Portraits of the Artist as a Young Woman
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In late 1856, not long after her image as Boadicea appeared, Barbara Leigh Smith joined forces with several other women to establish the Society of Female Artists, and the organization held its first exhibition the following year. In 1860 the first female student was admitted to the Royal Academy School (albeit amid great controversy), and in 1876 Ellen Clayton published her two-volume compendium of English Female Artists, thus gesturing toward a collective history and identity for British women painters. Emily Osborn’s 1888 portrait of Leigh Smith for Girton College portrayed the college’s founder seated in front of an easel, paintbrush in hand, in a gesture that acknowledged the important links between feminism, education, and women artists in nineteenth-century England. In France, the Académie Julian opened joint classes for men and women in 1868, offering serious training for female artists first in the mixed atelier and later in separate but still rigorous studios. By 1890 Rodolphe Julian was running four ateliers for female painters in Paris, as art instruction for women became, in Gabriel Weisberg’s phrase, “both a business and a cause.” The Union of Women Painters and Sculptors was established in Paris in 1881, sponsoring the Salon des femmes and the Journal des femmes artistes while at the same time, Tamar Garb explains, serving a political as well as artistic function as “a major campaigning body for women artists.” It was not, however, until 1897 that women were finally admitted to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. By
then, photographs, etchings, and paintings of women in the atelier regularly appeared not only at the Salon or RA exhibits, but in newspapers, journals, and the popular press, carving a space for this once anomalous figure in the public imagination.

After 1860 in France as in Britain, women’s professional artistic training thus began to move from the margins to the forefront of the public’s consciousness as a political and social as well as an aesthetic issue. Professional women painters also entered new realms of fame and legitimacy in the second half of the nineteenth century. After winning a gold medal at the Salon of 1848, Rosa Bonheur gained international fame in 1853 for her painting of *The Horse Fair*, a monumental image purchased by the London art dealer Ernest Gambart for 40,000 francs. Gambart, in turn, displayed the painting in London (including a private showing for Queen Victoria), Glasgow, Liverpool, and Manchester, charging a shilling per visit and establishing Bonheur’s reputation, according to the popular press, as a “female Landseer” and “the greatest painter of rural scenes in France, perhaps in the world.” In 1857, *The Horse Fair* traveled to New York, where it was eventually bought by Cornelius Vanderbilt for $53,000 and donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. By the 1860s, Rosa Bonheur had become a “household name,” Gretchen van Slyke affirms, “in France, across the English Channel, and even across the Atlantic Ocean.” Van Slyke adds, “By the end of the century engravings of *The Horse Fair* were hanging on schoolroom walls throughout Great Britain and the United States” (xii) and Bonheur served as a “model and mentor” to women on both continents, from American girls playing with their Rosa Bonheur dolls (van Slyke xii) to her “soeurs de pinceau” (sisters of the brush) in France and England (Garb 1994, 3). Bonheur’s studio became a sought-after destination for men and women alike, prompting the Empress Eugénie to pay a visit in 1863; two years later the Empress named Bonheur the first female Chevalier of the Legion of Honor, as she insisted “genius has no sex.” Portraits of the artist at work appeared at the Salon in images by Edouard Dubufe (*Portrait de Rosa Bonheur*, 1857), George Achille-Fould (*Rosa Bonheur dans son Atelier*, 1893), and Anna Klumpke (*Portrait de Rosa Bonheur*, 1898) among others, and each depicts the female painter in terms that reflect her professionalism, success, and artistic authority; in Klumpke’s luminous image of the artist shortly before her death, the rosette of the Légion d’honneur hangs on her chest at the center of the composition, testimony to Bonheur’s achievement in a world once exclusively open to men. The only woman included in Nicaise de Keyser’s *Les Grands Artistes de l’école française du XIXe siècle* (1878), Bonheur was posthumously memorialized by Gaston Leroux-Veunevot in a life-sized statue, palette and brushes in hand, in 1910, in a concrete and symbolic representation of her status as the most renowned female artist of the nineteenth century.
Nor was Bonheur’s artistic acclaim an anomaly. Mary Cassatt, Berthe Morisot, and Eva Gonzalès achieved success in the 1870s not only in the traditional Salon, but perhaps more importantly as members of the avant-garde, exhibiting with the Impressionists at the Salons des Refusés and participating in the stylistic and ideological challenge to the artistic status quo that would ultimately signal the end of the Académie’s hegemony. Manet’s controversial painting of Eva Gonzalès at her easel (Portrait of Mlle E.G., 1870) portrayed his student at work on a still life of flowers that looks more like one of Manet’s canvases than her own; yet if the scene functions more as “a cipher for his own creative identity,” as Tamar Garb claims, than for Gonzalès’s artistic vision, the image is nonetheless notable in its serious depiction of a readily identifiable female artist in the studio, representing contemporary art in material and metaphoric ways. On the other side of the Channel, Antonia Losano has shown, the number of British women identifying themselves as painters doubled between 1851 and 1871 and continued to rise through the end of the century, while the second generation of Pre-Raphaelite women artists—Lucy Madox Brown, Emma Sandys, Marie Spartali, Julia Margaret Cameron—achieved a level of acceptance and visibility in the 1860s–1880s that Anna Mary Howitt and her cohort had been unable to attain. The figure of the female painter continued to appear in Victorian literature and served, Losano contends, to demonstrate the ways in which women might “mine the liberatory potential of art as a source of emotional, spiritual, or financial satisfaction and tap the potentially radical transformative power of the woman artist to make significant changes in social, cultural, and political arenas”.

