



EXHIBITION GUIDE

Now You See Us

Women Artists in Britain 1520-1920

Find out more about our exhibition at Tate Britain



'Just What Ladies do for Amusement'

Flowers

Victorian Spectacle

Watercolour

Photogra



Elizabeth Butler *The Roll Call* 1874 Royal Collection Trust / © His Majesty King Charles III 2024

Now You See Us: Women Artists in Britain 1520–1920 celebrates over 100 women who forged public careers as artists. The exhibition begins with the earliest recorded women artists working in Britain. It ends with women's place in society fundamentally changed by the First World War and the first women gaining the right to vote. Across these 400 years, women were a constant presence in the art world. *Now You See Us* explores these artists' careers and asks why so many have been erased from mainstream art histories.

Organised chronologically, the exhibition follows women who practised art as a livelihood rather than an accomplishment. The chosen works were often exhibited at public exhibitions,

where these artists sold their art and made their reputations. Most of the women featured belonged to a social class that gave them the time and opportunity to develop their talents. Many were the daughters, sisters or wives of artists. Yet even these women were regarded differently. *Now You See Us* charts their fight to be accepted as professional artists on equal terms with men.

Many of the exhibited works reflect prejudiced notions of the most appropriate art forms and subjects for women. Others challenge the commonly held belief that women were best suited to 'imitation', proving they have always been capable of creative invention. From painting epic battle scenes to campaigning for access to art academies, these women defied society's limited expectations of them and forged their own paths. Yet so many of their careers have been forgotten and artworks lost. Drawing on the artists' own writings, art criticism, and new and established research, this exhibition attempts to restore these women to their rightful place in art history. *Now You See Us* aims to ensure these artists are not only seen but remembered

WOMEN AT THE TUDOR COURTS

There are significant gaps in our knowledge of women's artistic lives in the sixteenth century. As is the case for many artists in this exhibition, their lives are poorly documented and often hidden behind those of their husbands and fathers. The problems this presents are evident in this room.

