The National Museum Of Women In The Arts: Twenty Years Later

Abby Allen Fetter

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The National Museum of Women in the Arts: Twenty Years Later

by

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the twenty-year history of the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington D.C. The museum was founded in the early 1980's by Wilhelmina Holladay and opened in a remodeled Masonic Temple in 1987. Controversy over the ideological, political and art historical implications of the museum ensued and continued for many years. Discussion of the founding history of the museum and the initial backlash against it raises questions about separatism, quality, and institutional ideology and provides insight into the museum's relationship to feminism and post-feminism.

This analysis evaluates the initial controversy in order to answer questions regarding the intent of the museum, its portrayal of women artists, and its role within the contemporary art world. A detailed examination of the permanent collection and exhibition history of the museum provides insight into the value judgements that the museum makes about art and artists. The inquiry concludes by illuminating the successes and failures of the National Museum of Women in the Arts after twenty years.
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Introduction

The first two years of the 21st century signify important anniversaries for the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington D.C. The year 2001 marked the twentieth anniversary of the Museum's founding as a nonprofit entity in 1981, while 2002 notes the fifteenth year that the NMWA has resided in its current structure.

The founding and subsequent public opening of the museum received wide media attention in numerous periodicals ranging from *New Art Examiner* to *Vogue*, from *ARTnews* to *Southern Accents*. Everyone, it seemed, had an opinion on the new museum. Controversy over the ideological, political, and art historical implications of the museum continued throughout the 1980's. Feminist art historians and women artists were the chief, but not the sole, critics of the museum. Male art critics such as Robert Hughes and Hilton Kramer were eager to dismiss the fledgling institution.

This analysis of the twenty-year history of the National Museum of Women in the Arts seeks to assess which, if any, of the initial criticisms were warranted and to explore if the museum has established itself as a viable cultural institution. Discussion of the founding history of the museum and the initial backlash against it raises questions about separatism, quality, and institutional ideology and provides insight into the museum's relationship to feminism and post-feminism. Exactly what does a National Museum of Women in the Arts mean - a national identity for women in the arts? How has the establishment of the museum affected the female role in art history, contemporary women artists and societal perceptions of 'women in the arts'? This inquiry attempts to answer these questions by examining the museum's permanent collection and
exhibition history and by comparing those findings with the standing of contemporary women artists within the larger scope of the art world. Finally, the examination of the inclusion and exclusion of particular women artists will illustrate the successes and failures of the National Museum of Women of the Arts during its twenty-year history.

The Founding of the National Museum of Women in the Arts

The National Museum of Women in the Arts was the brainchild and pet project of Wilhelmina (figure 1) and Wallace Holladay. The Holladay collection forms the core of the Museum's permanent collection. As the story goes, the art-collecting Holladays came across a wonderful still life by Clara Peeters in the Prado in Madrid. They were pleased to find her also represented in a museum in Holland. Mrs. Holladay, having been schooled in art history in Paris, wondered why she had never come across the talented artist before. Upon returning to the States, she consulted the standard college textbook on art history, H. W. Jansen's History of Art. Much to her surprise and chagrin, Mrs. Holladay found no mention of Clara Peeters or, for that matter, any woman artist in the text. Thus, a theme for collecting was born.

Throughout the years, the Holladays assembled a collection of art by women. The collection included works from four centuries by international artists in a variety of media, though paintings by American artists predominated. In the early 1980's they began to seek an institution to house their vast collection. Nancy Hanks, a friend of the couple and then president of the National Endowment for the Arts, convinced them to make their collection the basis for a new museum, rather than donating it to an existing
institution. Realizing their collection could be relegated to storage rooms in a large established museum, the Holladays set about creating a distinct museum focused on works of art made by women.

In 1981, the National Museum of Women in the Arts became an independent nonprofit corporation. While the Holladays sought a public space for their new museum, docents gave tours of their collection in their Georgetown home. Finally, a suitable building was found for the site of the new museum. After years of courting corporate donations for renovation and other expenses, the National Museum of Women in the Arts opened in its newly restored home on New York Avenue in Washington D.C. in the spring of 1987. The inaugural exhibition, curated by Eleanor Tufts, was "Women Artists: 1830-1930."

The Initial Controversy

Controversy surrounding the museum began as early as 1983 and became especially heated around the time of the inaugural exhibition.

