

Women directors in museums c.1908-1965: an interdisciplinary approach

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Introduction and context

Even though the writer's previous background as an art and museum historian did not include subject-specific training in digital humanities, this was the topic explored by drafting a hypothetical upcoming research project dealing with the history of the first women who directed museums in twentieth-century Europe. The proposal connected current concerns regarding gender imbalance in the management roles of European cultural institutions, with the historical, gender-biased development of the curatorial profession. In this regard, the project aimed to explore both the impact and significance of the work carried out by pioneering (c.1908–1965) female directors in European museums, and the gender-based difficulties they faced, such as salary gaps, legal restrictions and longstanding cultural prejudices against female leadership.

With an emphasis on methodological approaches to art historical research, the research proposal gave central stage to the combination of research tools to be used in this potential research. This short paper aims to summarise the interdisciplinary combination of methodologies currently being employed in order to carry it out.¹

Literature review and expected contribution to knowledge

While museum historians are increasingly acknowledging the role of curators as 'makers' of taste and builders of collections, both the contributions of twentieth-century women curators, and their historical difficulties in accessing senior roles in museums and cultural heritage institutions are still meagrely explored from a transnational European perspective.²

¹ In late June 2022, the author had the opportunity to attend the summer school at the Università degli studi dell'Aquila. The five-day programme concluded with a series of short presentations delivered by each of the award holders, with particular attention to the use of methodologies in the Digital Humanities. My proposal has now been selected to become a two-year postdoctoral project, funded by the Faculty of Arts at Radboud University (Netherlands). The participation in the Summer School in Digital Humanities at the Università degli Studi dell'Aquila provided the author with state-of-the-art knowledge in the field, new valuable skills and knowledge in digitisation, analysis and visualisation of multimedia data, an invaluable academic network, and the motivation and inspiration to draft the project described here.

² For an overview of female American curators, see: A.K. Levin, *Gender, Sexuality and Museums*. Abingdon and London: Routledge, 2010; A. Sutherland Harris, 'Women in College Art Departments and Museums', *Art Journal*, 32:4, 1973, 417-419, DOI: 10.1080/00043249.1973.10793150. In Europe, the only major historical research on this topic is limited to archaeology: M. Díaz-Andreu, and L.S. Marie Sorensen, eds., *Excavating Women. A History of Women in European Archaeology*. Abingdon and London: Routledge, 1998.

So far, research projects have addressed either specific case studies, or focused on particular places, people and moments in history, thus leading to the impression that the achievements and difficulties of those pioneering women are somehow anecdotal and isolated.³

Moreover, gender history scholarship has not yet examined the evolution of workers' rights in this sector. Although several academic analyses have evidenced current gender inequality in the curatorial career, the issue has not yet been linked to potential historical causes.⁴

By delving into these research gaps, the project aims to shed historical light on the still ongoing gender imbalance in management roles in European museums, while providing a new reading of the shaping of museums and their collections in twentieth-century Europe. In doing so, it will contribute to rewriting the history of museums from a gender perspective, thus reshaping these institutions as agents for women's empowerment. By connecting the stories and the legacies of an entire generation of female heritage leaders with the current context of social demand for fair representation in cultural management, the project also fosters the effective implementation of the European Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 for gender balance in decision-making roles. Its relevance goes far beyond academia, thus responding to wider societal interests.

Integration of methods and disciplines

Aware that the research problem is far too complex to be understood within the borders of a single discipline, *Women in Museums* explores the interaction between three key theoretical frameworks: traditional historical methodology, the feminist historiographic perspective advocated by Griselda Pollock (1996), and the engagement with the Actor Network Theory employed as a tool to understand the history of museums.⁵ In order to uncover erased curatorial histories, this methodological approach opposes the chronological narratives commonly employed by Western museology, focusing instead in the 'historical specificities of women's practices across time and space'.⁶ By tracing female curators' histories,

³ For individual case studies, see, for instance: A. Azor Lacasta, 'Pilar Fernández Vega (1895-1973). Primera conservadora de museos. De los vientos modernizadores de los años veinte y treinta a la represión franquista'. *Boletín del Museo Arqueológico Nacional*, vol. 38, 2019, ISSN: 2341-3409, 327-342. Also: R. Ferrario, *Regina di quadri. Vita e passioni di Palma Bucarelli*. Milano: Mondadori, 2010. More general studies, such as K. Hill's (2016), has mainly focused on women's early presence as museum volunteers in UK museums, and thus, does not delve into curatorial nor management roles specifically: Kate Hill, *Women and Museums, 1850-1914: Modernity and the Gendering of Knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016.

⁴ Two examples at an international level are: J.H. Baldwin, and A.W. Ackerson, *Women in the Museum: Lessons from the Workplace*. Abingdon and London: Taylor & Francis, 2017; and V. Turner, 'The Factors Affecting Women's Success in Museum Careers: A Discussion of the Reasons More Women Do Not Reach the Top, and of Strategies to Promote their Future Success.' *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies*, 8, 2002, 6–10. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5334/jcms.8022>.

⁵ J.V. Aliaga, and P. Mayayo, eds., *Genealogías feministas en el arte español: 1960-2000*, Madrid: The Side Up, 2013, 47-84; S. Byrne, A. Clarke, R. Harrison, R. Torrence, 'Networks, Agents and Objects: Frameworks for Unpacking Museum Collections'. In: Byrne S., Clarke A., Harrison R., Torrence R. (eds), *Unpacking the Collection. One World Archaeology*. New York: Springer, 2011, 6-23; Griselda Pollock, *Generations & Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*. Hove: Psychology Press, 1996.

