Women and Artistic Production in the Long Seventeenth Century in the Low Countries

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Abstract

The importance of the role of women as artists has been recognised and rightly continues to be researched. However, although there are exceptions, the scholarship that has been produced over the past two decades does not sufficiently challenge patriarchal, male-centric art historical research, with its focus on the so-called 'creative genius'. The result, whether intentional or not, has been a continued emphasis on so-called stars, exceptional women, and trailblazers. Promising scholarship has focused on the role of women as artisan-makers or considered the gender-specific circumstances in which women operated. This scholarship, while of critical importance, unwittingly validates the assumption that the creation and production of (fine) art in the long seventeenth century in the Low Countries was primarily a man's affair, with women relegated to more peripheral roles. If we are to truly write an inclusive art history, however, we must be willing to re-examine, expand, and even re-define traditional concepts in art history as they relate to the creation and production of art, pursue interdisciplinarity, and adopt the tools at our disposal, notably technical and object-based art history and the digital humanities.

Keywords: artists as mothers and wives, alternative art practices, ordinary women, assisting labour, practices of exchange, women in the workshop, digital humanities

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The past two decades have seen exponential growth in the scholarship on early modern women artists and makers. Most publishers now have dedicated book series, and some of the most popular exhibitions over the past few years, including *Making Her Mark*, *Ingenious Women* (*Geniale Frauen*), and *Female Masters* (*Maestras*), three major exhibitions that took place in 2024, have been about women artists and makers. These exhibitions were buoyed by academic research that recovered the works and stories of extraordinarily talented women such as Catharina van Hemessen, Maria Fayd'herbe, Michaelina Wautier, Magdalena de Passe, Alida Withoos, and Gesina ter Borch. For the first time since its foundation in 1947, the *Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art* has published an issue dedicated entirely to women.[1]

Paradoxically, these successes may also stand in the way of histories of art that are genuinely inclusive and integrate the contributions of women into broader narratives. Unwittingly, and in full awareness of the limits of connoisseurship and canonisation, the response to Linda Nochlin's 'Why have there been no great women artists?' has produced a list of so-called exceptional women, trailblazers, stars – or women who have been understood as such by the broader public. The focus on a romantic notion of 'artistic genius' (which, as Feike Dietz, Nina Geerdink, Lieke van Deinsen, and Karen Hollewand demonstrate in this special issue, also applies to writers), arguably stems from approaches that frequently do not sufficiently challenge patriarchal, male-centric art historical constructs and methods (for example, monographic studies and *catalogues raisonnés*), even as significant steps have been taken in this direction. As Judith Noorman, Thijs Weststeijn, and Elizabeth Alice Honig noted in their must-read introduction to the 2024 *Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art*, much work remains to be done if women are to be truly integrated into art historical scholarship.[2]

Before proceeding to highlight the lacunae and opportunities presented by the current state of the literature, however, it is critical to acknowledge the seminal work of Katlijne van der Stighelen, Els Kloek, Elizabeth A. Honig, and Frima Fox Hofrichter, whose research

1 I wish to extend special thanks to Lieke van Deinsen and Nina Lamal for their insightful comments and support as this essay took shape. Noorman, Weststeijn, and Honig, 'Introduction'.

2 Noorman, Weststeijn, and Honig, 'Introduction'.

on Netherlandish women artists in early modernity continues to provide the foundations upon which the most recent scholarship builds.[3] By bringing a large number of women artists into the light and by engaging with questions that pertain specifically to artists who are women – including, for example, socio-economic gender expectations, access to training and the market, and the struggle to carry out an artistic practice for profit – the research of these leading female scholars has made it possible to continue to explore the many ways in which not only women, but all 'others' participated in early modern Netherlandish arts, and to do so from a number of perspectives, as discussed below.[4]

Rather than providing a laundry list of insightful texts (of which there are many), this essay focuses instead on trends in research that challenge the status quo and dares to suggest approaches for the future of studies about the role of seventeenth-century women in the creation and production of Netherlandish art. Specifically, this essay is concerned with the role of women as creators and producers of art as opposed to their roles as patrons and collectors, the latter two roles being addressed in Sarah Joan Moran's article in this special issue. If we are to write truly inclusive histories of art and integrate women's contributions with those of men, we must be willing to re-examine concepts such as collaboration and authorship within the context of workshop practices, and deploy the tools at our disposal, including technical analysis (as an example of object-based study) and digital humanities.