The Building Itself

One aspect of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, the building itself, drew immediate fire from critics. The NMWA debuted in its new home in April 1987. The Renaissance Revival building (figure 2) is situated on a triangulated corner at New
York Avenue and 13th Street, two blocks from the White House. When the nation's capital was first mapped and parceled, the museum's triangular plot of land was situated among small farms and plantations. From the late 1700's the original owner, John Davidson, passed the land down through his family. The Masonic Temple Association purchased it in 1899 because they needed a Grand Lodge in the capital city. Waddy Butler Wood designed the original building in Classical Revival Style. Construction began in 1907 and finished two years later for a total cost of $344,000. The irony of a museum for women's art residing in a former Masonic Temple is two fold. Free Mason membership was strictly for men; women were forbidden in the Temple. Also, Carol Duncan compares art museums to temples. Both buildings serve a ritualistic function in society. (Duncan 1991, 91) Following the decline of Masonic membership and after World War II, a theater occupied the building. Developers would have torn down the building in the 1980's if it were not for historic preservation efforts and the museum's decision to purchase it. The NMWA purchased the building in 1983 for $4.8 million. A cast of changing designers oversaw an $8 million renovation and redecoration, the outcome of which was panned by numerous critics.

One criticism was that the exhibition galleries were too small. The original structure only included 20,000 square feet of exhibition space, an amount equivalent to one-third the size of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's new twentieth-century wing. Furthermore, no exhibition space is located on the ground floor. Changing loan exhibitions are shown in the crowded second floor galleries that line the edges of the building. (The grand first floor lobby extends upward one story thereby gutting the
second floor.) The permanent collection is displayed in the third floor galleries. The low gallery ceilings on both floors, however, limit the size of works that can be exhibited.

In contrast to the crowded gallery space on the second and third floors, the ground floor lobby is spacious and opulent (figure 3.) Critics interpreted this uneven allotment of space as a metaphor for the priorities of the museum—less emphasis on exhibiting art; more emphasis on pleasing corporate donors, making money and entertaining. The Lockheed-Martin Great Hall (now the Martin Marietta Hall) was so named after the largest corporate sponsor of the museum. The defense contractor contributed $1.5 million to the museum's renovation project. The Martin Marietta Hall is no more grandiose than the lobbies of other museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the East Wing of the National Gallery. The latter museums, however, have gallery space that is proportionate to their lobbies. At the NMWA, the lobby dwarfs the surrounding galleries in size and style. This distinction illuminates the ultimate function of the lobby as a moneymaking enterprise. The Hall can be rented out for parties during non-museum hours for nearly $10,000 (most of which is tax-deductible.) Prior to the opening of the NMWA Mrs. Holladay noted, "We will be the only museum in Washington with seating capacity for 500 and a catering kitchen on the premises." (Day, 114) (The catering kitchen was an integral part of the renovation and cost about $1 million.) This appropriation of space, emphasis, and money suggests that the primary purpose for this building is the entertainment of guests on a large scale and its usefulness for grand parties. The building "has been designed to resemble the setting for a debutantes' tea-dance—though its real purpose is to serve as a catering
establishment for corporate dinner parties - and you can see why the funds were so easily obtained." (Kramer, 3)

This statement by critic Hilton Kramer leads to the aspect of the museum that has prompted the most criticism - the interior décor. The décor is utterly unlike any other large art museum and echoes antiquated notions of refinement and decorum. Upon entering on the ground floor, visitors are confronted with a vast space of pink and beige marble. Two grand staircases made of marble and ornate wood panels connect the first floor lobby with the upper floors. Three enormous cut-crystal chandeliers are suspended from the second floor ceiling. The walls of the mezzanine are replete with palladium windows and brocade coverings. The galleries are less lavish and more typical of conventional exhibition spaces, but the overall appearance of the museum is one of elaborate excess.

One critic dubbed the style of the lobby "Early Nieman Marcus" (Loughery, 61) which is appropriate due to the museum's emphasis on consumption. The only room on the first floor separate from the lobby is the gift shop and upon ascending the staircase the first thing that the visitor sees is an open-air style café where ladies can lunch. Hilton Kramer called it "a building so appallingly retrograde and outmoded that it can't be regarded as anything but an indictment of the (female) mind that selected it for this purpose." (Kramer, 1) He goes on to say the décor is "a ghastly parody of the kind of genteel taste once associated with the feeblest aspects of feminine sensibility." (Kramer, 1) Because the building is so drastically different from any other large art museum, the space itself sets up the museum's status as different or 'other.' The pink
marble and crystal indicate that this is a museum for women and that this is what a museum for women should look like (read feminine.)

