORY OF ART

While female artists have existed since the beginning of time, their work and reputations have often been lost or overlooked in the recordings of history. Nancy G. Heller states in her book 'Women Artists' 1997:

A Greek vase from the fifth century B.C. shows four artists at work one of whom is a woman.... The Roman writer Pliny the Elder, cited several Greek women painters including Timarete, Eirene, Kalypso, Aristarete, Jaia and Olympias. (1) (see Fig 2.1)

The lack of recognition given was often due to the perceived unsuitability of such a profession to womanhood. The biological fact of the womb dictating both the physical and moral occupation of the female in society. Unfortunately the portrayal of creative genius throughout the centuries as male, is still prevalent in our art education system today. It is a rare occurrence when female artists are mentioned in our most popular second level art appreciation text books. For example in the text Art History and Appreciation by Henry J. Sharpe (Gill and Macmillan, 1976) there are some 170 male artists mentioned and 2 female artists. Also these two female artists, Evie Hone and Mainie Jellett, are examined under the same heading – this is not repeated elsewhere in the text.



Those that are mentioned in other books are often labelled as having a distinctive feminine style. Can there be such a discernible feminine essence or sensibility in an artwork dictated by the gender of the artist? By the nature of people and the societies we create, from early childhood we become engrained with historical, racial and gender related prejudices. In the past the recording of art history has been a male dominated arena. It is probable that these same social stereotypes have been influential in the critical analysis of an artwork on learning that an artist is female.

In the essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists', Nochlin (1971) maintains that there have been, but because of the male-dominated educational and social structures, there has been little chance for women to establish reputations on a par with Leonardo or Picasso. Nochlin goes on to state that since the concept of genius, mastery and talent has been devised by men to apply to men, it is therefore remarkable that women artists have achieved as much as they have which is a long, productive and valuable involvement in the arts.

In this chapter I will talk about a number of noteworthy women artists throughout the centuries who deserve to be included in art







Fig 2.1 Detail of the Caputi Hydria C.460 – 450 BC



history texts and not confined to specialised publications on womens art.

### **(i) The Beginning**

It was not until the mid sixteenth century that women artists began to gain the education and opportunity necessary for them to achieve success and some degree of recognition as painters. Until this period the opportunity for women to express their artistic talent was usually confined to the work of manuscript illuminating. From the beginning of the Middle Ages women of aristocratic and the upper ranks enter a convent as a respectable alternative to marriage. Because of the requirement of a dowry on entering a nunnery this refuge was not an option for the women of the lower ranks. These convents were the only places in society where women could avail of training to become painters, so in turn they could only apply their skills to the veneration and illumination of religious manuscripts. Outside of the confines of religious life there are some references to women working as artists by the late Middle Ages. Wendy Slatkins states:

....as early as the thirteenth century commercial books illustrators, as opposed to monks and nuns, ran businesses in cities of Europe. While never very numerous, women painters and sculptors did exist. By the late thirteenth





century and early fourteenth centuries as documented by tax records, Etienne Boileau's Livre Des Métiers (1270) refers to a guild of female illuminators and binders. (2)

In the mid sixteenth century a change in social fashions signalled the end of rare and hard to authenticate works by women artists. In the year 1528, the writer Baldassare Castiglione published 'The Courier' this publication became very popular throughout Europe. It encouraged the education of women of the upper ranks in areas such as poetry, dance, singing and art. The outcome of such an education would ensure witty, entertaining and suitable companions for the renaissance male. In the sixteenth century the development of printing brought greater availability of books, both religious and secular. This encouraged much change in European thinking. This was also a time when working as an artist became elevated from a learnt craft or trade to being perceived as a worthy vocation for a gentleman. The rudiments of such a profession entailed a good knowledge of anatomy, perspective and a history of art. While this education could be obtained by men who could travel freely and study, the limited education of women encouraged by Castiglione did not intend womens artistic skills to be developed to this unnecessary degree. For this reason many of the first women artists to gain recognition were relatives of male





artists, who gave them access to their studios and equipment.

**(ii) Lavinia Fontana**

One such noteworthy artist is Lavinia Fontana, born in 1552. She was the daughter of Prospero, a prominent painter whose progressive attitude enabled him to foster his daughters formidable talent. In her lifetime she achieved fame throughout Italy, producing 135 documented paintings, 30 of which still survive. She married Gian Paola Zappi, who was also a successful painter. In a curious role reversal for the period, he set aside his career to look after their 11 children and the household.

In 1563 she became official painter to The Papal Court of Clement VIII and was elected to The Roman Academy. In 1611 a medal was made in her honour showing a formal profile and a view of Lavinia at her easel. (see Fig 2.2) She was commissioned by both public and private patrons to produce both religious and mythological paintings. Her work is known for its attention to detail and the personal insight in her portraits (see Fig 2.3) and studies of both the male and female nude.







Fig 2.2 Portrait Medal of Lavinia Fontana 1611







Fig 2.3 Lavinia Fontana (1552 – 1614)  
Portrait of a lady with a lapdog late 1590's



### (iii) Artemisia Gentilesthi

Born in 1593, she was another female artist who overcame the limitations which her society had placed on her like Fontana. Artemisia was also the daughter of a painter, Orazio Gentilesthi, who recognised great promise in her work. Orazio was an avid follower of Carravagio and passed this influence and style to his daughter. In 1612 he hired Agostino Tassi to further instruct Artemisia in drawing. Tassi abused his position by raping her. In an unusual move for this time, Artemisia's father sued Tassi. This resulted in public humiliation for Artemisia, when for a five month period she underwent torture including the use of thumbscrews to prove she was telling the truth. She would not retract her statement, and the case was dismissed.

Artemisia was immediately married to a Florentine Pietro-Antonio-de-Vincenzo Stiattesi. She moved to Florence and brought with her much influence as the dramatic theatrical style of Carravagio was little known there. Artemisia won much admiration for her work, which in her lifetime brought her to Venice, Genoa and eventually Naples.

