

Introduction

The earliest serious attempt to record the work of British women artists was made in 1859 with the publication of Mrs Ellet's volume, *Women Artists in All Ages and Countries* (London, Bentley). Until that point, references to women artists active in Britain had been few and far between. It was another seventeen years before Ellen C. Clayton's comprehensive two-volume work, *English Female Artists* (London, Tinsley), would contemplate in any great depth the contribution made by women to British art. It was particularly significant that Clayton not only recorded something of the lives and works of women who painted, but attempted to explain why women artists had been largely ignored in Britain prior to 1876, despite being active as far back as the sixteenth century. To Clayton, there had been a clear, gradual and consistent rise to prominence for women artists in Britain, though no one had thought to acknowledge it publicly or to record it previously.

Though Mrs Ellet's 1859 volume only hinted at the significance of a small number of British female painters, being a broader study of women artists from around the world, she and Clayton clearly came to the same conclusion over the general neglect of women painters. Both recognised that women artists had been wrongly overlooked for several centuries, that their contributions to art had been largely and unfairly dismissed, and that some of the earliest women active in Britain had, in fact, come from abroad. Early home-grown talent was more difficult for both writers to trace, faced with scarce documentation and the poor survival rate of works of art. It is highly probable that

women painted in Britain before the sixteenth century but evidence of their activities remains inordinately difficult to trace.

What neither Ellet nor Clayton could have visualised, however, was that just a few short years after the publication of their respective volumes, the numbers of professional, amateur and exhibiting women artists would swell considerably in Britain and abroad. The reasons for that change were many and complex. But better access to long-established schools of art (including the Royal Academy) and changing attitudes towards women through the efforts of the early feminists certainly played their part. Since Clayton, few attempts have been made to chart the continued rise of the British female artist, though European women have been the subject of a number of books and exhibitions in recent years. In 1905 Walter Shaw Sparrow's volume, *Women Painters of the World* (London, Hodder & Stoughton), made a well-intentioned attempt to introduce some of Britain's newer women painters to the general public, adding to the written history of women's contribution to art up to the early twentieth century. A number of those mentioned by Sparrow, including Helen Allingham, Rose Barton, Annie Swynnerton, Elizabeth Butler and Alice Fanner, are listed in this dictionary.

Since Sparrow's contribution more than a century ago, few attempts have been made to chart the overall progress made by women artists in Britain. This is despite the fact that exhibiting records indicate the peak years of women's ascent in British painting and sculpture to be those between 1880 and 1940, stretching some 35 years after the publication

date of Sparrow's volume. A small number of exhibitions staged over the last 50 or 60 years have paid homage to some of Britain's finest female painters, including 'Women Artists in Cornwall 1880–1940', held at Falmouth and Plymouth art galleries in 1996 and 1997. But an overall assessment of the achievements of British women artists is long overdue.

This dictionary, therefore, takes into account not only some of the very earliest women painters active in Britain, such as Lavinia Teerlinck and Susannah Hornebolt, but some of those who made significant progress subsequently. It was always the intention to offer here as wide a cross-section as possible of individuals active over four centuries in order to reveal the steady, general and consistent contribution made to British art by women. The majority, of course, were active during the last 150 years, because conditions for study improved somewhat after 1860. This dictionary does not, however, profess to be a complete record of every woman active in Britain since the 1500s. To list each and every British woman artist who has put paint to canvas would be almost impossible, so great would the final number be. Nor does this volume take into consideration those women currently still active, given that their careers are still evolving and are, effectively, incomplete. Rather, it offers just over 600 of the most accomplished – though not necessarily the best known – artists who have enjoyed remarkable and usually rewarding careers, and who have left sufficient evidence of their activities and achievements for researchers to examine.

One of the more interesting facts to arise while researching for this volume was that every woman listed in the following pages had a highly individual approach to her work. As the accompanying illustrations reveal, each artist produced distinct, unique and often highly

recognisable work which shows a fascinating diversity among a sector of society not normally encouraged in the field of art prior to the early 1900s. None of those listed chose to imitate her male contemporaries, as might be expected given that the majority of tutors were male. Nor is there any suggestion of repetition in their work, of reproducing a narrow core of ideas. But it is also the case that, collectively, British women artists developed a particularly strong personality in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, indicating that women were capable not only of working individually and with individuality but of collaborating in order to strengthen their voice and establish greater credibility. Not content merely to associate themselves with already established art groups and societies, women began to found their own organisations in order to make further progress and to create additional opportunities to exhibit work and, thereby, to draw greater public attention.