Separatism

The idea that separate is not equal was the most common complaint about the National Museum of Women in the Arts. "Many of the museum's critics believe that at a time when women are making unprecedented breakthroughs in all professional fields, a separate museum for women's art is inappropriate. Others think the museum represents a 'ghettoization' of women's art that will do more harm than good." (Day, 111)

Among the museum's most vocal critics were feminist art historians who had led the fight to highlight women's role in the making of art and culture. Norma Broude stated: "I have always felt uncomfortable with the concept of a separate museum for women's art. It seems to me to be a concept that trivializes the position of women as artists, reinforcing their artificial separateness and second-class status in a culture to which they have made central but unrecognized contributions. Conversely, how would we be reacting to the creation of a museum of men's art- a single one, as opposed to the many that we now have? Would our culture not view as demeaning the idea that a single museum could suffice to stand for and commemorate the creative accomplishments of men?" (Day, 115)
In fact, feminists have long been calling attention to the innate separateness in the term 'women's art.' The term 'art', though un-gendered, denotes art made by men; to even have to state 'women's art' shows a separation from 'true' (male) art. As Griselda Pollock explains in *Vision and Difference*, "this hidden sexual prerogative is secured by the assertion of a negative, and 'other', the feminine, as a necessary point of differentiation. The art made by women has to be mentioned then dismissed precisely in order to secure this hierarchy." (Pollock, 24) By proclaiming the need for a separate institution, the new museum was furthering this derogatory differentiation and accentuating art produced by women as 'other.' Art historians have also resisted the idea that art history is a progression of chronological movements. Art made by women has frequently been outside of such characterizations that typify the white Western male art historical canon. Female artists and feminist art historians have long contested being pigeon-holed into these classifications so "what serious artist wants gender to be the primary classification of her art?" (Hughes, 48-9)

Feminist art historians were not the only critics of the museum. Others who dealt with the mechanics of representing art produced by women also spoke out against the museum. Dealer Paula Cooper, "who handles important women artists in her New York gallery, feels that the idea is 'regressive and segregated.'" (Risatti, 27) Arts critics and professors also responded adversely to the segregated nature of the museum. John Russell, art critic for the New York Times, frankly criticized the museum and likened the separation of women's art to the segregation of blacks in buses. New York University professor Robert Rosenblum concurred that a separate museum was "a 'ghettoizing' of women artists. If I were a woman artist...I would prefer to be in the National Gallery."
Another critic asked, "Wouldn't a woman rather be in the MoMA or Hirshhorn collection than in 'a women's museum?'" (Hughes, 49) The answer is most likely yes as artists themselves seemed to not like the idea of a separate museum. Critic Robert Hughes said, "Lee Krasner did not want to be in a ghetto with 'women artists'- she wanted to be seriously compared, as she now is, with men like Jackson Pollock and Andre Masson." (Hughes, 49) Krasner's work is featured in many museums including the National Gallery and MoMA, as is the work of Cindy Sherman. Artist Sherman "also expressed skepticism, though she, like Susan Rothenburg, believes the Women's Museum has an important cultural function from a historical perspective." (Risatti, 27-8)

Wilhelmina Holladay addressed the issue of separation by saying "Our purpose is not separation; our purpose is to make women artists established and well known so that they will be accepted.” (Day, 115) Although separation was not the 'purpose' of the museum, it (separation) was the means by which the actual 'purpose' (recognition and acceptance) would be achieved.

Quality

Critics frequently debated the aesthetic quality of the more than 400 works of art in the Holladay collection. Aside from works by already recognized women artists including Lavinia Fontana, Georgia O'Keeffe and Suzanne Valadon, the collection was criticized as "showcased and glamorized' far beyond its merit." (Day, 115) Questions
regarding quality first emerged at the inaugural exhibition, "Women Artists: 1830-1930" at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. According to one art critic, the exhibition was an "excruciating experience for anyone seriously interested in American art and feminist goals." (Loughery, 62) Even visitors not interested in feminist goals were dismayed. Conservative critic Hilton Kramer gave the exhibition (and the entire museum) a scathing review. "It is as if every failure of mind and talent ever ascribed to female aspiration in art had been deliberately gathered in one place for the purpose of permanently discrediting arguments on its behalf." (Kramer, 1) Kramer also questioned the viability of the museum as an institution. "In the name of according the artistic achievements of women some sort of historical parity, this whole enterprise only succeeds in establishing a ghetto-like sanctuary for the kind of art that, with few exceptions, no first-rate museum would ever have an interest in showing. Which means that in the end we are given an institution that stigmatizes as inferior the very thing it claims to rescue from oblivion." (Kramer, 2)