She produced a large and impressive body of work, encompassing





full scale religious paintings usually concentrating on old testament heroines. One of her most outstanding works Judith Beheading Holofernes (see Fig 2.4) is also one in which her sense of powerful dramatisation surpasses that of her mentor Carravaggio. In this work, Artemisia's Judith is portrayed as a strong and powerful woman. In her muscular arms and determined expression, we can truly believe her capacity for such a task. Her body registers the difficulty of such a slaying, but also avoidance of the spurting arterial blood. In Carravaggio's Judith Slaying Holofernes, the Heroine is somewhat fragile and unstrained, appearing only slightly distasteful of the horrific moment of decapitation.

#### **(iv) Angelica Kauffman**

By the eighteenth century little had changed for women in terms of access to education or admission to art academies throughout Europe without these two necessities, an art education would be left bereft in areas such as anatomical study and composition. Angelica Kauffman (1741) was again a painter's daughter. Her genius was recognised in childhood and developed as she accompanied and assisted her father on many commissions in







Fig 2.4 Artemisia Gentileschi 1593 to 1652  
Judith Beheading Holofernes





Italy, Austria and Switzerland. Angelica was proficient in several European languages, and a highly accomplished musician. During her travels Angelica met and was influenced by a number of advocates of the neo classical movement. By 1766 she had settled in London and befriended Joshua Reynolds. She was permitted along with flower painter Mary Moser, to join the Royal Academy. Her principle desire was to be accepted as an historical painter, taking her subjects from classical, ancient and medieval history. An example of which is Virgil Writing His Own Epitaph at Brundisium 1785 (see Fig 2.5). This was quite revolutionary in an England of artists preoccupied with the fashionable genre of portraiture. Kauffman's success can be gauged by her personal wealth, accumulated through countless commissions and the fact that the Royal Academy in an unusual move requested her contribution in the decoration of the new Royal Academy in 1778. In one of her most esteemed works, Cornelia Pointing to her Children as Treasure Kauffman focuses on the central female heroine, its simplicity of a gesture and classicism of pose is typical of her renowned style. The portrait of David Garrick, the actor shows remarkable warmth, intimacy and insight, unusual for a commissioned portrait of the period. It is a sad testament to the rare acknowledgement of such talent in a woman artist, that it was





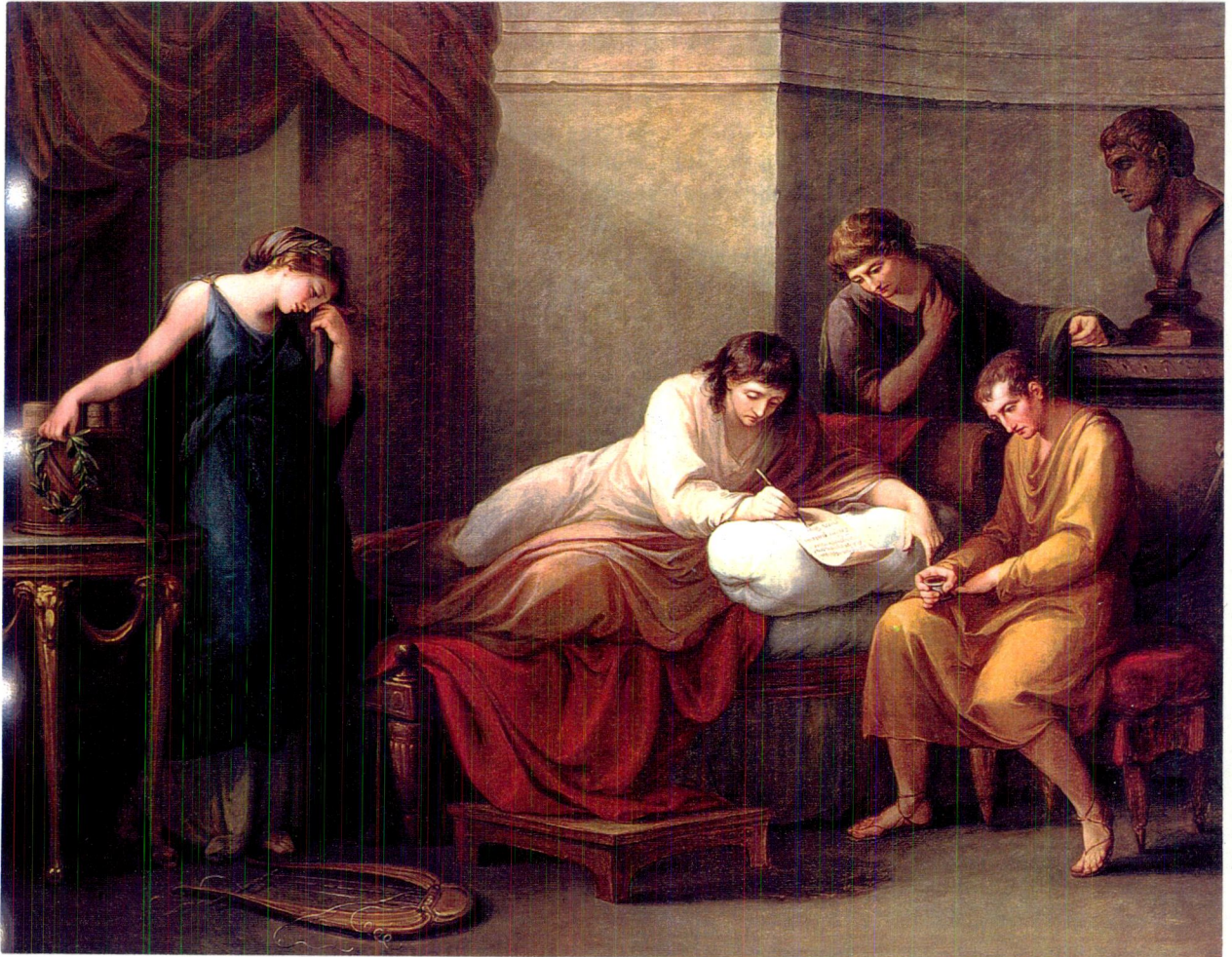


Fig 2.5 Angelica Kauffman 1741 – 1807  
Virgil Writing his own Epitaph at Brundisium, 1785





not until the twentieth century another woman was allowed to join the Royal Academy.