⁶ Pollock, *Generations & Geographies*.

achievements and networks, *Women in Museums* explores the links between national and transnational politics, museum history and women's cultural, intellectual and artistic practice in twentieth-century Europe. It does so via an integration of traditional methods of the Humanities (historical methodology, i.e., archival research and primary literature) and Social Sciences' techniques (interviews and data visualisation). Moreover, in its aim to widen its societal impact, this methodology broadens towards quantitative tools traditionally limited to STEM narratives, thus contributing to the break-up of boundaries between disciplines. Indeed, the use of quantitative analysis in art history is still little explored and acknowledged. However, two recent publications – *Women Can't Paint* (Gorrill, 2020) and *Painting by Numbers* (Greenwald, 2021) – have successfully applied it to feminist art history, thus demonstrating the relevance and timeliness of such approach.⁷

Research tools

On a practical level, this multidisciplinary research methodology triangulates five different techniques, integrating tools from the disciplines of Social Sciences and Humanities. Firstly, the project combines the analysis of primary literature and archival research. Regarding primary literature, the study of research published by twentieth-century female curators aims to uncover these women's academic interests and their contributions to the historiography of art. The analysis of historical museum texts such as the minutes of the 1934 Madrid Conference, contextualise these women's intellectual and methodological positioning against the bigger picture of twentieth-century museology.⁸ Regarding archival research, the project's historical approach implies a thorough analysis of documents such as museums' pay books, museum boards' meetings reports, letter books and curators' reports, news-cuttings, photographs and work diaries. These documents will provide data regarding work conditions – to be compared against those of male colleagues – as well as information on class, education, career development, networking, and curatorial decisions such as the arrangement of exhibitions and museums acquisition policies.

One of the challenges of archival research lies in reconstructing the lives and presences of the individuals involved, and the richness of their personal experiences, given that the archives consist mainly of institutional documents. To mitigate this absence, and to bring back to life the voices of the protagonists, the research will make use of semi-structured oral history interviews of descendants of the first female curators. These are expected to provide human details such as personality traits, and the balance between professional and family life. Interviews of female curators working in European art galleries between the last third of the twentieth century and the present day will offer information on present-day curatorial duties, career progression and working conditions.

A further methodological challenge comes from the fact that the hypothesis to be demonstrated requires a fair amount of numeric evidence, such as salary gaps between male

⁷ Helen Gorrill, *Women Can't Paint. Gender, the Glass Ceiling and Values in Contemporary Art*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020; Diana Seave Greenwald, *Painting by Numbers: Data-Driven Histories of Nineteenth-Century Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021.

⁸ Jean-Baptiste Jamin, 'La Conférence de Madrid (1934). Histoire d'une manifestation internationale à l'origine de la muséographie moderne'. *Il Capitale Culturale. Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage* 15, 2017, 73-101.

and female curators, and the number of women working in museums in different historical periods. This quantitative data – to be obtained via archival research – will then be compared to data regarding current gender inequality in the sector. In this way, the outcome will provide statistical evidence of the evolution of women's work and rights in museums, highlighting any periods of regression, which will then be correlated against the bigger picture of the historical context.⁹ In order to facilitate the reading of this data, the methodology also features data visualisation and digital humanities tools, which will assist in transforming this numeric evidence into charts and graphs. Some of the data visualisation tools envisaged as part of this methodological approach are Omeka (for virtual exhibitions of the artworks acquired through the intermediation of female curators), Time Mapper (for a timeline of the arrival of women to the curatorial profession in different countries, in comparison with the main historical and museological events of the twentieth century), Gephi graphs (to make evident professional networks), and visualisation charts (for the comparison of working contracts and conditions between female and male curators).

Expected outputs

The ultimate goal of this project is the publication of a scholarly monograph evidencing the role played by twentieth-century women curators. This monograph will cover aspects such as the historical circumstances of female access to the museum profession, women's work conditions in museums, and professional careers and distinctiveness of female curators' contributions to art historiography, gallery management and shaping of museum collections. An appendix will feature a series of biographical notes on the main case studies.

However, for the shorter-term of the two-year postdoctoral project at Radboud University, the main expected outputs are academic articles in the field of museum history and gender studies, as well as the presentation of papers in international conferences, and subject-specific lectures at the university. The digital humanities' part of the research will be made accessible to the general public via a website, which will act as a hub for the data visualisation outcomes in a user-friendly manner. This website will also include biographical notes on the curators and blog entries highlighting the progress of the research, as well as an in-depth description and direct access to the raw data for academic audiences. The biographical notes on women curators will be shared via Wikipedia, by creating entries for the women who do not have one yet, and by updating the ones already existing, thus increasing public awareness on women curators' role in the history of museums.

Conclusion

Women in Museums materialises the methodological innovations and the creative atmosphere experienced at L'Aquila. As such, it aims to be innovative in multiple ways. Firstly, it brings

⁹ Most countries in Europe have publicly available statistical datasets on the topic, which will be employed for this purpose. See, for instance: División de Estadística y Estudios, Secretaría General Técnica. Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte, *Estadísticas de Museos y Colecciones Museográficas*, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.culturaydeporte.gob.es/dam/jcr:3d2cedf7-8860-43ea-949a-3a4988e88e03/estadistica-de-museos-y-colecciones-museograficas-2020.pdf>. Accessed: 07 September 2022.

to light extensive and completely unexplored research content, as the history of museum curators has not yet been delved into from a gender perspective. Secondly, its methodology combines traditional historical research methods (such as archival research) with state-of-the-art techniques from the digital humanities and social sciences (i.e., data visualization, oral interviews and quantitative analysis). Thirdly, it links research from separate disciplines, such as museum history and gender studies. Last, on its aim to rewrite the history of curatorial practices, it will help museums to become more welcoming places that include the collective memory of all humans who were and are part of them.

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