Wilhelmina Holladay was quoted as saying "Seeing is believing. If people don't believe women can be great artists, we will simply show them. A picture is worth a thousands words, and this museum houses hundreds of them." (Pontello, 13) Unfortunately, the inaugural show proved that seeing, in fact, was not believing in the talents of many of the represented women artists. "The show lends fuel to those who have argued that women artists of merit haven't been ignored because they haven't existed in large numbers. A passive acceptance of what's in front of us just isn't possible. The reaction has to be: Is this really it? Are these the neglected greats? If this is a sampling of the best art by women within the dates mentioned, Mrs. Holladay's
whole endeavor is in trouble." (Loughery, 62) Robert Hughes put it bluntly: "Did any American couple ever assemble a worse collection than the Holladays? Perhaps, but none that got their own museum." (Hughes, 48) The Holladays, however, did get their 'own' museum; therefore, their political and artistic ideology became intertwined with that of the museum.

Institutional Ideology

A debate over professional standards at the NMWA ensued because few arts professionals were ever consulted on museum issues ranging from the renovation to curatorial duties. Because the museum had little in the way of professional staff at the time of its opening, Mrs. Holladay emerged as the central figure controlling all aspects of the museum. Her prominence resulted in questions regarding the ideology of the museum.

Feminist critiques of art, art history and art institutions frequently examine the ways in which prevailing ideologies construct social and cultural meaning. "Art has always been about politics and ideology...As Lucy Lippard observed in the catalogue for the "Art and Ideology" exhibition, "It is understood [or should be] by now that all art is ideological and all art is used politically...There is no neutral zone." (Risatti, 28) The National Museum of Women in the Arts, of course, is no exception— it is not a neutral zone. Because Mrs. Holladay was the key figure involved in the structure of the museum and her collection became the core of the museum's personal collection, her
personal politics became the museum's politics and her ideologies, both political and aesthetic, became interwoven with the those of the museum. Her ideology and outlook were, in fact, institutionalized. "Unlike private collections, all public institutions- and that is what the Women's Museum essentially is- have a responsibility to the public that cannot be superseded by a particular collector's taste." (Risatti, 28-9) In the case of the NMWA, the Holladays' viewpoint was inherited along with their art collection.

Mrs. Holladay's political stance as an anti-feminist conservative and her personal stature as wealthy Washingtonian socialite resonated in choices of works for her art collection that became the core of the museum. "Her conception that both art and life should be aesthetic (beautiful) is a version of Greenbergian formalism popular in the late 50's and 60's, a formalism still endorsed by neo-conservative Hilton Kramer, who also dislikes 'messy' art. This view of art, whether it be generated by the 60's mindset or personal position, is very consonant with the optimism that affluence encourages." (Risatti, 29.) The Holladays are an affluent couple. They are prominent figures in the upper echelons of Washington society. Wallace Holladay is the president, and his Wilhelmina is a director, of Holladay-Tyler Printing Corporation, the company that prints Connoisseur and Smithsonian magazines, the Metropolitan Museum of Art Quarterly and parts of National Geographic. The Holladays also own a successful real-estate investment company, the Holladay Corporation, for which Mrs. Holladay oversees interior design. The Holladays' wealth, social status and professions have translated into their limited view of art. Art should not be 'messy;' it should be beautiful, visually pleasing and glossy like the page of a magazine. Art should elevate and decorate and,
as evidenced in the décor of the museum, 'true' art should adhere to notions of refinement and decorum.

Mrs. Holladay's ideas about art and aesthetics came under fire from critics. "By stating that 'art museums are intended to focus on artistic creativity,' Holladay has inadvertently asserted that she knows what is art and what is not- that she will judge what is artistic creativity and what is not. This attitude is as repressive, as exclusionary, as the attitude that women belong in the kitchen." (Risatti, 29) Mrs. Holladay's ideas about what art is, and what art is not, reflected aspirations similar to the white, Western male canon that was greatly at odds with feminism.