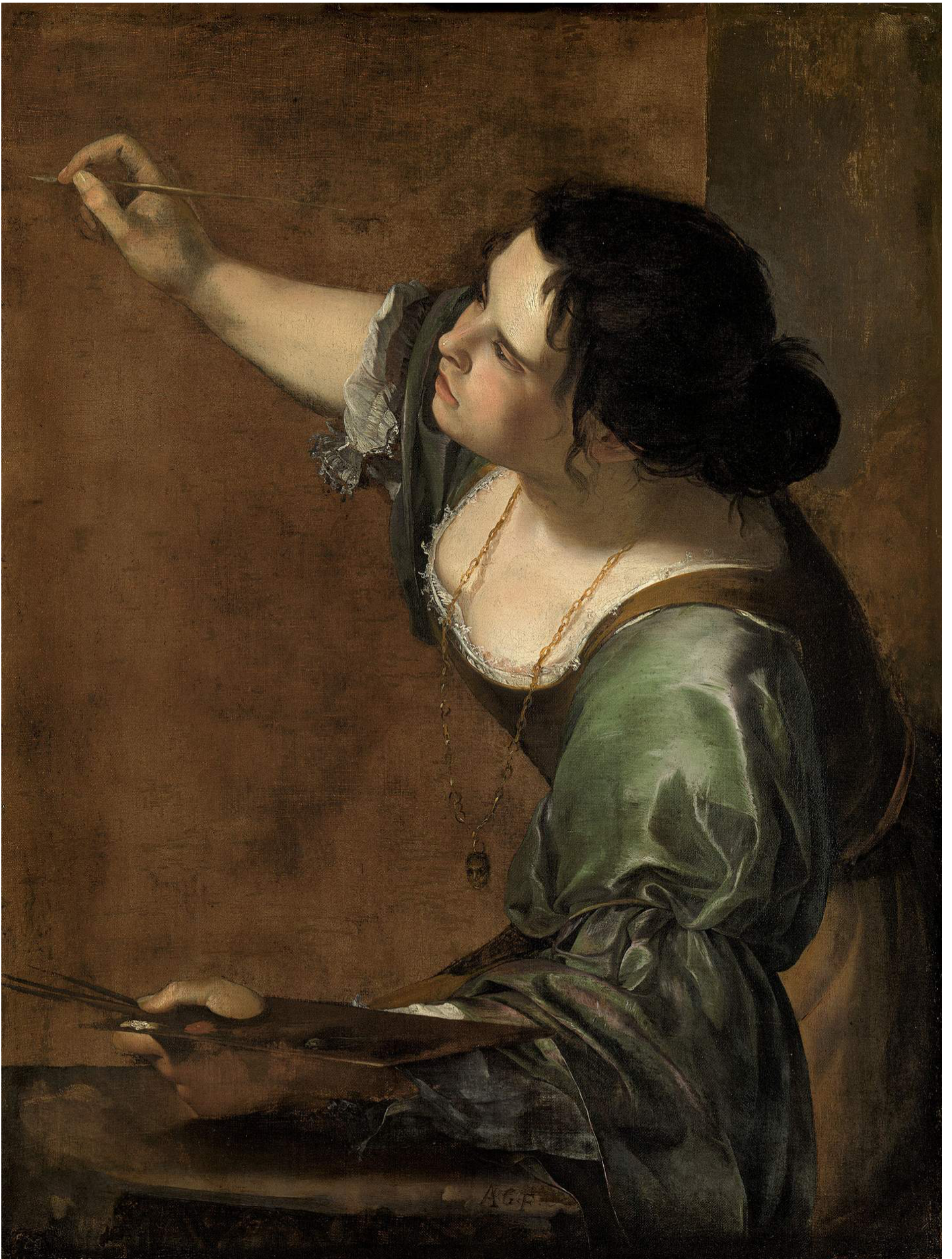
Susanna Horenbout (1503–1554) and Levina Teerlinc (c.1510s–1576) are among the earliest women in Britain to be named as artists. Their reputations are clearly recorded. In 1521, Horenbout's skill was admired by the German painter and printmaker Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), and in 1567, both artists were praised by the Italian historian Lodovico Guicciardini (1521–1589). Yet no works by Horenbout have been identified, and those attributed to Teerlinc are not certain.

Horenbout and Teerlinc were both daughters of Flemish manuscript illuminators and were likely trained in their family workshops. Both arrived in England to work at the court of Henry VIII. But as women, they were not employed as artists. While Horenbout's brother Lucas Horenbout (1490–1544) was Henry VIII's painter, she served Anne of Cleves as one of her Gentlewomen of the Privy Chamber. Teerlinc served Elizabeth I likewise. This does not mean that they did not paint – at court, their artistic talents would have been a distinguishing skill – but, as is a common feature of this exhibition, written histories have failed to record their activities.

Working in a different context – as a scribe and calligrapher – the works of Esther Inglis (1571–1624) can be identified. Inglis authored more than 60 manuscript books and included

her name and self-portrait in many. Raised in Scotland, she may have learnt the art of calligraphy from her mother, Marie Presot (active 1569–1574).

ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI



Artemisia Gentileschi, Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting (La Pittura), c.1638-1639. Royal Collection Trust / © His Majesty King Charles III 2024

Italian artist Artemisia Gentileschi arrived in London in c.1638–9 by invitation of Charles I. Like other European rulers, Charles I employed artists of international reputation to signal the cultural sophistication of his court. Gentileschi had prestigious patrons across Europe, including the Grand Duke of Tuscany and Philip IV of Spain. She was the first woman to be a member of the Academy of the Arts of Drawing in Florence, and in Rome, her house had been ‘full of cardinals and princes’. Gentileschi’s fame as an artist was augmented by her status as a woman.