Despite the ongoing pressure to conform to social tradition and domesticity, the nineteenth century saw a more widespread acceptance of the female artist. This acceptance was clearly worked for in a social climate which firmly believed the woman's role to be that of a virtuous homemaker. As Debra Cherry notes:

Women artists' claims for public recognition collided with hegemonic definitions of bourgeois femininity as dependent and domestic while their bids for professional status contested emergent codes, of masculine professionalism. (3)

In the nineteenth century there was still debate over the propriety of allowing women access to nude models. Life and anatomy study in women's art classes were largely from fully clothed female models. Despite these major restrictions, many female artists gained respect and success in painting genre paintings depicting often sentimental Victorian scenes with touching or amusing scenes of human interactions. Emily Mary Osbourne was one such artist, who with the help and encouragement of firstly her mother, and latter the patronage of prestigious women like Queen Victoria, made a considerable reputation. She liked to focus on the plight of women in society, albeit middle class women. Her most poignant work, Nameless and Friendless, (1851) (see Fig 2.6) features a







Fig. 2.6 Emily Mary Osbourne  
Nameless and Friendless 1857





female artist who resorts to trying to sell her paintings to an austere unsympathetic art dealer. She depicts the art gallery as a male domain, in which the heroine of the work is clearly intimidated and uncomfortable. This is not helped by the somewhat lecherous glance of the two male browsers, in the left hand side of the work.

**(v) Mary Cassatt**

In the 1870's the revolutionary impressionist movement came into being. It was inspired by the invention of the camera. This freed artists from the age old job of realistic documentation of the world. It allowed them a new way of seeing, that would forever change the artists role and obligation in society. One of the leading contributing members of this new movement was Mary Cassatt.

Cassatt was born in Pittsburgh in 1844. She came from a middle-class family who were uninterested in art. However as a result from frequent family trips to Europe during her youth, her mind quickly became absorbed with the possibilities of an artistic career. She met with much opposition from her family in this venture. She perservered with her artistic ambitions by studying for four years at Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. She



furthered her artistic training in Paris, thought of at the time as the nucleus of the art world.

Cassatt met and was greatly influenced by Manet, and later became intrigued by the impressionist movement, and began to paint in this style. She established an admirable reputation in a series of exhibitions both in France and America. From the 1870's she was invited to show with the impressionists, in 1879 and continued to participate in many of the groups shows. Many wealthy friends and associates of the Cassatt family travelled to Europe and purchased impressionist work helping to promote the popularity of the movement throughout the world. Many of Cassatt's subjects used throughout her paintings are intimate studies of atmospheric scenes of women and children (see Fig 2.7).

The twentieth century has been a time of dramatic change in all areas of life. Industrialisation and the movement of women from the realm of the domestic into the work force. The Suffragette Movement brought about some degree of equality of women and the hope of greater liberation from social constraints in the future. In the art world new movements were developing at an ever-







Fig 2.7 Mary Cassatt 1844 – 1926  
Lydia in a Loge Wearing A Pearl Necklace 1879





increasing pace: Fauvism, Expressionism, Cubism, Dadaism and Surrealism. Women were at the forefront of all of these movements. The restrictions of women being permitted into art academies, and drawing alongside men from nude life models were also lifted. It would be impossible to document all of the highly successful and highly individualistic women artists of this century.

The confines of this dissertation have only allowed for a limited number of female artists to be discussed. This is not to suggest in any way that the artists mentioned are the only ones worthy of historical and critical attention. Those mentioned personify the industrious, innovative and talented nature of each generation of female artists. They have left us a heritage of great value in terms of many works of art which show genius, beauty and insight into lives and eras far removed from us. By the quality and standard of their works we must surmise that their voices deserve to be written about and cherished as much as their male contemporaries it would be ethically and historically inaccurate not to include these female artists in our art history classes. To continue this exclusion of important artists because of their gender would be both a disservice to second level students and also a misrepresentation of





our past.

In the periods between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries I have discussed not only some of the works but also the lives of the women artists because throughout their extraordinary lives they overcame many social restraints in order to pursue their true vocations.



## FOOTNOTES CHAPTER 2

1. Nancy G.Heller, Introduction in Women Artists (New York: Abbeyville Publishers 1997) p.12.
2. Wendy Slatkin, "The Medieval World" in Women Artists in History (New Jersey: Simon and Schuster 1997) p.52.
3. Ibid. "Victoria England" p.123.





## CHAPTER 3

## PRACTICAL RESEARCH: ABSENCE AND INFLUENCE

The educational system remains one of the most influential instruments in modern society and represents a powerful arena for the initiation of changes in the pattern of accepted ideology. A school setting provides an opportunity to examine the process by which information is assimilated into the community and thus becomes cultural short hand. In fully appreciating the absence of women from the educational canon, a classroom is the perfect analytical tool on two counts. Firstly, it provides an microcosmic view of general opinion and secondly, there is a curriculum present that can act as a backdrop to discuss the absences therein. Involvement in a sequence of lessons provided the axis on which the research for this dissertation revolved. Initial research was carried out at Loreto College Swords. This work was based on six practically applied drawing and painting classes with a fifth year group consisting of twenty-five girls using only female artists as support studies. Along with this "in house" research, a visit was made to an exhibition by a contemporary female artist, Kiki Smith. The group chosen for this research had been described as "unbearably quiet". Besides this they had never drawn the figure



before. It was possible that the passiveness of the class and their inexperience in drawing could present obstacles to the overall aims of this research. The overall aim was to address the imbalance caused by the non representation of the female artist in second level education. The specific objectives included:

- To develop the pupils understanding of how female artists dealt with the interpretation of the figure.
- To investigate how this understanding could influence and inform the pupils work.
- To enhance and develop the pupils understanding of the concepts and ideologies of female artists work.
- To create debate and discussion about female artists work

#### **(i) Initial Response**

In order to create debate and discussion on the topic of female artists, a questionnaire was distributed to the class (see Appendix A). From the answers given, data was examined to indicate the initial response of the class to the questions, and this data is illustrated using pie-charts.





In Question 1 the respondents were asked if they could name any female artists of which a 100% could not name even one female artist. This confirmed that my own lack of knowledge of female artists in secondary school was not unique.