Nineteenth-century female artistic identity, negotiated through paintings and novels as well as petitions, campaigns, and pamphlets, continued to be inextricably linked to the feminist cause in their shared battle for the right to work and the right to representation, in every sense of the word. But even as women artists (authors and painters equally) became associated through their labor with feminism—for the very act of writing or painting as a professional was in a sense a militant gesture—it was above all their art that played a formative role in transforming the cultural habitus (Rancière’s distribution of the sensible) in such a way as to enable French and British society to imagine, envision, and ultimately even understand or accept a professional female subject entering the field of cultural production and representing the world. Indeed, as Janet Wolff so cogently reminds us, “culture is central to gender formation. Art, literature, and film do not simply represent given gender identities, or reproduce already existing ideologies of femininity. Rather they participate in the very construction of those identities.”

The figure of the female painter remained a powerful image of artistic identity in the novel well into the twentieth century, and perhaps the most
famous of all—Virginia Woolf’s Lily Briscoe—gives voice to many of the same issues as her nineteenth-century predecessors, while at the same time embodying Woolf’s own Modernist concerns and new directions for the female artist. Woolf’s engagement with the sister arts was personal as well as theoretical: her sister Vanessa Bell, often considered a model for Lily, was a successful Modernist painter who illustrated some of Virginia’s works, while the Bloomsbury Group, to which they both belonged, included artists, authors, critics, and intellectuals in its ongoing discussions of aesthetics, politics, and philosophy. In *To the Lighthouse* (1927), appearing nearly seventy years after *Elle et lui*, the female artist remains politically charged, and the image of a woman representing her view of the world, indeed struggling to find and express “her vision,” was perhaps no less radical in 1927 than it was a century earlier. Woolf’s novel foregrounds many of the same questions of gender, art, and identity that Desbordes-Valmore, Howitt, Owenson, Arnaud, Brontë, and Sand wrestled with in their own works, while at the same time offering a critique of the patriarchal structures of society and of representation, much as her predecessors had done. An astute reader of nineteenth-century women’s fiction, Woolf maintained that “a woman writing thinks back through her mothers,” and Lily Briscoe emerges from a collective history of real and fictitious women painters and authors fighting for visibility, reflecting not only Virginia Woolf’s (and perhaps Vanessa Bell’s) aesthetic battles, but also those of generations of women before them. But if Lily is a central character in *To the Lighthouse*, the passage of time is a central theme, and by the end of the novel, as Lily finally finishes her painting, Woolf points to the possibility of new models of female art and identity, and the eventual shift from Mrs Ramsey’s domestic ideal to Lily’s independence as a female artist.

From the outset of *To the Lighthouse*, the tension between gender and artistic expression is articulated through the character of Charles Tansley, whose injunction “Women can’t paint, women can’t write” echoes throughout the narrative in Lily’s consciousness, reflecting the voice of the patriarchy while linking the two genres (painting and literature) as equally inaccessible to women. Although set in the years immediately preceding and following World War I, the values of the nineteenth-century remain dominant, and the subject of Lily’s painting, and by extension Woolf’s novel, is the reinterpretation of the image of Mrs Ramsey and her son James, “mother and child then—objects of universal veneration” (55–56) in both formal and thematic terms. If Lily hopes that they “might be reduced to a shadow without irreverence” (56), so too does Woolf shift her narrative to reflect the formal nature of perception and the stream of human consciousness; yet at the same time, Mrs Ramsey represents traditional subject matter and traditional roles for women, both of which are subverted by author and painter for a new vision/version of what art might be
and what women might be or do. Intimacy is here achieved not through love or physical contact, but in the very act of becoming visible to the other, and in keeping with Rancière’s formulations, when Lily allows William Bankes to examine her painting and “it had been seen” she feels “This man had shared with her something profoundly intimate” (57). For Lily Briscoe, as for Woolf, the importance lies less in the painting as physical artifact than in its manifestation of her personal vision, a way of seeing and representing the world that signals a break with earlier modes and mores.