Feminism Versus the NMWA

Feminists were the key critics of the ideological viewpoint of the museum and its founder, a woman who disavows feminism. "Billie Holladay makes a paradoxical patron for today's women artists: politically conservative, she opposes feminist activism. "I must stress that we are not a part of the feminist movement," she states firmly." (Day, 112) Many felt that the Museum was not an extension of the work begun by feminists in the early 1970's and the antithesis of the alternative art spaces of the era. "It has been at times very painful for me to see this profoundly conservative, anti-feminist, and money-driven venture profit from what we have all done with our art, our writing, our lecturing, and our teaching over the past 15 years to bring about a transformation of social attitudes towards women." (Withers, 5) Most critics took offense to the museum's anti-feminist stance. "They want to disavow any connection with the feminist
movement while simultaneously riding on its coattails, says Mary Garrard, professor of art history at American University in Washington and co-editor (with Norma Broude) of *Feminism and Art History*. (Day, 112)

Many feminists directly criticized Wilhelmina Holladay and her ideological intentions for the museum. Josephine Withers, in a paper presented at the Politics of Identity Panel in 1987, made the following comments about Mrs. Holladay: "At this point the projected museum primarily embodies the values of its founder, Wilhelmina Holladay, a Washington businesswoman and socialite. She models her museum on a corporate image of power and success, which explicitly means that she operates from a central position of stasis, or inertia. She supports the status quo, tends to dismiss feminism as sour grapes, and thereby rejects any suggestion that her museum be a critique of this value system that has systematically excluded women artists from museums." Withers, 5)

The anti-feminist image of the Museum was solidified by the choice of Barbara Bush to cut the ribbon at the opening ceremony. Bush, who was later quoted in *Women's Day* magazine in 1990 as saying "Women's Lib made me feel inadequate and useless," (Jones, 10) typified the kind of woman that was the target audience for the NMWA, a woman similar to Wilhelmina Holladay: a politically conservative, wealthy woman with a dismissive attitude toward feminism. Mrs. Holladay has personified the museum and its attitude. She "thinks of her museum as the Sandra Day O'Connor of the art world; she admires O'Connor's 'gentle, dignified' approach." (Day, 112)

In an article aptly titled "A New Center: The National Museum of Women in the Arts" Anne Higonnet perfectly summarizes the controversy surrounding the museum
and notes that it was "less about the museum itself than about the ideology that subtends it." (Higgonet, 10) She goes on to say: "The real issue was the economic and political institutionalization of feminism. As the cultural manifestation of that phenomenon, the NMWA unsettled both the right and the left of the American political spectrum. In the eyes of the right, the museum brought together what should never be mixed: politics and culture. From a leftist point of view, the NMWA did not mix politics and culture enough. Neither of these positions was new. What was new was a middle ground the museum represented, a position that denied any conflict between its gender convictions and its political beliefs, happily navigating the shoals of commodity marketing and corporate financing. For its constituents, at once moderately feminist and politically centrist, the institutional embodiment of their beliefs posed no dilemma. The very existence of the NMWA signaled their accession to mainstream political status. A cultural institution like a museum varnishes established authority to a high gloss." (Higonnet, 10-11)

Feminists represent the view of the left that feel that 'the NMWA did not mix politics and culture enough.' "Feminist art historians believe that it is essential when mounting a historical collection to explain the social context of a woman artist's work (how the society of her time regarded women artists; what compromises, if any she had to make to achieve recognition; how the fact of being a woman might be creatively reflected in her work), however confrontational the facts may be."(Day, 116) The NMWA does not seek to illuminate social context and decides to let the works speak for themselves.
Art critic Hilton Kramer represents the view of the right that feels that politics and culture should not be mixed. He states: "By making gender the central desideratum of this enterprise and consigning the question of achievement to an entirely secondary status, what the Holladays have established is less an art museum than a political lobby. Its principal goals lie not in the realm of aesthetics but in the realm of propaganda and persuasion." (Kramer, 2)

According to Mrs. Holladay, "the social context will be spelled out only if it is of 'historical significance.' Rather than 'highlighting past grievances,' she says she would like to 'accent the positive.'"(Day, 116) The positive is, of course, the works of art. That positive, however, can easily turn into a negative if the works of art in question are of questionable aesthetic quality by any standards. Placement within a social context, therefore, seems necessary. Mrs. Holladay goes on to differentiate her agenda from a feminist one: "'We are doing something else than the feminist art historians,' she says. 'We have not placed the emphasis on inequities but on achievements.'" (Day, 116) Ironically, clarifying the social context within which many women artists worked and explaining the obstacles that they encountered would further accentuate the achievements.