In London, Gentileschi worked for Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria. Records suggest she produced seven works for the royal collection. These included self-portraits and large history paintings, with subject matter drawn from classical history, mythology, and the Bible. Only the two displayed here are still known. Gentileschi often placed women at the centre of her works, depicting narratives that celebrate their strength and virtue. *Susanna and the Elders* is an example of the kind of work for which Gentileschi was celebrated.

Gentileschi achieved in her lifetime what many women who came after her had to fight to attain: she was a professional artist who ran her own studio, was a member of an art academy, worked from life models and was ranked as a serious artist alongside men. Despite this, Gentileschi’s status has fluctuated over time, and the artist has faded in and out of art history.

Early accounts of Gentileschi’s work focus on her personal life as much as her painting. Like many of the women artists who came after her, the details of her biography continue to dictate interpretations of her work.

THE FIRST PROFESSIONALS

In 1658, historian William Sanderson (c.1586–1676) published *Graphice. The use of the pen and pensil. Or, The most excellent art of painting*. The publication lists contemporary artists practising in England. He includes four women working in oil paint: ‘Mrs Carlile’ ([Joan Carlile](#)), ‘Mrs Beale’ ([Mary Beale](#)), ‘Mrs Brooman’ (probably Sarah Broman) and ‘Mrs Weimes’ (Anne Wemyss). Carlile and Beale are believed to be two of the earliest British women to have worked as professional artists. Very little is known about Broman or Wemyss beyond snatches of information in archives.

This short list highlights how unusual it was for British women to pursue art as a profession in the seventeenth century. Women had little agency over their own lives and were subject first to their fathers and then their husbands. Limited to the domestic sphere, they were not expected to conduct public lives. Many women painted privately with no thought of turning it into a career. While young men began as apprentices or assistants in the studios of professionals, this route was not open to most women.

In the seventeenth century women writers, poets, playwrights and artists began to give voice to those questioning their secondary status and petitioning for women's rights. They argued that it was lack of education, not 'weak minds' that limited their opportunities. This fight for equality and access to education runs throughout the exhibition.

THE FIRST EXHIBITORS

The first public art exhibition in Britain took place in London in 1760, and art shows soon became an important part of the city's social calendar. Founded in 1768, the Royal Academy quickly emerged as a driving force in cultural life, with its Summer Exhibition attracting tens of thousands of visitors every year. Other venues, including the Society of Artists and the British Institution also hosted exhibitions.

Women artists played an active part in this competitive world. An estimated 900 women exhibited their work between 1760 and 1830. [Angelica Kauffman](#) and Mary Moser were both founding members of the Royal Academy (although, as women, they weren't awarded full membership and were excluded from the Academy's council meetings and governance). Despite this precedent, it would take more than 150 years for the next woman to be elected to membership.

Kauffman is one of the few women artists of the eighteenth century whose profile has been sustained. Many others made names for themselves, but their careers are not well documented. Even Moser is less well known, perhaps because she painted flowers while Kauffman pursued the 'high genre' of history painting, depicting historical, mythological and biblical narratives.

Art critics of the time often criticised women for their 'weak' figurative work, yet they were denied access to life-drawing classes. Women artists also had to battle social expectations. Publishing a private or studio address in an exhibition catalogue was a signal of commercial practice, but painting for money was considered improper. Women artists of higher social rank were listed as 'honorary' exhibitors; some exhibited simply as 'a Lady', and after marriage, many switched their status from 'commercial' to 'amateur'.

'JUST WHAT LADIES DO FOR AMUSEMENT'

In 1770, the Royal Academy banned 'Needle-work, artificial Flowers, cut Paper, Shell-work, or any such baubles' from its exhibitions. They also banned works that were copies. Other categories of art that the Academy considered 'lower', such as miniature painting, pastel and watercolour were also treated dismissively. Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792), the Academy's President, said that working in pastel was unworthy of real artists and was 'just what ladies

do when they paint for their own amusement’.