State of the Art

One of the most disconcerting recent developments in art history was the unveiling of the CODART canon, in 2019.[5] The result of a selection by an international network of curators and a public vote, the canon purports to provide an 'overpowering overview of the work of the Dutch and Flemish Old Masters'. The canon consists of one hundred works of painting, sculpture, and 'applied arts' dating between 1350-1750. It includes five works by women, all but one from the seventeenth century: Clara Peeters, Judith Leyster, Geertruydt Roghman, Rachel Ruysch, and Maria Sibylla Merian. Disappointing though it might have been, this result was not surprising: how could women 'equal or supplant men in the canon' when 'the canon was a male construction'?[6]

A threshold problem with attempting to make women artists fit into the canon is the designation of 'master', which traditionally required membership in a guild and the achievement of a status sufficient to lead a workshop. Early modern women, however, only infrequently had this opportunity: Judith Leyster and Rachel Ruysch both joined a guild (in Haarlem and The Hague, respectively), but this was not the norm. More often than not, women were confined to the category of amateurs, the subject of Elizabeth A. Honig's essay 'The Art of Being "Artistic"'. Being trained in artistic practice – drawing,

3 Key works include Van der Stighelen, *Anna Maria van Schurman*; Van der Stighelen (ed.), *Elck zijn waerom*; Kloek, Sengers, and Tobé, *Vrouwen en kunst*; Kloek, *1001 vrouwen*; Honig, 'The Art of Being "Artistic"'; Honig, 'Desire and Domestic Economy'; Hofrichter, *Judith Leyster*.

4 Noorman, Weststeijn, and Honig, 'Introduction', 7-21.

5 The CODART canon was released to the public as a website and as a book in 2021: CODART, *100 Masterpieces*.

6 Schleif, 'The Roles of Women in Challenging the Canon'.

embroidering, music – was part of a good humanist education for early modern women of well-to-do families. Because of their education, gender, and social status, however, the women were frequently relegated to the rank of amateurs, partly because they did not make art for profit (Katlijne Van der Stighelen's 'intentional amateur'), and partly because of the media in which they expressed themselves: embroidery, glass engraving, and paper-cutting, for example, were less worthy of attention, as they belonged to the so-called mechanical or applied arts; they also tended to be more fragile and are therefore less likely to survive.[7] This artistic hierarchy, which persisted through centuries, resulted not only in a division along class lines but, as Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock have argued compellingly, in a division along gender lines as well, where men dominated the fine arts while women presided over the 'lesser' arts, which were seen as less intellectually, technically, and creatively demanding.[8] The irony, as pointed out by Honig, is that whereas the innovations and creativity brought to bear by women in the applied arts ought to have been celebrated, most of these women fell into invisibility.

Responding to the false dichotomy between amateur artists and professional ones and to the hierarchy of media, a number of scholars have focused on women's artistic practices outside of oil painting and sculpture. This has been a productive avenue of research. Martha Moffitt Peacock, for example, has suggested that Joanna Koerten actively devised a strategy to elevate the art of paper-cutting, for which she was celebrated, as well as her own reputation. Peacock argued that Koerten did so purposefully by choosing subjects at the top of the hierarchy of the arts in the Netherlands at the time, such as portraits of heroes and rulers, as well as allegories. Koerten, the argument goes, mimicked the illusion, depth, perspective, and modelling of oil, sculpture, and painting through the use of her innovative paper cutting technique.[9] Martine van Elk has called attention to the glass engraving of Anna Roemers Visscher, Maria Tesselschade Roemers Visscher, and Anna Maria van Schurman, placing their artistic practice in the context of a rich craft tradition that includes embroidery and the devising of emblems in alba amicorum, while highlighting the significance of the artworks as objects of socio-cultural significance (particularly in the context of gift giving) and tools of self-representation.[10]

The scholarship of Lia Markey, Amy Reed Frederick, and Madeleine C. Viljoen has called into question the diminished artistic value accorded to 'reproductive prints', thereby placing the works of Magdalena de Passe, Geertruydt Roghman, and Katherina Prestel in a more favourable light than in the past.[11] Alison M. Kettering has highlighted the gendered characterisation made by early commentators of the use of watercolour and the medium's attendant low ranking in the hierarchy of the arts, and I have written about the scientific and aesthetic sophistication of the illustrations of natural history produced by Maria Sibylla Merian, Johanna Helena Herolt-Graff, and Alida Withoos (among others) with the use

7 Honig, 'The Art of Being "Artistic"'; Van der Stighelen, 'Amateur Artists'.
8 Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, esp. ch. 2.
9 Peacock, 'Paper as Power'.
10 Van Elk, 'Female Glass Engravers'.
11 Markey, 'The Female Printmaker'; Frederick, 'Reclaiming Reproductive Printmaking'; Viljoen, 'Multiple Challenges'.

of watercolours.[12] The series of short monographic essays contained in the volume *Gouden vrouwen van de 17de eeuw* showcases the breadth of artistic practices and involvement in the art market by seventeenth-century Dutch women, while the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Making Her Mark* features comprehensive essays about women's artistic practices in prints and watercolours, embroidery and textiles, ceramics and porcelain, and silver and gold metalworks – an unprecedented body of scholarship.[13] This long overdue recognition of the multifaceted creative practices of early modern women and of their talent and dedication to the creation and production of art is welcome.