In Question two (see Fig 3.1) the respondents were asked if they would be interested in learning about female artists? 80% replied yes, that they would. 16% replied indifferent while only 4% replied no. This prematurely suggested that the respondents had an overwhelming curiosity relating to this subject.

In Question three (see Fig 3.2) the respondents were asked if they had ever questioned the absence of female artists from the curriculum? A staggering 92% answered no – they had not. This proves that they had not been made aware of this non representation of the female artist in their education.

In Question four (see Fig 3.3) the respondents were asked if they thought the inclusion of female artists would have relevance to their art education? 40% of the respondents choose yes while 44% were indifferent. There seemed to be a disparagement between this question and question two (see Fig 3.1) where the respondents



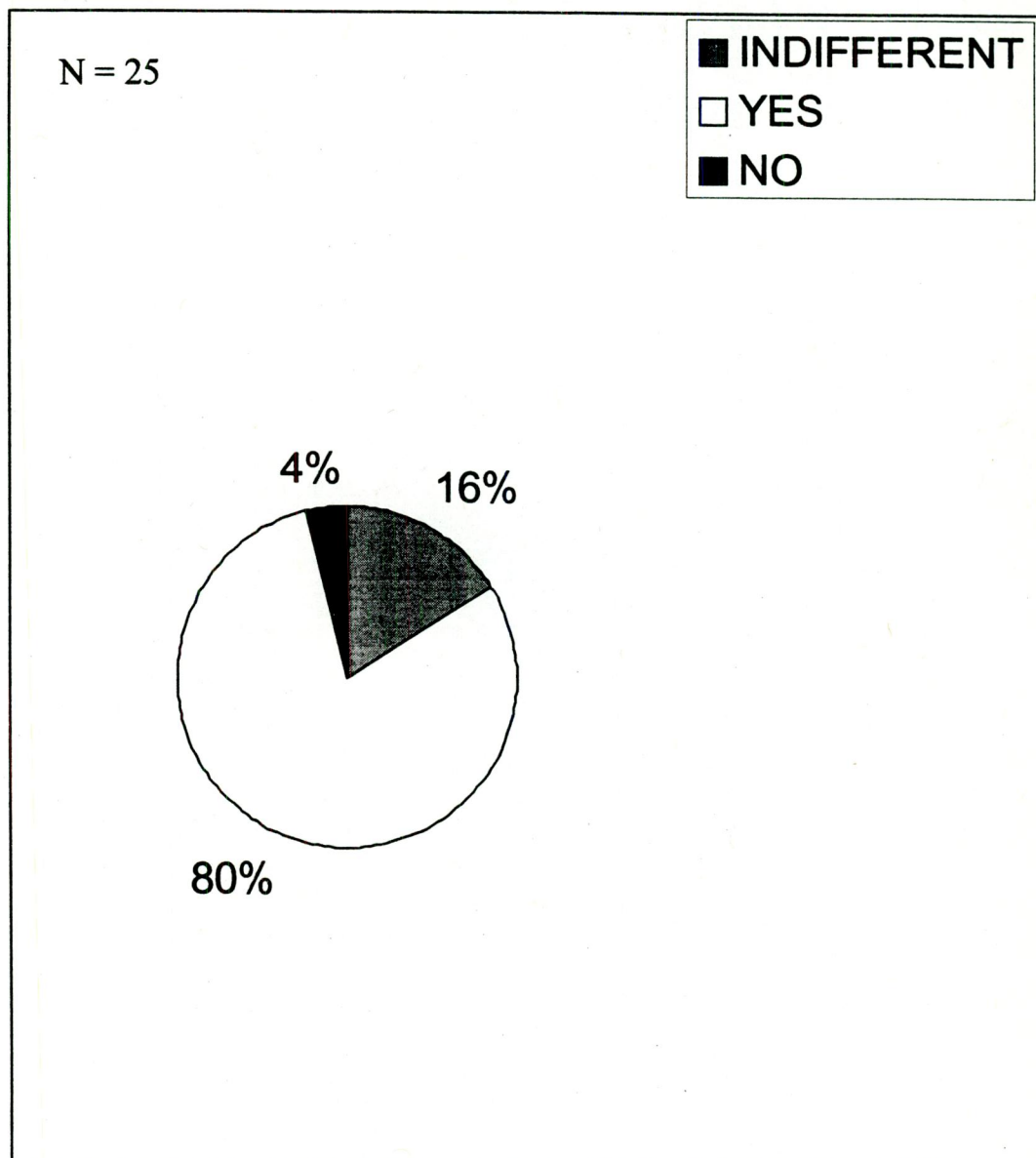


Fig 3.1 Pupils response indicating level of interest in the Female Artists





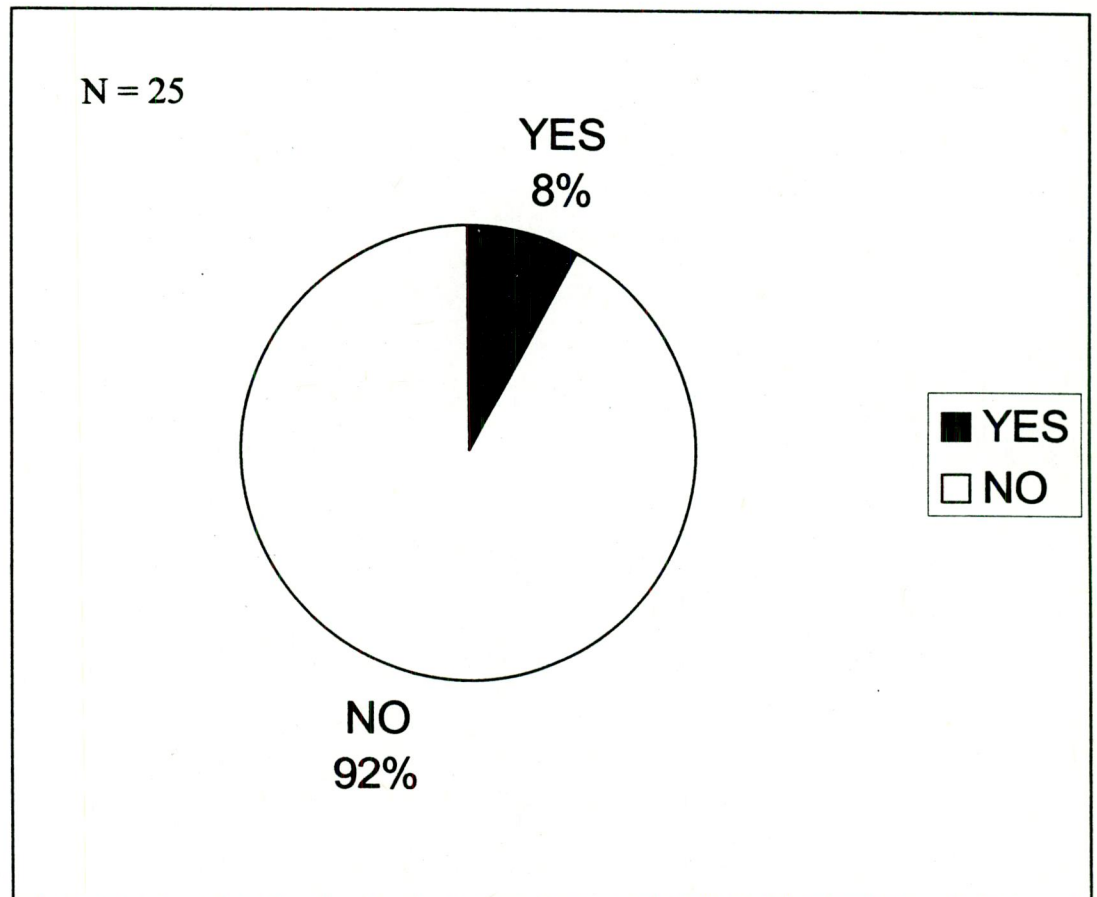


Fig 3.2 Numbers of respondents who had questioned the absence of female artists from the curriculum