These ‘lower arts’ were ones that women practised the most. Small in scale and considered less technically challenging than oil painting, they demanded less equipment and could be pursued at home. They were taught to middle and upper-class girls and were the realm of women who pursued art as amateur accomplishment.

Despite this, these art forms offered opportunities for women to earn a living. Many turned miniature painting, needlework and pastel into lucrative professional careers, supplementing their income through tutoring. Their patrons were often women, and some boasted large, fashionable clienteles and even galleries which became tourist attractions.

Founded in 1754, the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (the Society of Arts) offered cash prizes and medals in many categories, including the ‘polite arts’. Awards were given for patterns for embroidery, copies of prints, drawings of statues and of ‘beasts, birds, fruit or flowers’, as well as landscapes. Some prizes were specifically intended for young women. The Society was a stepping stone to a career and many of the artists in this exhibition won medals. Yet most of the women recorded as submitting work for competition can no longer be identified beyond their names.

FLOWERS





Mary Delany *Rubus Odoratus* 1772-1782 The British Museum 1897,0505.753. Bequeathed by Augusta Hall, Baroness Llanover in 1897

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, painting flowers was considered a suitably delicate pursuit for women. Imitating nature (rather than demonstrating creative or imaginative flair) was thought to be an appropriate outlet for women's artistic skills. Flowers were also at the heart of respectable hobbies like embroidery, botany and gardening. In the 1850s, the women's periodical the *Ladies' Treasury* called flower painting 'a ladylike and truly feminine accomplishment'. When Mary Moser exhibited *Cymon and Iphigenia* (based on a poem by John Dryden, 1631–1700) at the Royal Academy in 1789, a reviewer urged her to stick to flowers. She painted flowers 'transcendently', he noted, and should do 'nothing else'.

Many women were employed as professional illustrators, recording plant species for horticulturists and botanical publishers. Some conducted hybrid careers, working as illustrators and drawing tutors while exhibiting flower paintings for a wider market. In the Victorian era, critics applauded several women artists as leaders of the genre. Yet the idea that flower painting, especially in watercolour, was an exclusively amateur pastime has damaged the legacies of many accomplished artists who successfully worked within this

genre.

VICTORIAN SPECTACLE

Grand exhibitions were a defining part of the Victorian art world. The Royal Academy, the leading art institution since 1768, was still Britain's most prestigious exhibition venue, but was later criticised for its traditional conservatism. New venues, such as London's Grosvenor Gallery, which opened in 1877, became rival spaces, and exhibitions in Liverpool and Manchester offered fresh opportunities for exhibiting artists. The Victorian era was also the age of World Fairs. Major exhibitions were held in London and Paris, and in 1893, the World's Exposition in Chicago was visited by over 25 million people.

This room explores the successes of women artists on this public stage. Many of the works on display were shown in these exhibitions. They won international medals, praise from art critics and public recognition. Yet women tackling 'male' subjects, such as battle scenes, caused surprise. Opinion was also divided on women painting the nude: some thought it immoral, others brave.

Exhibitions gave women a public platform to build substantial reputations, and some became popular names. Despite this, membership of the Royal Academy, which was a mark of professional recognition, remained out of reach. As a result, women had no automatic exhibiting rights and were reliant on committees of men selecting their works for exhibition. Without institutional support, they had to navigate the commercial art market on their own.

Women artists' campaigns for access to the Academy joined calls for greater equality in society. From the 1850s, women petitioned for equal rights to education and work, as well as women's suffrage. These causes are reflected in the works in this room.

WATERCOLOUR

Watercolour was considered one of the 'polite arts' best suited to women. However, there were few opportunities to practice professionally. The principal watercolour societies – the Old (founded in 1804) and the rival New (founded in 1807 and reconstituted in 1831) – restricted the membership of women. Membership of the Old was limited to six women (in practice, usually four), while the New admitted around ten.