Inasmuch as the dismantling of the hierarchy of art media (or, at the very least, a loosening of its grip) results in the recognition of artistic creativity and innovation and in the recovery of previously marginalised or ignored art makers, this type of research must continue. There are, however, two related and less desirable – albeit unintentional – potential consequences stemming from this work. The first is the risk of continuing to isolate women in categories of their own. Rather than being included in the broad lexicon of 'artists', many early modern women have joined the ranks of makers of alternative artforms, which artforms have thus become indistinguishable from feminine practices.

A second, related, risk is that this research fuels the impression that women were *like* great artists, rather than simply *being* great artists. Arguably, by highlighting how paper-cutting could mimic painting, by emphasising the similarities between embroidering and drawing, and by insisting on the technical skills necessary to illustrate nature in a scientifically accurate and aesthetically pleasing manner, we have repeatedly noted that the women were *not* painters or celebrated draughtspersons, but that they *possessed equivalent talents*, thereby cementing the fiction that the pursuit of fine arts by men is the benchmark against which women artists are to be measured. Indeed, I am unaware of an instance in which an easel painting by a man was put forward as being as technically accomplished as a paper-cutting, or of a drawing being so sophisticated as to make the viewer believe that it might be a complex work of embroidery.

In the call to write early modern women into art history, a promising avenue of scholarship has been to approach the artistic practices of women from gender-specific perspectives. Elizabeth Sutton has emphasised the need to rely on feminist theory, which has to be intersectional and interdisciplinary, as we 'deconstruct and reconstruct a foundation for inquiry'.[14] This plea was not necessarily new, but the need to 'think differently' about women has borne fruit over the past two decades. Frima Fox Hofrichter, for example, has examined Baroque women artists using childbirth as a point of reference. She found that we could learn much about a woman artist's oeuvre and career when examining them through the demands of pregnancy and motherhood.[15] In a similar vein, Katlijne Van der Stighelen has posited there is much to learn about how women could manage artistic practices by determining how the artist Anna Francisca De Bruyns, who specialised in painting

12 Kettering, 'Watercolor and Women'; Powell-Warren, 'Scientific and Natural Illustration'; Powell-Warren, *Gender and Self-Fashioning*.

13 Noorman (ed.), *Gouden vrouwen*; Banta, Greist, and Kutasz Christensen (eds.), *Making Her Mark*.

14 Sutton, 'Introduction', 14.

15 Hofrichter, 'An Intimate Look at Baroque Women Artists'.

and drawing, balanced her responsibilities as a mother, wife, and artist.[16] Nicole Elizabeth Cook, for her part, has considered how nighttime provided the artists Judith Leyster and Gesina ter Borch with rare moments of quietude that could be devoted to their creative endeavours.[17]

I believe that these approaches represent the best that art history currently offers. If we aim to learn about women artists and cultural producers, we must ask questions that target their experiences as women within a complex socio-economic, religious, political, and biological web of expectations and obligations. Although promising, however, these types of inquiries have been slow to produce paradigm shifts, as individual art historians painstakingly recover individual stories and contributions, supported by inadequate archival materials. Furthermore, a natural consequence of deeply researched microhistories is that we continue to be left with too few women, who by default become 'exceptional'.

Where and how can we locate the many 'ordinary women' who must have contributed to the creation and production of art in the Low Countries? If men contributed to the output of family workshops by mixing pigments, preparing canvasses, and painting backgrounds, why would there not have been wives, daughters, and sisters who did the same? Inasmuch as there are many male artists who were minor masters or mass producers of middling works for the market, why would there not have been women who did the same? At a minimum, it would seem that we need to be asking different research questions, and that we need to adapt the way in which we conduct our research accordingly. Corine Schleif knowingly wrote that 'nothing short of a universal earthquake will, therefore, move the mountains necessary to effect a complete paradigm shift, but perhaps we can begin by dislodging a few pebbles within the realms of our own purview'.[18] The following thoughts on the future of scholarship on early modern Netherlandish women in art production in the long seventeenth century will not produce an earthquake; together with the other proposals contained in this special issue, however, they may help weaken the hardened soil of patriarchal art historical constructs and methods sufficiently to precipitate the necessary tectonic shifts.