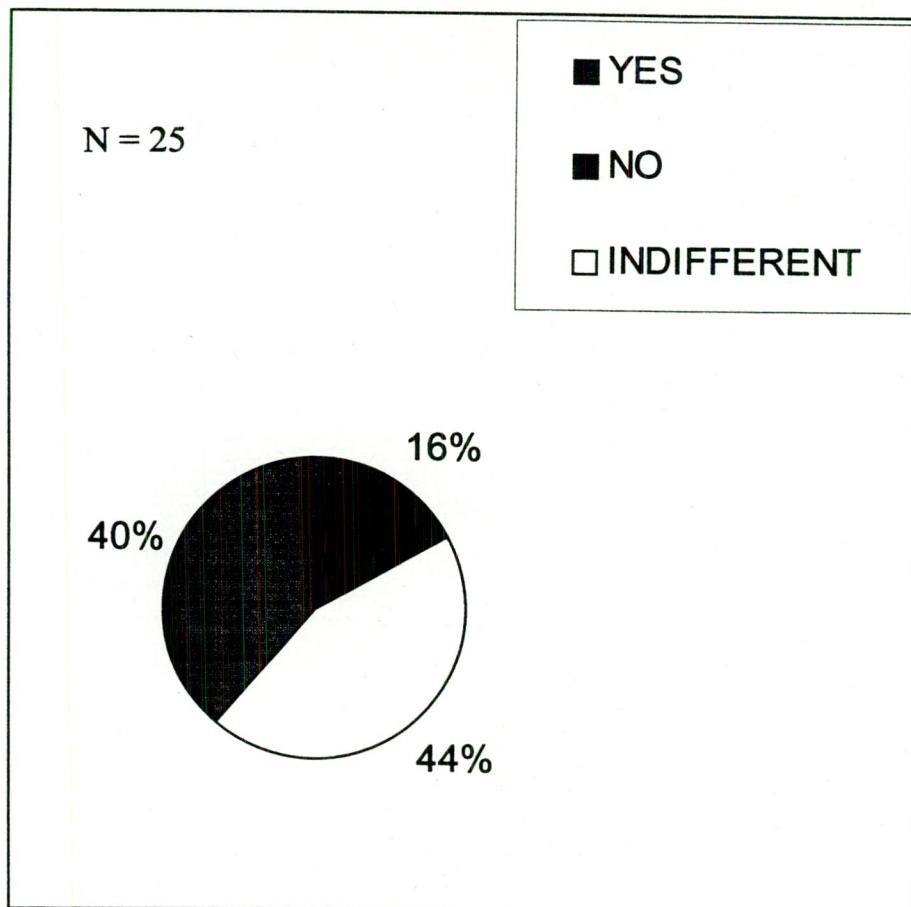


Fig 3.3 Respondents' perception of relevance of female artists to their art education.





were asked if they would find it interesting to learn about female artists? 80% responded yes.

On further investigation of these answers it emerged that while there was a genuine interest in this subject there was also a general concern that the inclusion of extra artists would simply translate into extra work.

In Question five (see Fig 3.4) the respondents were asked where they got their female role models from. The results were of some concern as only 4% of the respondents choose their female role models from their education. Of this 4% chosen the respondents identified that they were teachers and not historical or artistic female figures because they simply were not aware of any.

### **(iii) Painting The Figure**

During the six practically applied classes only female artists were used as a source of observation and inspiration in the form of support studies concentrating mainly on the artists Frida Kahlo, Paula Rego and Rita Duffy due to their extensive use of the figure