In both societies, women were confined to the category of 'Lady Members' until the end of the nineteenth century. They had no say in governance and were denied access to the financial premiums awarded to full members. Since the annual exhibitions of both societies were closed to non-members, most women had limited opportunities to exhibit their work.

Against these odds, many women watercolourists achieved significant commercial and critical success. They enjoyed solo shows and developed commercial relationships with dealers, taking control of their careers.

In 1857, a group of women founded the Society of Female Artists (later, the Society of Lady Artists in c.1869, then the Society of Women Artists in 1899) to promote the work of women artists in Britain.

PHOTOGRAPHY

The announcement of photography in 1839 marked a major shift in the art world. In its first decades, photography was a laborious practice that required an understanding of chemistry and optics, as well as expensive equipment. It needed more money, specialist instruction and time than most other art forms. For women who had access to these privileges, the medium provided new opportunities.

From its foundation in 1853, the Photographic Society of London welcomed women members. However, they rarely attended meetings, which were scheduled in the evenings when women required a chaperone to leave the house. The atmosphere of the meetings was described as a 'men's club' and it wasn't until 1898 that the Society belatedly banned smoking 'in respect of ladies' attendance'. Meetings often included papers on new techniques and equipment, providing significant benefits to those who were able to join.

Women participated in London's first public photographic exhibitions at the Royal Society of Arts in 1852–3 and at the Photographic Society in 1854. The Amateur Photographic Association, established in 1861, also welcomed women from its outset. In the 1890s and early 1900s, London's Photographic Salon became a key venue. Founded by the Linked Ring Brotherhood, who promoted photography as a fine art, Salon exhibitors included women from across Europe and the US. A photograph of British photographer Carine Cadby in silhouette, examining one of her glass plate negatives, featured on the cover of the 1896 Salon catalogue. Despite this, women were not elected as members of the Linked Ring until 1900. By 1909, they numbered just 8 among 63 men.

ART SCHOOL

Women were excluded from enrolment at the Royal Academy Schools, Britain's principal art academy, until 1860. Laura Herford (1831–1870) was the first woman admitted. She had submitted her work for consideration using only her initials and was assumed to be a man. Once women gained entry, they were determined to achieve equal access to training.

Women were barred from the Academy's life-drawing classes until 1893. Their exclusion from this vital component of art education was justified on many grounds. Chiefly, it was to 'protect' women's supposed modesty, but also because they were considered amateurs who lacked the intellectual capacity to practice art at the highest level. Women students marshalled critical support for their cause and submitted petitions. Life drawing was considered essential to the training of men pursuing careers as artists. Why, they argued, was it not also essential for women?

The Female School of Art, founded in 1842, provided another route into art education. Like several regional schools, such as that in Manchester, it encouraged women into vocational careers in design. Women also had access to private academies, including Sass's and Leigh's (later Heatherleys) in London, which prepared students for admission to the Royal Academy Schools. And some women artists, such as Louise Jopling, established their own art school.

In 1871, the founding of the Slade School of Fine Art at University College London signalled a fundamental change of attitudes. From the outset, the Slade offered women an education on equal terms with men. Studying from life models was a central focus of teaching and by the turn of the century, women students outnumbered men by three to one. Access to life drawing had been regarded as the last barrier to equal opportunity. Now they could study from life, some critics argued it was up to women to prove they could be successful artists.

BEING MODERN



Laura Knight *The Dark Pool* 1908-1918 Laing Art Gallery (Tyne and Wear Archives & Museums) © Estate of Dame Laura Knight, 1877-1970 (Worthing, UK)