Asking Different Research Questions

Instead of only asking 'Why have there been no great women artists?', it might be fruitful if we returned to more basic questions: what was the nature of art production in the long seventeenth century in the Low Countries; how did it work – economically, socially, materially, and physically; and, importantly, *who* made it work?

Art creation in the long seventeenth century was a complex business. From bookkeeping (fig. 1) to preparing canvases and sitting as figure models, the need for so-called 'assisting labour' was immense, as the industrious studio depicted in Hans II Collaert's engraving of 1590 demonstrates (fig. 2).[19] The very high number of canvases emerging from the Rubens

16 Van der Stighelen, 'Anna Francisca de Bruyns'.
17 Cook, 'By Candlelight'.
18 Schleif, 'The Roles of Women in Challenging the Canon', 88-89.
19 I borrow the expression 'assisting labour' from Schmidt, 'The Profits of Unpaid Work'.

Fig. 1 Rembrandt van Rijn, Saskia at the Window with Books*, c. 1635-1638, pen and ink, 16,4 × 12,5 cm, Budapest, Szépművészeti Múzeum.*

workshop, for example, only did so because there were many more hands involved in the production of works attributed to him than even those of his known apprentices or 'official' collaborators. In 1615 alone, his works included (but were not limited to) *The Discovery of the Child Erichthonius* (218 × 317 cm), *Nymphs and Satyrs* (139,7 × 167 cm) and *Daniel in the Lion's Den* (224,2 × 330,5 cm). These works – preparing and stretching the canvases, laying the ground, preparing the underdrawings, and painting – would have required a small army of artists and assistants, especially given their monumental scale, and there could well have been women among them.

The existing literature on the contributions of women to the economy of the early modern Low Countries confirms the critical nature of women's participation to trade, commerce, and charitable and civic administration, among other areas.[20] Scholars have confirmed that women acted as art dealers and were active in the market, an involvement that the research project *The Female Impact* is further uncovering.[21] Similarly, the role of women in trade workshops has long been acknowledged and we are aware that there

20 Van der Heijden and Schmidt, 'Public Services'; Van den Heuvel, *Women and Entrepreneurship*.
21 *The Female Impact* is a NWO-funded VIDI project led by Judith Noorman: www.thefemaleimpact.org (Accessed on 22 February 2025). See also Noorman, 'Beeldende kunst m/v'.

Fig. 2 Hans Collaert II (after Johannes Stradanus), Invention of Oil Painting (Color Olivi), *1590, engraving, 27 × 20 cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.*

were women in tapestry and printing workshops, silver- and metalworks, and in textile ateliers.[22] Adam Kraft relied heavily on his wives for non-specialised labour.[23] Why should painting workshops have functioned differently? In his *vita* of the German-born court painter Johann Spilberg II, Arnold Houbraken wrote:

> He had a daughter named Adriana, born in Amsterdam on the 5th of December 1650. Seeing she was by nature inclined to art, he instructed her from her infancy in the arts of drawing and painting. She drew skilfully after life in pastels, or with crayon, and also elaborately in oil paints, and gained much fame thereby.[24]

There are no known surviving works by Adriana Spilberg, but Houbraken tells us that she relocated to Düsseldorf in 1681 and entered the service of the Elector Palatine. Spilberg married twice, and both of her husbands were painters. We know that she was talented and found favour with the elector, but little else. Such paucity of information is not

22 Croizat-Glazer, 'Unraveling the Threads'; Ogilvie, *A Bitter Living*; Schleif, 'The Many Wives of Adam Kraft'; Wiesner-Hanks, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany*; Wolfthal, 'Agnes van den Bossche'.
23 Schleif, 'The Many Wives of Adam Kraft'.
24 Houbraken, *Groote Schouburgh*, III, 45-46. See the English translation by Hendrik J. Horn and Rieke van Leeuwen, *Houbraken Translated*, https://houbraken-translated.rkdstudies.nl (Accessed on 22 February 2025).

Fig. 3 Johann Andreas Graff, Girl embroidering by candlelight in an interior (possibly Sara Marrel), *1658, chalk and ink, 18,7 × 29 cm, Frankfurt am Main, Städel Museum.*

unusual when researching early modern women. As recognised by Natalie Zemon Davis and recently argued by Nadine Akkerman, creative solutions to archival limitations and flexible interpretations are critical if one is to bring the stories of women to life.[25] In the case of Spilberg, it is reasonable to ask about and research the art production of her father and, later, that of her husbands, Wilhelm Breckvelt and Eglon van der Neer, and to hypothesise about her participation in the men's enterprises. This inquiry is consistent with our understanding of Spilberg's social circumstances and of the economic and practical considerations that animated art production at the time. It also accords with the physical reality of artists' studios: far from the isolated, inner sanctum accessible only to 'The Great Artist' that we may imagine, the studio was a busy liminal space – at once part of the business and of the family's living quarters. This is evident in a drawing of a young girl embroidering, made by Johann Andreas Graff (fig. 3). The empty easel behind the girl confirms her location: she has wandered into her father's studio (she is believed to be Sara, Jacob Marrel's daughter), where her activity has been recorded by her father's apprentice.