Further analysis of Higonnet's summation shows that the 'middle ground' of the museum and its 'moderately feminist and politically centrist constituents' fall under the umbrella of the term 'post-feminist.' 'Post-feminism' entered culture during the 1980's roughly at the same time as the National Museum of Women in the Arts. The prevailing conservative attitudes of the decade necessitated the term 'post-feminist' to subsume feminism with the assumption that feminism and its implications were dead. Loosely
defined, 'post-feminist' refers to women (actual or imagined) who have moved beyond feminism by embracing numerous aspects of the cultural systems that feminists once critiqued. (Jones, 10)

Deciphering the Title- A National Identity for Women in the Arts?

Scrutiny of each word in the title of the museum, 'National Museum of Women in the Arts,' provides insight into the museum's function and its inherent ideology.

The first word in the museum's title, "National" carries the prestige of affiliation with the United States government and is understandable due to the institution's location in Washington D.C. The use of "National" in the title brings inevitable comparison to the National Gallery of Art that is also located in Washington D.C. The National Gallery, however, is affiliated with the U.S. government through the Smithsonian Institution; the NMWA is not.

"National" seems to denote a quality that is uniquely American, though both the NMWA and the National Gallery house art by non-American artists. The collection in the NMWA consists primarily of work by American artists, but the museum frequently holds exhibitions centering on female artists from varying parts of the world. Examples include: "Three Generations of Greek Women Artists" (1989), "Views from Jade Terrace: Chinese Women Artists, 1300-1912" (1989) and "Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World" (1994) to name only three. [It is interesting to note the use of the word
'women' when describing the artists of the former two exhibitions. The gender
description seems repetitive and superfluous in light of the museum's title and scope.]

"National" is also used to invoke pride of country in the visitor. In Civilizing
Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums, Carol Duncan discusses how art museums become
symbols of a politically virtuous state. American art museums in particular use art to
identify its country's citizens as members of a cultural elite. (Duncan 1995, 34)

The word "Museum" has a myriad of meanings too numerous to detail. Above
all, museum connotes cultural authority. If art is contained in a museum, then it is
supposedly worthy of display and preservation and is, therefore, thought to be of high
quality and important to cultural heritage.

Even the preposition 'of' brings meaning to the title. "The choice of whether to
use 'of' or 'for' in a name contributes significantly to its meaning; whether it is perceived
as an institution containing only women's art ('of'), or an institution 'benevolently'
devoted to furthering women's artistic pursuits ('for')." (Hauser, 26)

'The National Museum of Women's Art' was the initial title of the museum, but
was changed in 1984 due to criticism. The former title serves to further substantiate the
'otherness' of women's status in art.

The use of 'Women' in the current title has different connotations than if the word
"Woman" had been used. Teresa de Laurentis contrasts the two terms in her book Alice
Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema. "For De Laurentis 'woman' is a totalizing,
"Fictional construct...dominant in Western cultures..." while 'women' means 'real
historical beings'" (Hauser, 23) Therefore, the title reveals that 'real historical beings'
created the art contained within the museum. "On the other hand the decision to name
the 1987 structure the National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA) was apparently an attempt to emphasize the idea that individual women make up this nation. " (Hauser, 25) Although use of 'Women' makes clear that individuals, 'real historical beings' are the source of the art, even having to assign gender in the title accentuates that 'Women' are traditionally denied cultural authority. Gender is conspicuously absent in the National Gallery of Art. By using the word 'Women' in the title, "they highlight women's otherness as different from the male 'norm' while simultaneously trying to move women's marginal situation toward centrality through historical and institutional validation." (Hauser, 26)

The choice of using 'the Arts' rather than 'Art' connotes the plurality of the museum in what they choose to display. The titles of most art museums contain 'Art' in its singular form and when the plural 'Arts' is used, they are always defined as 'Fine,' as in the case of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Feminist critiques of art institutions and art history challenge the hierarchy of media. Oil paintings dominate the top rung while art traditionally associated with women are given lower value and designated as 'craft.' The NMWA has proven this plurality of representation through some of its exhibitions: "Ayako Miyawaki: The Art of Japanese Applique (1991), "Stitches in Air: 5th International Lace Biennial (1992), and its annual "Book as Art" series. The museum also represents 'Arts' not typically associated with museum installations, such as the stage design of Julie Taymor (2000).