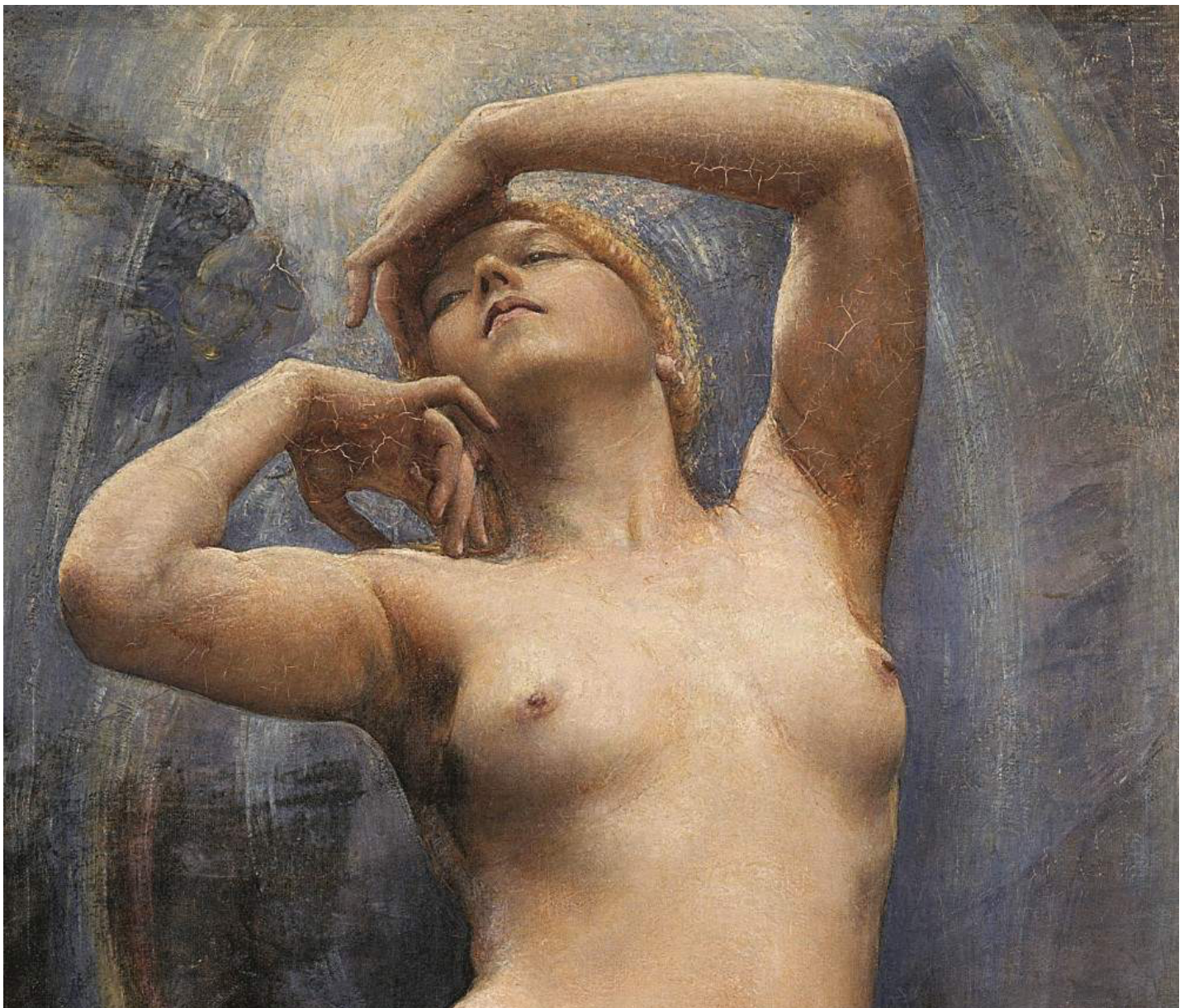
The first two decades of the twentieth century saw rapid change for women, with their rights, roles and opportunities evolving at an unprecedented pace. The First World War signalled a decisive change for women's place in society and in 1918, after decades of campaigning, some women finally gained the right to vote.