Furthermore, the hypothesis supporting Adriana Spilberg's involvement first with her father's and then with her husbands' art production aligns with the arguments that have been made concerning the significance of family and social networks in the lives of

25 Davis, *Fiction in the Archives*, 25; Akkerman, *Invisible Agents*, 23-26.

early modern women, arguments to which I will return below.[26] Logically, the presence of women should be noted in family workshops and in artistic networks; not only in the case of Spilberg, but also in those of the Van Veen, Van Thielen, Ykens, Withoos, Brueghel, and other, countless workshops. Exhibitions like *Brueghel. The Family Reunion*, held at Het Noordbrabants Museum in 2023-2024, open the door to such inquiries and invite creative scholarship.

I suggest that a second, related avenue of research should focus on collaboration and collectivity. As I have argued elsewhere, the notion of collaboration in early modern art as currently framed is insufficiently flexible to accommodate most women, regardless of their creativity or capacity for artistic innovation.[27] This is so whether collaboration is defined as requiring the input of two or more 'independent masters of equal talent and standing', or else two or more 'individuals contributing substantially to a work's conception and production, usually through dialogue and within a reasonably limited time period'.[28] For example, Maria Moninckx, Alida Withoos, and Johanna Helena Herolt, three artists involved in the illustration of the *Moninckx Atlas* (a nine-volume collection of illustrations of rare flowers and plants from the Amsterdam *hortus medicus* produced over a number of decades), do not easily meet the requirements necessary to their being credited as collaborators: we have no evidence of ongoing discussions and the women likely worked separately.[29] The archival evidence makes it clear, however, that the women illustrated a significant portion of the *Atlas* figs. 4 and 5), and the visual evidence shows that they engaged in intellectual and artistic exchanges both with each other and with Jan Moninckx, the manager of the project and the artist who contributed the greatest number of works to it.

Individuals in workshops, such as that operated by Maria Sibylla and her daughters Johanna Helena Herolt and Dorothea Maria Graff, relied on sheets of models, shared materials, and even copied each other's compositions.[30] Artists who shared networks, such as the women of the *Moninckx Atlas*, frequently did the same. A painting signed by Anna Maria Janssens (fig. 6), the wife of Jan Brueghel the Younger, displays features common in both the Francken and the Brueghel workshops.[31] As many as two or three individual hands may have contributed to the panel, although only Janssens signed it. Once again, it is unclear whether, based on the traditional definition, Janssens would be considered a collaborator in the family workshop, notwithstanding that she was clearly active in it.

Whether as a subset of collaboration or as part of a broader analytical framework that includes the sharing or exchange of resources, materials, subjects, knowledge, and

26 Kemp, Link, and Powell, 'Accounting for Early Modern Women in the Arts'; Powell-Warren, *Gender and Self Fashioning*; De Jeu, *'t Spoor der dichteressen*; Hunter and Hutton (eds.), *Women, Science, and Medicine*; Pal, *Republic of Women*; Reinders, *De mug en de kaars*; Sikkens-de Zwaan, 'Magdalena Poulle'.

27 Powell-Warren, 'Johanna Helena Herolt, Alida Withoos, and Artistic Exchanges'.

28 Honig, *Jan Brueghel*, 160; Newman, 'Introduction', 9.

29 I refer specifically to the portion of the *Moninckx Atlas* that was completed in the late seventeenth century. Dorothea Storm Kreps contributed a number of illustrations at a later time. I do not include her in this discussion.

30 Reitsma and Ulenberg, *Maria Sibylla Merian & Daughters*. I examine the workshop practices of Merian and her daughters at length in Powell-Warren, *Maria Sibylla Merian*.