For Lily, as for Desbordes-Valmore’s Ondine, Howitt’s Alice Law, Owenson’s Marguerite, and Arnaud’s Clémence, identity and meaning come from their artistic production and profession rather than marriage and maternity. Although Mrs Ramsey constantly urges Lily to marry, in the pivotal scene at the dinner table, in the midst of the small talk, domestic negotiations, and social tensions, Lily “remembered all of a sudden as if she had found a treasure, that she had her work. In a flash she saw her picture” (87) and “her spirits rose so high at the thought of painting tomorrow that she laughed out loud at what Mr Tansley was saying” (95). Placing a saltcellar on the table cloth to remind herself of her picture, Lily contemplates her inner landscape while Woolf presents her reader with a series of refracted still lifes and portraits, and both artists reflect the interpenetration of the interior and exterior worlds, giving new resonances to the psychological “truths” of these “feminine” genres. Indeed the domestic and quotidian world of summerhouses, dinner parties, boat trips, and children on the lawn is endowed with new value as Woolf, through Lily’s painting and her own narrative, locates meaning not in the object itself, but in the very act of representing perception and the accurate reflection of experience.

In the final section of the novel, following Mrs Ramsey’s death, Lily returns to the Isle of Skye with the Ramsays and tries to resume the painting she had begun ten years earlier. The canvas serves as a “barrier” to ward off Mr Ramsey’s “neediness,” and in the absence of the original subjects—Mrs Ramsey and James, mother and child—Lily returns to her vision, “that line there, that mass there” (153) resisting, even refuting, the chorus “Can’t paint, can’t write” that continues to echo in her mind. In a scene that establishes the formal and stylistic connections between author and painter, Woolf describes Lily’s act of painting, rather than the painting itself, in rhythmic, lyrical terms that mirror Woolf’s own prose, as each attempts to capture the inner process of perception, “making of the moment something permanent” (165). Woolf’s Lily Briscoe thus departs from earlier female painters in the novel in her commitment to an inner vision outside of the studio or society, and in her personal engagement with expression. In none of the previous novels examined here did the female author privilege the fictitious painter’s style and form in such a way as to draw inevitable parallels between her prose and the visual artist’s painting,
and here the political act of women’s artistic creation lies in her presentation of a woman’s vision. As Woolf would later contend in *Three Guineas*, although men and women may “see the same world,” they nonetheless “see it through different eyes.” For Lily Briscoe then, it is less a question of being “seen as an artist” (as it was, one could argue, for the artists in the earlier novels), but rather of finding a way to express her vision, even if it is only she who will see it. Her identity as an artist, denied by Tansley and Mrs Ramsay, ultimately comes not from society but from herself. The passage of time, rendered palpable in the novel, is reflected in Lily’s movement toward the successful translation of her vision as she recognizes that “nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint. Yet it would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be rolled up and flung under a sofa; yet even so, even of a picture like that, it was true” (182–83).

In the act of painting, Lily performs artistic identity, at once representing her vision of Mrs Ramsay and moving beyond the limitations imposed by her subject, finding freedom in the absence of her metaphoric mother. As she applies pigment to canvas she reflects: “And one would have to say to [Mrs Ramsay], It has all gone against your wishes. They’re happy like that; I’m happy like this. Life has changed completely. At that all her being, even her beauty, became for a moment, dusty and out of date” (178). Thus, Lily Briscoe embodies the next generation of women, moving beyond the seductive beauty of Mrs Ramsay’s maternal ideal, turning away from social mandates refusing their expression (“Can’t paint, can’t write”) that reflect the “dusty and out of date” values of a previous century, for new ways of being and seeing. Value and meaning for Woolf’s Lily Briscoe come from a painting no one may ever see that nonetheless represents her point of view, a woman’s consciousness. In the final lines of the novel, Woolf affirms Lily’s success as an artist:

[S]he turned to her canvas. There it was—her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought, it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? she asked herself, taking up the brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at the canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done, it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision. (211)

Tansley’s words remain vivid reminders of the continuing social and ideological barriers faced by women artists well into the twentieth century, and the fact that Lily’s painting would indeed more than likely end up in an attic or under a couch reminds us of the vast strides that remained to be achieved.
before women would hold a place of equality with men in the field of cultural production.\textsuperscript{12} Yet Woolf’s canonical Modernist novel centering on a female painter and her “vision” stands as testimony to the ongoing struggle for visibility undertaken by her nineteenth-century predecessors and the continuing resonance of these issues of gender, genre, representation, and female subjectivity in fiction and painting.

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In \textit{The Future of the Image}, Jacques Rancière affirms that “the images of art are, as such, dissemblances.”\textsuperscript{13} Whether visual or verbal, the artistic image reflects regimes of representation, giving form to what is sayable or visible; more radically, however, the image can also confer “a new visibility” and “educate a new gaze” (\textit{Future} 14), allowing the reader or viewer to see what had not previously been “seen.” The images of the female painter in the novels and paintings produced in Britain and France during the first half of the nineteenth century served to construct both an identity and even a cultural presence for a formerly invisible and inconceivable figure. From Marceline Desbordes-Valmore and Hortense Lescot to Anne Brontë and Margaret Gillies, the authors and painters in \textit{Portraits of the Artist as a Young Woman} offered up images that reflected art and gender identity not simply as they were, but as they might be, opening the door for future generations of women artists to continue the ongoing struggle for voice and visibility in the public sphere.