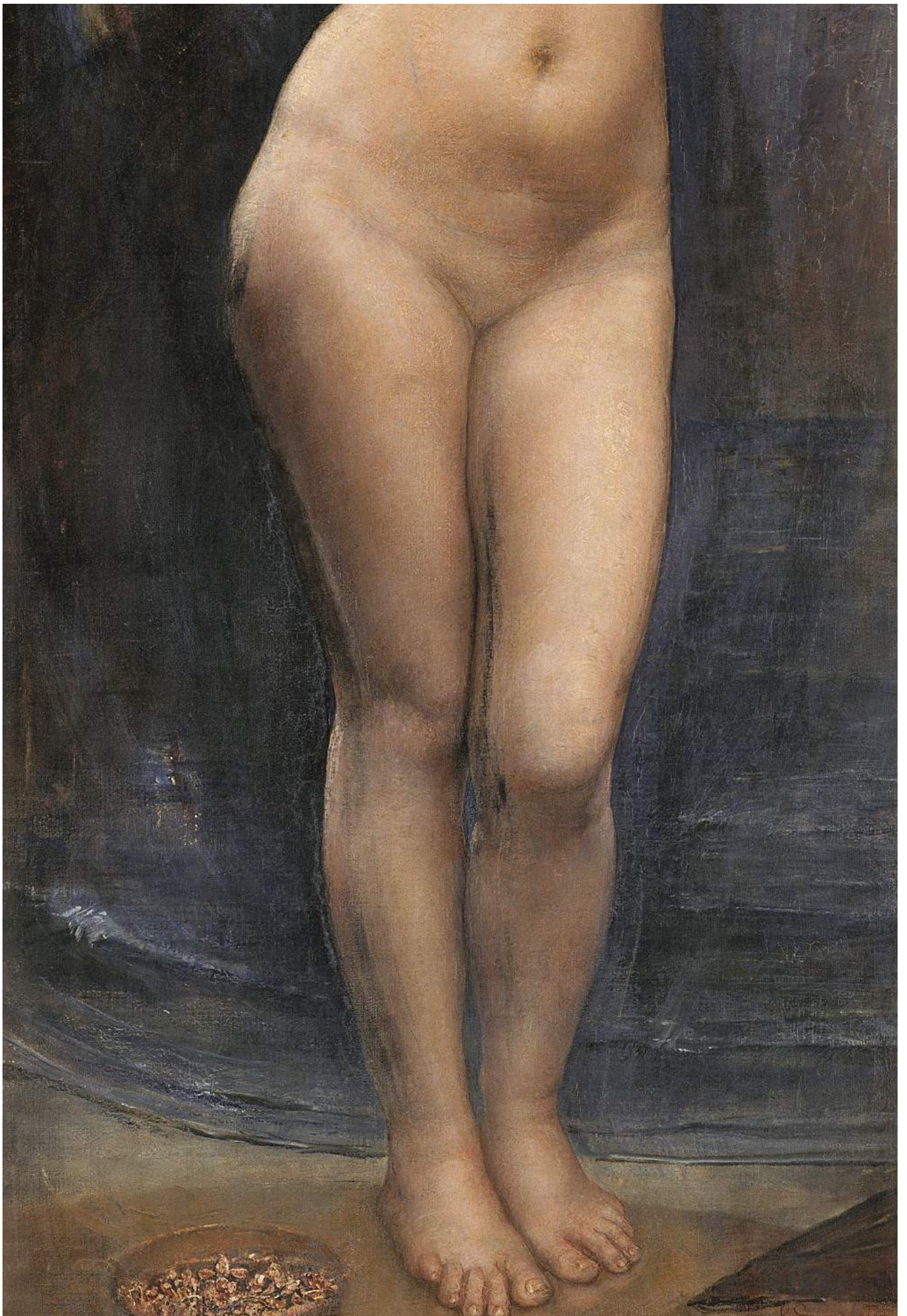
At the same time, the art world was also changing. New art groups and exhibiting societies rejected tradition and promoted modernist aesthetics. Instead of figurative realism, they privileged form, colour and experimentation. Many saw modernism as an opportunity for greater artistic freedom. However, despite growing liberalism in art and society, women

artists still faced challenges. The New English Art Club became a rival exhibiting venue to the Royal Academy but was slow to admit women. The Camden Town Group labelled itself 'progressive' but openly excluded women.