31 Groeneveld-Baadj, '(Re)Framing a Family', 48-50.

Fig. 4 Alida Withoos, 'Aloe vulgaris', watercolour on vellum, in: Jan Moninckx, Alida Withoos, Barent Dionijs, Joan Huydecoper, Johannes Commelin, and Hortus Medicus Amstelodamensis, Moninckx Atlas*, Amsterdam ca. 1690-1698, II, plate 33, Amsterdam, Allard Pierson Museum.*

artistic techniques, which I refer to as 'practices of exchange', these women's contributions should be included in our discussions about and our understanding of artistic creativity and production. So, too, should the contributions of women about whom we know only that they provided their husband artist with 'much able assistance'.[32] Insofar as our objective is to include women in our framing of art history, we should endeavour to employ research and analytical frameworks that favour the inclusion of women, such as models that take into consideration women's participation in networks, a point also made by Elizabeth A. Honig.[33] To thus expand the concept of collaboration would not only facilitate recognising the work of women, but it would also be consistent with the historical understanding of art creation and production. As Anne T. Woollett has noted, 'this practice [of collaboration] was so common, and had so many different modes, that there was no middle-Dutch word for what today falls under the general umbrella of "collaboration".[34] Put another way, the limits placed on the recognition of collaboration are of our own making: early modern patrons and art dealers recognised the inherently collaborative and collective nature of art-making. By insisting on identifying and researching individual

32 This comment is made in respect of the wife of painter Isak Ducart, in Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh*, III, 85.

33 Honig, 'Additive Painting and the Social Self', 170.

34 Woollett, 'Two Celebrated Painters', 4.

Fig. 5 Maria Moninckx, 'Aloe Africana caulescens', watercolour on vellum, in: Jan Moninckx, Maria Moninckx, Maria, Alida Withoos, Barent Dionijs, François de Vroede, Joan Huydecoper, Gerbrand Pancras, and Hortus Medicus Amstelodamensis, Moninckx Atlas *Amsterdam c. 1694-1701, III, plate 6, Amsterdam, Allard Pierson Museum.*

genius and accomplishment, we sacrifice the contributions of generations of talented and hard-working colleagues who were essential to the creation and production of art in the long seventeenth-century in the Low Countries – including women.

Focusing our scholarly attention on the role of women in the workshop and onto the nature of collaboration and collectivity would allow us to include 'non-elite' or 'ordinary' (meaning those who were not wealthy, noble, or had achieved the status of master) women into the narratives of art history. It may even allow us to gain insight into the contributions of indigenous and enslaved people and of populations from colonised countries, such as the men and women who provided Maria Sibylla Merian with labour and knowledge in Suriname.[35] It is unsurprising that much of Western art history is concerned with the (mostly white) upper classes – those famous artists, wealthy patrons, rich commissions, and encyclopaedic collections about which records and from which objects are more likely to survive. As we know from the work of economic art historians, however, a significant proportion of the art production of the Low Countries in early modernity was for the merchant and middle classes, people who shared different backgrounds: copies and multiples were produced 'on spec' for the open market by workshops.[36] Recovering the contributions

35 Powell-Warren, *Maria Sibylla Merian*; Morrison, 'Whitewashing Nature'; Kinukawa, 'Science and Whiteness'.
36 Raux, *Lotteries*; Vlieghe, Vermeylen, and Lyna (eds.), *Art Auctions and Dealers*; Bellavitis (ed.), *Making Copies in European Art*; Jager, *The Mass Market for History Paintings*.

Fig. 6 Anna Maria Jans., Garland with Virgin and Music-Making Angel, *after 1607, oil on panel, 74,5 × 55,4 cm, Antwerp, The Phoebus Foundation.*

of women to this important cultural phenomenon would provide us with a more complete and better contextualised Netherlandish art history. As a necessary corollary, the better we become at ascertaining the participation of women at different levels in the creation and production of art, the farther we will move from the entrenched assumption that women in the arts were 'exceptional' or a rarity.

Any meaningful pursuit of this avenue of research arguably requires overcoming a critical conceptual hurdle concerning the authorship of a work of art. What is the value of the contributions of the many individuals whose labour enabled or facilitated the production of a work? Although the practice of connoisseurship no longer enjoys the prestige or dominance that it once did in art history, questions of attribution remain central to much research and scholarship. Attribution, in turn, is inextricably bound with the individualistic construct of the genius artist. Unless we challenge that conceptualisation, it will remain difficult to write inclusive histories of art, whether we are concerned with women or with

other historically marginalised individuals. In making this suggestion, I am conscious of the difficulty of challenging a concept into which so much of art history – and art historians – are invested. As Schleif astutely noted, in 'acknowledging that the artist was not the primary force behind the work of art, but, at best, one of several forces and, possibly, a tool in the hands of others – the art historian would have exposed his own presumed authority as only illusory'.[37]

Adapting How We Research: Interdisciplinarity, Technical Art History, and Digital Humanities

As willing and eager as we may be to ask different research questions, however, the answers to these questions will only produce meaningful change if we are also flexible in the methods we deploy. Tracing the contributions and stories of early modern women is an enormous task, one made even more intimidating given the often-limited archival sources at our disposal. Seventeenth-century women left few ego documents, and their names do not usually feature in guild or official city records. In the face of these obstacles, we can benefit greatly from looking at different types of records in greater quantities, and in examining and analysing them with all of the tools at our disposal.[38] I posit that three approaches are particularly promising in answering the types of questions set out in the first part of this essay: interdisciplinarity; reliance on technical tools as a form of object-based art history; and the use of digital humanities, particularly in conducting social network analysis.