Scrutiny of the title shows the focus of the museum: of the women and by the women. The museum's sweeping and collective title also denotes that this museum represents all women who are in the arts. The title also suggests that within its walls it
contains the art or arts of all types of women and that this art expresses the numerous points of view of women throughout the entire nation. No point of view is left undiscovered or underrepresented. As evident in its permanent collection and exhibition history, the plurality extended to 'Arts' is not extended to 'Women.' "Founders of the NMWA...wished to represent specific women artists (evident in the use of 'women' rather than 'woman' in the name). This intention is subverted, however, due to the use of the word 'national,' suggesting representation of the nation's female population in a lone institution that both studiously avoids any controversial political or feminist issues and represents women from around the world." (Hauser, 25)

Through its title, the National Museum of Women in the Arts proclaims its authority on 'Women' and more specifically 'Women in the Arts.' The museum also seeks to establish a nation identity for women in the arts, but that identity is constricted by stereotyped femininity as evident is in its building, its aesthetic choices and political ideology. The museum narrowly defines what it means to be a woman, especially one in the arts.

The Permanent Collection

In the introduction to the 1987 book highlighting works from the museum's permanent collection, art historian Allessandra Comini defines the purpose of the collection. "The permanent collection...serves a revisionist- and coincidentally feminist-cause, ensuring that the whole story of art be broadened to include the "Anonymous
Was a Woman" arena of human endeavor. It presents not a footnote to the history of
art, but a supplement: not a ghetto, but an extension." (Rennolds, 11) The museum's
'broadening' of art history of which Comini writes has lead to an uneven permanent
collection. Artists that would have barely rated a mention or footnote in the history of art
have been included en masse and over-represented because they were women. Many
artists included in the permanent collection sharply contrast to artists who have been
excluded, artists whose works are firmly entrenched in the annals of art history.

Inclusions

As of January 21, 2001 the permanent collection of the National Museum of
Women in the Arts included 2675 works of art by 805 women artists including 14 listed
as 'unknown.' [Ironically, the collection also contains works by 11 men. These works
include a lithograph by the actor Robert DeNiro and a drawing by J.B. Yeats of Eulabee
Dix, an artist prominently featured in the collection.]

The permanent collection seems to have a disproportionate number of works by
a small number of artists. Of the 2675 objects in the permanent collection, seven
women top the list with a collective 745 works for a 27.85 percentage of the entire
collection (figure 4.) Grace Albee, a little-known 20th century printmaker, leads with 243
works. Louise Dahl-Wolfe, a fashion photographer, places second with 105 works. The
collection contains 103 watercolors and drawings by Eulabee Dix and 94 paintings and
etchings by Ellen Day Hale. Maria Sibylla Merian and Beatrice Stein tie for fifth place
with 72 works each. Hester Bateman, an 18th-century silversmith who worked in
collaboration with male members of her family, has the 6th largest number of works by a single artist with 56 objects. Only two of the seven artists, Louise Dahl-Wolfe and Maria Sybilla Merian, were famous during their lifetimes. Dahl-Wolfe was more famous in fashion circles than in artistic ones. She worked during a time when photography, especially fashion photography, was not considered an art form. The 17th-century German-Dutch painter Merian produced watercolors of flowers and insects that were reproduced by means of engraving and bound into albums that were widely known across Europe. The 72 works listed in the museum's collection are taken from the same bound volume of engravings "Dissertation in Insect Generations and Metamorphosis in Surinam" that was in the original Holladay collection. The other five women mentioned are not particularly well known, nor would they be if they had not been included in the permanent collection in the museum.