One of the most significant of those bodies was the Society of Women Artists. Founded in around 1855 and still holding major exhibitions into the late 1990s, the Society has provided women, and only women, with the opportunity to show their work on a regular basis.¹ With members from around the world, the Society was one of the first major statements by British (as well as international) women artists that they intended to be taken seriously and were committed to developing their own distinct voice. So, where appropriate, individual biographies offered in this dictionary give exhibiting details not only for the more traditional bodies, such as the Royal Academy and the Royal Society of British Artists,

1. Early papers belonging to the Society were destroyed during the Second World War, making the exact date of founding difficult to pinpoint. See Katy Deepwell's essay (*A History of the Society of Women Artists*) on the Society in Charles Baile de Laperriere (ed.), *The Society of Women Artists Exhibitors 1855–1996* (Wiltshire, Hilmarton Manor Press, 1996, pp. xvii–xxx).

but for the Society of Women Artists and other predominantly or exclusively female exhibiting societies such as the Manchester Society of Women Painters (founded in around 1880). Not all women have elected to exhibit with the Society of Women Artists or other such female groups; but many have, and have often taken on organisational roles or become members, secretaries, vice-presidents or even presidents. Before the existence of such societies and groups, many women never received the praise or adulation they deserved simply because they were female, and they often worked in quiet isolation, occasionally even in secret. Individual societies such as the Society of Women Artists are not listed or discussed separately, however. The aim of this dictionary is to concentrate on the individual women rather than on groups or collectives. All female-related art groups deserve more thorough discussion than can be carried out here.

Stringent efforts have been made to ensure that the information given in this volume is correct. Sometimes, conflicting evidence has arisen, and in some instances more detailed research needs to be done. Every one of the artists offered here deserves a more detailed and comprehensive study devoted solely to them. A proportion of the information for this dictionary has come from the works of Ellet, Clayton and Sparrow, particularly where the very earliest artists are concerned. It is an unfortunate fact that the further back one goes the more difficult it is to find much more than a fleeting reference here and there. Other works, including Clara Erskine Clement's *Women in the Fine Arts* (New York, The Riverside Press, 1904), have proved additionally valuable as sources of information, as have contemporary journals, which from the 1860s began to include the occasional article or reference relating to women artists. Other volumes consulted,

including listings of exhibitors at some of the more major galleries and institutions, are listed in the bibliography. Individual articles and other writings which refer to specific women are listed in the relevant biographies. An additionally important source of information has been the autobiography, though a meagre few have been written and published over the last few centuries.

Ultimately, there is no rational, reasonable or simple explanation as to why women artists active over the previous centuries have had to face exclusion from schools of art, exclusion from life classes where men were present and exclusion from drawing the naked form, exclusion from some national and international art competitions, and exclusion from written accounts of British arts history. To read many books written and researched over the last few hundred years, it would be ridiculously easy to conclude that women have never lifted a paintbrush. That, of course, would be a grave mistake. This dictionary could easily have included details of over 1000 women. But limited time and space has made it impossible.

In an ideal world there would be no need to offer a separate volume detailing the work of women only. But centuries of neglect has made this essential. The lack of paintings by women on permanent display in many of Britain's major galleries and museums only highlights the difficulties faced by women artists in winning recognition over the years. The whereabouts of many works are not known, and a thorough search should be conducted to ascertain the location of paintings and sculptures by women in both public and private collections. Attempts have been made to give examples of works by the women discussed in this volume, and to give some indication of collections known to possess works by them.

By putting together what evidence has survived, a very definite and clear picture has

emerged of the enormous contribution made by women to British art, individually and collectively. Some biographies given here contain only the barest information, perhaps census recordings and exhibiting dates, while others contain more detail. But even then this work has provided the opportunity to put forward women who, in the future, may become subjects of more detailed research so that they might become better known.

Change is afoot, and works by women are beginning to appear in exhibitions with greater frequency than in the past. This dictionary will, hopefully, dispel something of the myth that women artists have never achieved anything of note, never exhibited anything of note, and fit a particular stereotype. The artists in this dictionary happily show that women of all ages, whether self-taught or professionally tutored, whether members of an artistic family or an isolated phenomenon, whether rich or poor,

educated or uneducated, whether blessed with long lives and careers or destined to die young without fulfilling their potential, have all had something important to say through their work, something which is still relevant today. This dictionary is not an end in itself, a conclusion, a final word. It is a long overdue appraisal that strives to add to the work of Ellet, Clayton and Sparrow. Though written 149 years ago, the words of Mrs Ellet offer the simplest and still most appropriate summary to a book about women artists written by a woman:

Should the perusal of my book inspire with courage and resolution any woman who aspires to overcome difficulties in the achievement of honourable independence, or should it lead to a higher general respect for the powers of women and their destined position in the realm of Art, my object will be accomplished. (page v.)