Kirsten Derks's essay in this special issue demonstrates how technical art history, here specifically MA-XRF imaging, can provide invaluable insights into the working methods of artists, as well as lead us to a better understanding of their training and influences. It would be inappropriate, as a non-expert, to delve into the minutiae of technical art history. However, it seems that tools such as X-rays, MA-XRF, and infrared and ultraviolet imaging, among others, could be used to gain broader insights into workshop practices and the possible role of women within them – much as the object-based studies featured in *Making Her Mark* or Saskia Beranek's insightful look examination of a baluster in relation to Amalia of Solms and the global trade for Japanese lacquer.[39] For example, technical analysis could be used to understand how several individuals may have collaborated on individual works, or even how works by different artists may be related through the use and supply of materials, such as canvas cut from the same bolt of textile, or a particular type of oxide used in certain pigments.

Besides technical art history, we might benefit from more interdisciplinary approaches. Of course, the call to interdisciplinarity is not new; in fact, as a much used and abused buzzword, the term itself frequently appears devoid of meaning. As is amply evidenced simply by the necessary cross-references and topical overlaps between a number of the

37 Schleif, 'The Roles of Women in Challenging the Canon', 81-82.
38 Davis, *Fiction in the Archives*, 25; Akkerman, *Invisible Agents*, 23-26.
39 Beranek, 'A Baluster'.

essays in this special issue, however, engaging with colleagues from disciplines other than art history is critical. Economists and art historians have an established tradition of working together.[40] Because of their work, we now have a much better understanding of the demand and supply for art in the early modern period in the Low Countries, from guild economics to the serial production of copies, the secondary market, and the organisation of lotteries.[41] Literary historians and, increasingly, theatre historians, are working with art historians to challenge traditional assumptions about the nature of Netherlandish art.[42] Historians of science and art historians are collaborating to explore the relationships between the discovery of knowledge and its illustration, among other things.[43] These partnerships are essential in order to address the role of women in the creation and production of art in the long seventeenth century. There should be more of them.

Legal experts and labour historians can understand, research, and explain the legal position of women with respect to the signing of contracts and the ability to challenge wages or working conditions. Health historians can inform art historians with respect to the hygiene and medical limitations (whether real or imagined) experienced by the women who would have been in the workshop. Combining the knowledge and analytical frameworks of artists, philosophers and historians of knowledge, anthropologists, sociologists, and historians of pedagogy and education with those of art historians would permit the survey and the understanding of a greater range of archival and other material records than ever before, and thus lead us to a more complete and nuanced understanding of the experiences of early modern women, not only in the workshop, but also in the city and in the home.

Finally, the volume of data generated by interdisciplinary collaborations and in response to the broader range of questions raised in the first part of this essay would, in turn, benefit from the application of digital tools. The usefulness of digital tools in the construction of historical networks is well established and is the subject of ongoing discussion, for example in the Artl@s Lecture Series in Digital Art History.[44]

By allowing us to visualise links between individuals, sites of knowledge and/or production, objects, and other data points, networks have the ability of revealing the agency or centrality of actors who are not necessarily well-known, such as women.[45] Another benefit of social network analysis, carried out through the use of digital humanities, lies in the ability of large sets of data to reveal relationships, trends, and gaps that are not otherwise easily perceived. Meredith Cohen has specifically argued that 'digital visualization offers extraordinary ways of seeing that facilitate novel interpretations and directions in

40 Honig, Stewart, and Cui, 'Economic Histories of Netherlandish Art'.

41 Raux, *Lotteries*; Vlieghe, Vermeylen, and Lyna (eds.), *Art Auctions and Dealers*; Bellavitis (ed.), *Making Copies in European Art*; Jager, *The Mass Market for History Paintings*; De Marchi and Van Miegroet, 'Rules versus Play'; De Munck, 'Skills'.

42 See for example Bussels and Van Oostvelt, *The Sublime*.

43 Payne, *Vision and its Instruments*; Van de Roemer et al. (eds.), *Maria Sibylla Merian*.

44 Brown (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Digital Humanities and Art History*; Brosens et al., 'Maptap and Cornelia'.