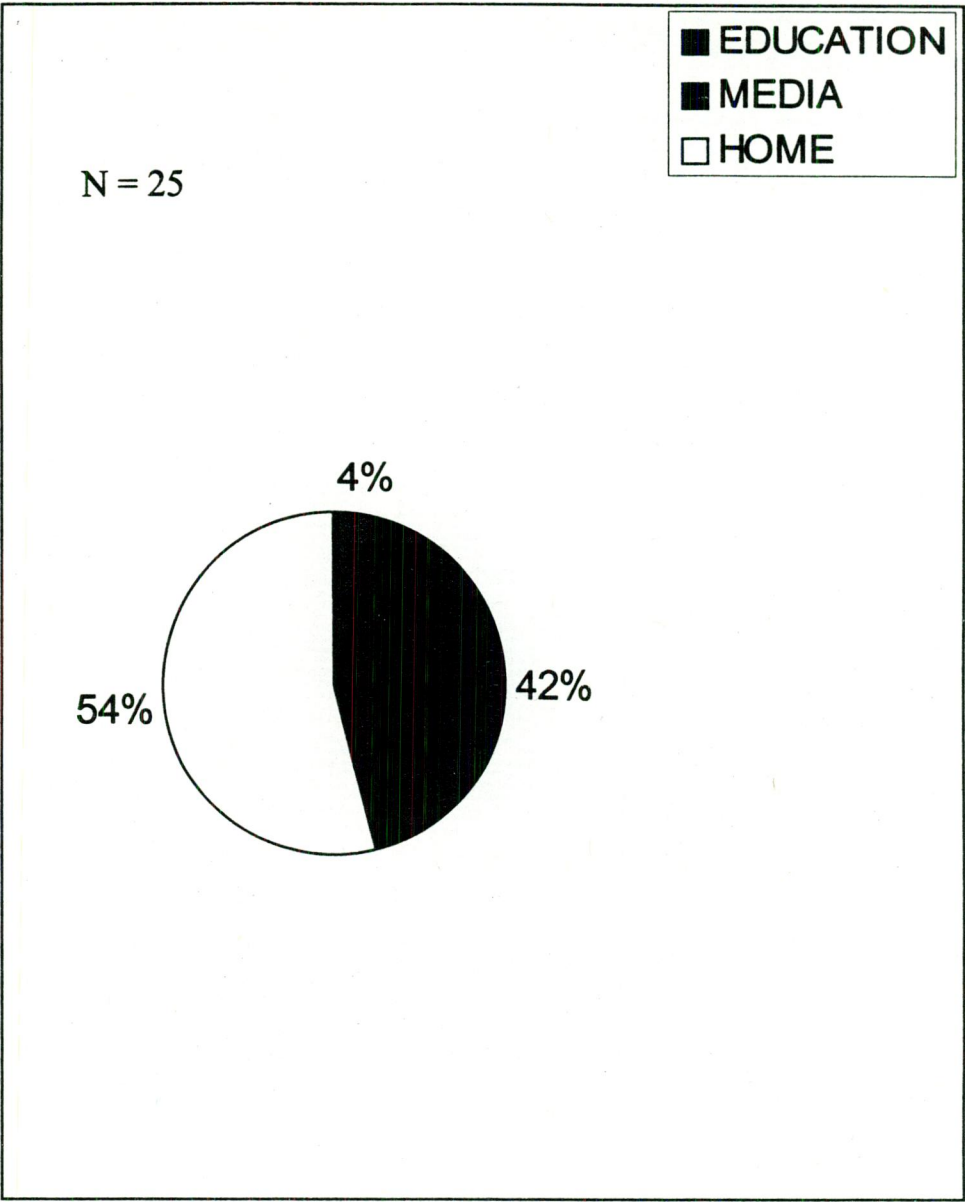


Fig 3.4 Sources of female role models for adolescent girl respondents.

in their work. Through these practically applied classes the pupils were required:

- To create an expressive style painting with a composition of more than one figure using a chosen female artist as an influence.

In Lesson One the project was introduced to the pupils. They showed little or no interest and were very timid. For the foundation of this project they were required to make observational line drawings from the figure. Their studies reflected their apprehension and it was apparent that they had little knowledge of the subject matter of the figure. The only positive point was their interest in Rita Duffy's work expressing surprise when informed that she was a contemporary Irish artist.

In Lesson Two there was a slight improvement in their interest towards the support studies acknowledging them and asking questions. This class was based on tone and how it can be manipulated to create form within the figure.

Lesson Three was based on composition but as the class was still



very much reserved it was designed to create an atmosphere and some interaction between myself and the pupils. As this was essential if there was to be a good response from them. This was achieved by getting the class to physically move into different viewpoints. A birds eye view was accomplished by standing on the table, worms eye view by sitting on the floor. This was an excellent class for breaking the silence and they started during the evaluation to explore themes for their paintings giving examples such as suicide – love divorce etc. and also exploring the female artist that might be suitable to be an influence.

The Fourth Lesson dealt with thumbnail sketches of various ideas for their paintings and they choose their artist.

The Fifth Lesson dealt with colour and how colour not only creates depth in a painting but also emotive qualities i.e. Red: happy Blue: sad. During the sixth class the pupils completed their final paintings. One pupil choose Rita Duffy as her influence (see Fig 3.5 and 3.6). She says her painting uses Rita Duffy's unusual use of composition as an influence. Another pupil looked towards Paula Rego (see Fig 3.7 and 3.8) for her influence in "painting a strong woman compared to the usual small weak women." While







