

Cooper and Irvine on Balducci and Jensen, eds. (2014)

Balducci, Temma, and Heather Belnap Jensen, eds. *Women, Femininity and Public Space in European Visual Culture, 1789–1914*. Surrey: Ashgate, 2014. Pp. xviii + 317. 20 color and 43 b&w illustrations. ISBN: 978-1-4094-6572-0

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In this fascinating volume, Balducci, Jensen, and their contributors argue that women played an essential part in the public sphere during the years 1789–1914. Highlighting the way in which numerous and contradictory interpretations of Habermas’s dichotomization of men’s public and women’s private spheres have influenced critical opinion of women’s access to the arts, the volume explores various art forms in order to argue that women had a greater influence on various publics than has previously been admitted.

Organized chronologically, the volume opens with a thought-provoking article by Jensen which argues that the image of the ideal modern mother was produced in post-Revolutionary France. She suggests that emerging images of fashionable women performing mothering acts in public spaces set a precedent which allowed women to embody the Rousseauian ideal of the dedicated mother whilst simultaneously maintaining their role as socio-political figures. Laura Auricchio’s contribution shows that the Baroness Hyde de Neuville’s sketches of New York give form to the spaces of female civil society, such as sites of philanthropic activity. Daniel Harkett focuses on Juliette Récamier who, running her salon from a remote convent, became a “connective force” (52) who arguably played an important role in post-Revolutionary reconciliation.

Offering surprising statistics on the large number of women copyists who visited Florence’s Royal Gallery of Statues, Sheila Barker demonstrates that the Uffizi was one of the first public spaces where women were able to practice art without threat to their female honor. Gerrish Nunn investigates the extent to which artist Emma Brownlow was able to overcome the public-private paradigm during her 1863 journey. An excellent complement to the volume’s first chapter, Justine De Young’s contribution similarly suggests that fashion plates worked against, rather than to reaffirm, the idea of gendered spheres. Focusing on a selection of plates published from 1865–1875, De Young argues that the decade saw a move from images which depicted women in the home to those which showed women in the streets of Paris in the years following the Franco-Prussian war.

Amy Von Lintel looks at the art historical writings of Heaton (1836–86) and Bell (1844–1936), women who led successful careers despite lacking university degrees or curatorial positions. Their career trajectories show that the separate spheres of public and private were far from distinct. Karen Leader examines the public space of the Salon as seen through caricature, and sheds new light on the place of women from all social classes, as consumers of art and as its subjects, in this “crowded, noisy and festive scene” (144). Balducci shows that representations of women moving about Paris’s public spaces are more common than traditionally held. Her use of conduct manuals to supplement visual examples shows that various codes of conduct existed governing how women should be treated as they inhabited the streets of Paris. Similarly, Vanesa Rodriguez-Galindo, using examples from Madrid’s illustrated press, shows women occupying the Spanish capital’s streets, parks, and public transportation systems.

In her fascinating chapter, which harkens back to Von Lintel’s examination of the careers of Bell and Heaton, Elizabeth Mansfield discusses the intersections of social class and gender in the career and writings of art historian Emilia Dilke. Miranda Mason then goes on to show how Louise Abbéma painted the public spaces of Paris as a “flâneuse” (213), documenting the presence of a “lesbian Paris” (210) in the public sphere of the city. Samantha Burton takes Emily Carr’s set of color drawings, entitled *London Student Sojourn*, as the basis for examining Carr’s experience of a women’s boarding-house in London. Her clever analysis shows that the boarding-house is a space between public and private and that Carr’s position as an expatriate Canadian enabled her to slip between borders of class. Julie Johnson argues that women’s absence from art in Vienna is due to the fact that they were “actively erased” (242) from history during the Nazi period. Using painter Broncia Koller as a case study, she suggests that any focus on domesticity in her work is due to a wider interest in interiority common to the Klimt group.

Erin Eckhold Sassin’s chapter, like Burton’s, explores how women’s collective housing functioned as a space where young professionals learnt to navigate the public-private divide. The volume’s final chapter is dedicated to Gertrude Stein. Annalisa Zox-Weaver explores how the private and public spheres function as part of one’s consciousness, both necessary to the idea of a complete artistic persona.

This insightful volume forces us to re-evaluate previously held ideas (Habermas, Huysen) as each chapter convincingly demonstrates that women played a significant role in the public sphere in nineteenth-century Europe and that borders between public and private were less fixed than is typically held.

Volume: 44.1-2

Year:

- 2015