45 Medici, 'Using Network Analysis to Understand Early Modern Women'.

the field', in no small part because digital tools allow researchers to represent objects, time, and space in new ways, and thereby 'illustrate the unknown, the invisible, the lost, and the lacunae'. These new representations of objects, time, and space can help us locate the stories and contributions of early modern women to the creation and production of art in the Low Countries.[46] Similarly, software development now allows art historians to create dynamic timelines to reflect the evolution in the relationships between two or more variables, which can prove immensely helpful in identifying shifts in art production, whether related to volume, genre, style, or media – and the addition of a spouse to a workshop.

This is not to say, however, that the digital humanities are a panacea. Stephanie Porras, Michelle Moravec, and Claire Bishop have each made compelling arguments in favour of exercising caution in our embrace of digital tools or against them altogether.[47] A major criticism is that the quality of the output cannot surpass the quality of the input. Insofar as data on early modern women is difficult to obtain or is of lesser quality (being more frequently indirect or mediated through the voice of dominant men), having more of it will not necessarily enable researchers to draw reliable conclusions. These criticisms are valid. It should go without saying, however, that digital humanities offer tools, and not answers in and of themselves. In the first place, the negative consequences of having too little data are answered by the interdisciplinary approach suggested above: the broader the range of documents consulted, the more data will be collected. For example, for the recent project *The Freedom of the Streets*, which was concerned with gender and mobility in the early modern city, researchers plumbed old atlases and city maps, as well as legal documents containing minutes from trials.[48] The project used digital tools to create models of the early modern city in order to better understand the movement of people through space. Combining these approaches with analytical frameworks drawn from sociology, anthropology, geography, and history allowed the researchers to reach conclusions regarding the movement of women that could not have otherwise been ascertained. Among other things, the research team found that the women of early modern Amsterdam frequently ventured away from the home and navigated the streets of the city, but that they nevertheless tended to spend more time at home than men; when they did go out, they usually remained closer to home than men did.[49]

In the second place, the impact of lower quality data can be overcome by careful examination at the time of input and prior to analysis, as demonstrated by the 'slow digital art history' approach advocated by Koenraad Brosens, Klara Alen, Astrid Slegten, and Fred Truyen in the context of Project Cornelia.[50] Finally, there is also a risk that when undertaking a large project seeking to identify women's participation, too few women will be identified to allow scholars to reach broad conclusions. This risk, however, can be

46 Cohen, 'Visualizing the Unknown in the Digital Era of Art History'.

47 Porras, 'Keeping Our Eyes Open'; Moravec, 'Network Analysis and Feminist Artists'; Bishop, 'Against Digital Art History'.

48 *The Freedom of the Streets* was an NWO-funded project based at the University of Amsterdam. See www.freedomofthestreets.org (Accessed on 22 February 2025).

49 Pierik, *Urban Life on the Move*; Pierik, 'Where Was Women's Work?'; Van den Heuvel (ed.), *Early Modern Streets*.

50 Brosens et al., 'Maptap and Cornelia'.

mitigated through reliance on statistical analysis and 'scholarly empathy', as described and advocated by Andrea Pearson and Saidiya Hartman (who used the expression 'critical fabulation').[51] In this context, scholarly empathy does not require the suspension of analytical rigour, but it does require the willingness to bridge the gap between points supported by documented evidence with general knowledge gleaned from the archives, material evidence, primary sources, and logic. Doing so will mitigate the risks that accompany the use of digital humanities, and will allow the contributions of women to be accounted for.

Conclusion

The arc of the state of our knowledge and understanding of early modern women in the arts demonstrates how much research has moved forward in the fifty years since Linda Nochlin asked 'Why have there been no great women artists?'. The 1999 exhibition *A Chacun sa Grâce/Elck zijn waerom* broke new ground for women artists of the Low Countries. Nevertheless, the movement to celebrate women artists was slow to take hold. The first contemporary exhibition of Michaelina Wautier's works (held in 2018 at the Museum aan de Stroom in Antwerp) was several years in the making, in large part because of a lack of interest on the part of institutions. In 2025 (seven years later – a reasonably short time in exhibition scheduling), Wautier will make her Austrian debut in a major exhibition at the Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna. More scholars are focusing on the role of women in early modern art history, and more projects are being funded.

This essay has suggested moving away from traditional monographic studies and author- or oeuvre-based studies: by undertaking research focused on contributors, networks, and collectives; by exploring the full potential of interdisciplinarity; and by making the most of the tools at our disposal. These, however, are only some of the avenues of research open to us. The next twenty-five years are promising for the future of research and have the potential to see significant, tectonic changes – provided that we continue to think of innovative approaches and dare to undertake risk-taking research as we look for the many women without whom art creation and production in seventeenth-century Netherlandish art would not have been possible.

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51 Pearson, 'Gender, Sexuality, and the Future of Agency Studies'; Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts'.

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