While modernism is often presented as the dominant movement of the early twentieth century, it doesn't account for all artistic production of the period. Membership of the Royal Academy, an exhibiting venue many now regarded as too traditional, remained a symbolic goal for many women. When Annie Swynnerton was elected an Associate Member in 1922, Laura Knight said she had broken down the 'barriers of prejudice'. In 1936, Knight was elected a Royal Academician, becoming the first woman to achieve full membership since the eighteenth century.

The artworks in the final room of the exhibition explore this complex period. Their variety reveals women forging their own paths and pursuing professional careers with purpose and confidence. While many chose not to challenge traditional artistic values, they pushed the boundaries of what was expected of them, paving the way for generations of women artists who came after them.







Annie Louisa Swynnerton *Mater Triumphalis* 1892 Paris, musée d'Orsay. Donated by Edmund Davis, 1915

Letter to the Daily News

SIR, – In some of the notices which the newspapers have given of the newly-formed Society of Female Artists, it has been asked 'Why the ladies should seek to sequestrate themselves from the rougher sex?'

Sir, the old [Watercolour] Societies profess to include female artists. But their practice is to exclude all but a very small number ... , and even these are debarred the usual privileges of membership, being excluded from all share in the profits or in the administration of the affairs of the Society.

No available mode of presenting to public attention the water-colour works of women exists, beyond the narrow limit of four members in one Water Colour [Society] and about ten in the other.

But in the short space of a few weeks, one hundred and forty female artists, painters in oil as well as watercolour, have stepped forward with 300 works ... which have found favour in the eyes of judicious and impartial critics.

In 'setting up for themselves' as it is jocularly termed, the ladies have simply followed the example of the 'lords of the creation' who confine the advantages of their respective institutions to their own sex, although nominally professing to allow a participation to women.

If the new Society were to propose to admit a small number of men painters, to exhibit only, without sharing either in the profits of the exhibition or in the privileges of administration, I wonder how many male candidates would offer themselves for election?

AN AMATEUR OF SIXTY

'An Amateur of Sixty' (probably Harriet Grote) to the editor of the Daily News concerning the foundation of the Society of Female Artists (extracts) Daily News, 18 June 1857

Letter from Anna Mary Howitt to Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon

Did I tell you I went one night to hear Leslie [the artist C R Leslie] lecture at the Royal Academy. Oh! How terribly did I long to be a man so as to paint there. When I saw in the first room all the students' easels standing about – lots of canvasses and easels against the walls ... a perfect atmosphere of inspiration, and then passed on into the second room hung around with the Academicians' inaugural pictures, one seemed stepping into a freer, larger, and more earnest artistic world – a world, alas! which one's womanhood debars one from enjoying – Oh, I felt quite angry at being a woman, it seemed to me *such a mistake*, but Eliza Fox ... said, 'nay, rather be angry with men for not admitting women to the enjoyments of this world, and instead of lamenting that we are women let us earnestly strive after a nobler state of things, let us strive to be among those women who shall first open the Academy's doors to their fellow aspirants – that would be a noble mission, would it not?

Transcript of a letter from the artist Anna Mary Howitt (1824-1884) to Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon (1827–1891), c.1848-52 Cambridge University Library, Add.MS 7621

WE RECOMMEND



EXHIBITION

Now You See Us: Women Artists in Britain 1520–1920

Discover the artists who forged a path for



She Who Dares: Four Women Artists to Know

Discover the women artists who broke barriers across 400 years

generations to come

📍 TATE BRITAIN

📅 UNTIL 13 OCT 2024

🎫 £20 / FREE FOR MEMBERS



How this Painting Campaigned for Women's Rights

It captures a single woman trying to earn a living as an artist