Fig 3.5 Rita Duffy's Orange Men 1992





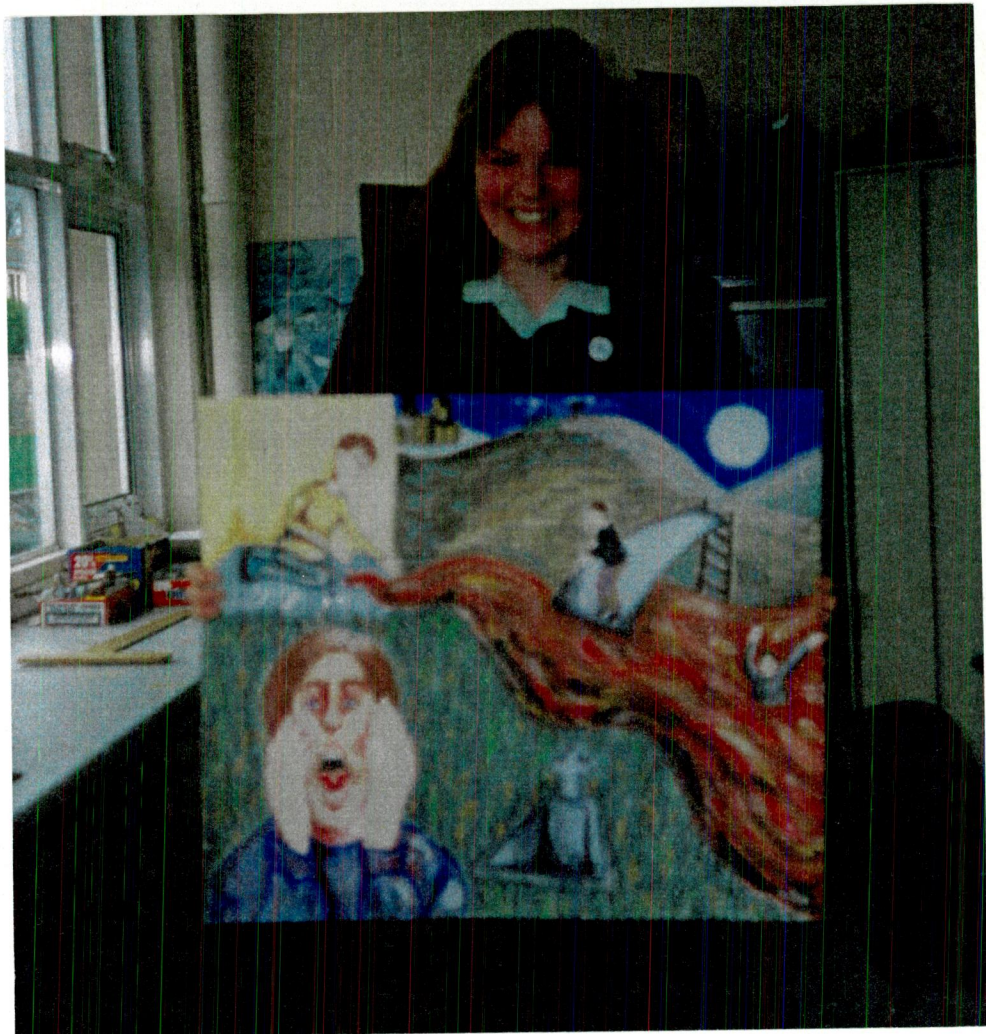


Fig 3.6 Pupils Work Influenced by the work of Rita Duffy







Fig 3.7 Paula Rego  
Dancing Ostriches Walt Disney's 'Fantasia' 1967







Fig 3.8 Pupils Work Influenced by the Artist Paula Rego



two other pupils looked towards Frida Kahlo (see Fig 3.9 and 3.10) as an influence “using colours that the artists used” and the opposites sides of the personality (see Fig 3.11 and 3.12).

During the six classes the pupils work became much more informed and confident in the pursuit of their individual styles and interpretations of the artists work. Using these female artists encouraged and motivated the students in their work.

As part of the next lesson the pupils visited an exhibition of the work of the contemporary female artist Kiki Smith held at the Irish Museum of Modern Art. The pupils were given a handout (see Appendix B) on Kiki Smith’s life and work. They were also taken on a tour of her work. During which they were encouraged to take notes and ask questions.

### **(iii) Analysis of Pupils Reactions**

At the end of this tour the pupils were given questionnaires (see Appendix C) and asked to answer them as best and as honestly as they could.







Fig 3.9 Frida Kahlo Tree of Hope Keep Firm 1946







Fig 3.10 Pupils Work Influenced by the Artist Frida Kahlo







Fig 3.11 Frida Kahlo The Flying Bed 1932







Fig 3.12 Pupils Work Influenced by Frida Kahlo





The limitations of this dissertation do not allow for every pupils opinion to be detailed so the following are just some sample of those contained in the pupils responses.

In Question One the pupils were asked to list the names of the female artists they had studied? In reply to this - 100% of the respondents could now name at least three female artists.

In Question Two the pupils were asked if they had found it interesting to learn about female artists. 100% of the respondents replied yes that they had found learning about female artists very interesting.

In Question Three the respondents were asked to discuss the reason why they thought female artists had been excluded from their art history education. To this there was a variety of responses. One respondent answered "because men held all the important jobs and their work was noticed while women were seen as second class" while another response was "because women weren't allowed to be independent and strong, it wasn't a perfect world and it still isn't." This shows that the pupils are aware of the elements of inequality which still surround them. One pupil



introduced the subject of women rights suggesting that "female artists didn't have the same publicity as men because they didn't have the same rights as men."

In Question Four the pupils were asked to give an explanation in their own opinion why female artists were relevant/not relevant to their art history class. To this question 100% of respondents replied that female artists were relevant to the art history class. One respondent explained that "it is important because men and women view the world differently as does each artist. It opens up more opinions as well as talents." And one respondent commented on their art education so far. "It was good to learn about something different all we ever learn about is the great male artist during the Renaissance."

In Question Five the respondents were asked if they could think of any well known women who they saw as a role model and to explain why they choose her. To this question there was a mixed response but the role models chosen were not diverse. The majority choose Princess Diana because as one respondent stated "she helped people even when she was unhappy" and "she gave love and support to others and expected nothing in return." Here





the respondents were supporting the traditional role of woman as carer.

Also Mary McAleese and Mary Robinson were mentioned because "they are strong women who give a good example to other women." Another choice by a respondent was Sara Kavanagh, "because she is a female who worked her way into the totally male dominated sport of motor-racing. She has worked her way up to racing the Jordan car which was always done by men." This was a very positive response. Pupils all seem to agree that within their scope of knowledge that there wasn't really very many good female role models in popular culture.

In Question Six the respondents were asked did they think that any of the female artists we had studied would make good role models? This question was important to see if learning about female artists had any real impact on the respondents. The results were very positive. One student replied "Yes" I think Paula Rego would be a good role model because all the artists we look at in school paint slim and pretty pictures of women, they're like the women you would find in magazines it was good to see Paula Rego's big strong women." Another student simply replied "yes



female artists express things to other women.”

One pupil choose Rita Duffy as an example “Yes Rita Duffy because she showed all the problems in the North as people – like her mother and children pictures - it is true that a mother suffers most when her children die.” Another pupil choose Frida Kahlo for her resilience, saying: “Yes Frida Kahlo, she had all those horrible injuries and had her leg amputated and still kept painting. That must have been really tough.” These reactions proved that learning about female artists did have relevance and also an impact on the pupils. They enjoyed and embraced the subject of female artists and identified that it had been a positive and worthwhile experience. As Mary Duggan and Carmel Heneghan state in the Education Journal 1997:

...There cannot be real equality in education provision unless there is a real effort to oppose sexism or stereotyping wherever either exists. Clear messages about equality should be given through all books and materials used in the classroom and positive role models should be provided for all young people. (1)





## FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER 3

1. Duggan Mary and Heneghan Carmel, Issues in Education Volume 2 (Ireland: ASTI Education Journal 1997)



## CONCLUSION

In many ways this dissertation was initially a reaction to my own experiences in Post Primary education. The fact that I had received no education related to female artists and that my only experience of females in education was as facilitators rather than creators of knowledge. As a teacher I do not want to play a part in history repeating itself.

Women in the past have largely gone unrecognised in a society that was male dominated. Within our own environment we have only to look at the Christian Church and its story of creation. In the Garden of Eden, Eve, the helpmate to Adam, becomes a saboteur. This reinforces the image that women are to be socially and morally controlled. An alternative was offered in the form of the Virgin Mary, left unimpowered by her virtue.

Accusing women of witchcraft and being in league with the devil made it easier to pinpoint evil from this recognisable source. Women were associated with domestic life and their selfworth was calculated according to their value as a helpmate.





Works of art characterising women in a negative light are continually shown in art education. While these have many formal merits pupils need to be made aware of the social and historical context in which they have been created. This would allow the pupil to develop an educated and informed opinion of these art works.

This Dissertation has examined several female artists all of whom are not discussed in the school art history text books. They are a mere drop in the ocean of female talent that exists. A fuller inclusion of the diversity of female artists would serve to reflect the diversity of the student body.

In the practical research the influence made on the pupils was apparent, their attitudes became more informed. They are no longer passive or withdrawn or unmotivated but confident with a language, formed through knowledge that is relevant to them as individuals.

Education expresses both explicitly and implicitly the wider culture of society. It is only through examining the past that we as individuals can prepare for the future. The need for a role model



therefore is essential.

Role models become our inspiration, they affirm our selfworth and esteem and encourage us to push out the boundaries and realise that which we sometimes see as unobtainable, is in fact within our reach. When the role model of a female pupil is of the same sex, how much more relevant and valid this affirmation is. If female pupils are to strive for excellence in art, if they are to develop as whole individuals then it is essential that they are made aware of the legacy that comes before them. By doing this pupils will begin to realise that they are not working in a vacuum they are part of an ongoing tradition the importance of which is only now being recognised.





## APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE Given to pupils

SUBJECT: Female Artists

1. Can you name any female artists? Yes ( )  
No ( )
  
2. Would you be interested in learning about female artists? Yes ( )  
No ( )  
Indifferent ( )
  
3. Have you ever questioned the absence of female artists in your curriculum? Yes ( )  
No ( )  
Indifferent ( )
  
4. Do you think the inclusion of female artists would benefit your art education? Yes ( )  
No ( )  
Indifferent( )
  
5. Where do you think your female role models come from? Home life ( )  
Education ( )  
The Media ( )  
(Television/Films/Music)



## APPENDIX B

Handout To Pupils: SUBJECT: Kiki Smith

Kiki Smith was born in 1954 in Nuremberg, Germany while her parents were touring Europe. She grew up along with her two sisters Seton and Beatrice in New Jersey. Her father was Tony Smith, the Minimalist artist, her mother Jane Smith, an opera singer. Considering her creative background Kiki made her decision to become an artist relatively late in life, however as a child her mother says her artistic inclination was very apparent.

Kiki herself talks matter of factly about her childhood hobby of making mummies out of dead animals and adorning them with jewels before burying them.

Kiki was always uncertain about what she wanted to do with her life, so from the age of seventeen she went through a variety of occupations including theatre, construction work and industrial baking and living with the rock band 'The Tubes' for a year. In San Francisco after her move to New York in 1976 she fell in with Colab, an unconventional artists collective whose goal was to challenge the art worlds orthodoxy. From this time Kiki began to make her first artworks, initially showing in Colab group shows





and some commercial galleries in New York, during this period she supported herself with odd jobs - working as a waitress, bartender, cook also doing some plumbing and construction work. From her first artworks it was obvious that Kiki's interest lay in the body, by the age of 25 she was making works influenced by Gray's anatomy. Her natural curiosity with the body developed even further when in 1985 she studied, along with her sister Beatrice, to become an emergency medical technician.

In 1988 she had her first one person show at the Fawbush Gallery, New York. In the same year her sister Beatrice died of aids. This had a profound effect upon Kiki's life and she was one of the first female artists to deal with aids in her work.

A piece made in 1990 using glass jars typifies the underlying interest in Smiths work. It consisted of a dozen mirrored glass bottles the size and shape of those used for office water coolers on a low free-standing wall. Each bottle was etched with the name of a different bodily fluid from blood to saliva. Viewers of these were attracted by the beauty of the bottles but repulsed by their supposed contents. This work prompted questions about our reactions of disgust to bodily fluids. As these materials are 'The



Materials of Life' – life giving and life sustaining.

Smiths career as an artist has taken off in the nineties often fuelled by the controversy her work generates. As an artist she likes to experiment with a lot of materials, ignoring fashionable trends in the art world by often working with 'fringe' materials such as glass, embroidery and print.

Throughout the nineties her work has developed from strictly body related works to a broader interest in the environment, animals, mythology and the Cosmos.





## APPENDIX C

QUESTIONNAIRE - Given to Pupils

SUBJECT: Female Artists

1. List the names of the female artists you have studied?
2. Did you find it interesting learning about them?
3. Discuss the reason why you think female artists have not been included in your art history education?
4. Give an explanation in your own opinion why female artists are relevant/not relevant to your art history class?
5. Can you think of any well known women who you see as a role model explain who and why?
6. Do you think any of the female artists we have studied would be good role models YES/NO why?



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## IN SEARCH OF A ROLE MODEL:

The non representation of the female  
artist in second level education

LAURA CANAVAN

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