The most striking example is Ellen Day Hale. Her still lifes and portraits of genteel life in early 20th century New England had previously been dismissed as decorative until her works were featured in the inaugural show of the museum. In 1988 her paintings fetched four times the price on the auction block as they had in 1987. Hale is a prime example of what is termed the 'exhibition effect,' a phenomenon in which prices for works by an artist increase dramatically after a well-known museum includes the artist in a major exhibit. (Peers, C19) Perhaps not coincidentally, almost all of the 94 works by Hale were gifts of the Holladays. The increase in price and popularity of works by Hale could only benefit the Holladays by making their gifts to the museum more valuable monetarily and, therefore, seemingly more valuable to art history. Some artists who would have been relegated to 'footnotes' (if that) in the history
of women's art are now given 'supplemental' status. By dredging up women artists from the past and dubiously 'canonizing' them, the museum is creating a demand translating into more money for collectors and investors through higher auction prices and increased tax deductions for their donations to museums. The Holladays have found the ideal marketing tool- a museum- for their brand of art. As a result many inclusions in the permanent collection are debased from 'art' to 'commerce' and 'consumption.'

As compared to the top seven most represented artists (.87% of total artists represented in the collection, figure 5) who make up 27.85% of works in the collection with 745 objects, fifty of the most well known and established artists (6.2% of total artists) rate only 6.1% of works with 164 works. These fifty well known artists are mentioned in standard compilations of art by women, collected by non-gender specific museums, and would be included in survey courses in histories of women's art (figure 6.) The artists range from Angelica Kauffman to Camille Claudel, from Gabriele Münter to Louise Bourgeois. The list is by no means exhaustive and serves only as an example of certain inequities in the permanent collection. These fifty women (and others) make up the backbone of the history of women's art. They bind together centuries of artistic tradition through high-quality works and established reputations. These artists cannot be seen as mere 'supplements' to the history of art, yet they only rate a small portion of the museum's collection.
Exclusions

At least the fifty artists listed in figure 6 have found their way into the permanent collection. Numerous other artists of high stature and art historical significance are excluded entirely from the museum. Most of the exclusions are, not surprisingly, contemporary artists who work in a vein antithetical to the prevailing sentiments of the museum. The exclusion of certain artists leaves glaring gaps in the history of women's art.

The main exclusion in the museum's collection of artists of the past is the work of Artemisia Gentileschi. The 17th-century Italian painter is widely touted as the gold standard and poster child of overlooked female artists, so her exclusion is quite noticeable. However, in the museum's defense, her works (of which there are few) are highly regarded and collected by major American and European museums including the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Because the museum has only recently begun to purchase acquisitions from its endowment fund, it has relied heavily on donated works of art. Therefore, the museum has most likely not been in the position to purchase a painting by Gentileschi and the donation of a work seems unlikely. The future acquisition of a work by Gentileschi, however, would be in the museum's best interest to round out its collection.

Prominent contemporary artists excluded from the permanent collection include Susan Rothenburg, Bettye Saar, Faith Ringgold, Ana Mendiata, Barbara Krueger, Sherry Levine, and Cindy Sherman. Works by Rothenburg and Ringgold are relatively benign; their works were probably not excluded for political reasons, but Sherman,
Krueger, and Levine share an undercurrent in their work that may explain their exclusion. Photographic works and appropriated images by these artists may be viewed as 'too feminist' in nature. Although none of their works are offensive or graphic in style, the subject matter does pose questions about the status of women in society that the museum is generally hesitant to ask.

The exclusion of Cindy Sherman seems the most surprising and ridiculous since she is probably the most acclaimed living female artist. Sherman was one of two women (along with Louise Bourgeois who is included in the collection) to make the list in ARTnews of the Top 20 Most Influential Artists of the Twentieth Century. She has received numerous other accolades and no contemporary collection is complete without one of her photographs. The feminist themes in her work may explain her omission or the museum could use the excuse that she is already well established and does not need the exposure. The two most likely reasons for Sherman's exclusion are the museum's general apathy in exhibiting contemporary art and its general lack of photographic works in the permanent collection. Oil paintings comprise the majority of the collection, followed by prints and drawings. The museum's permanent collection assigns second class status to photography and mixed media works. Other than the 105 works by Louise Dahl-Wolfe, the collection contains only a handful of photographs. Dorothea Lange, whose indelible image of a migrant mother with her children, is not even included.

Upon the opening of the museum in 1987, the critic Robert Hughes wrote: "Now that any list of collectors' favorites in the current art world would have to include Nancy Graves, Agnes Martin, Louise Bourgeois, Susan Rothenburg, Elizabeth Murray,
Jennifer Bartlett, Cindy Sherman and Joan Snyder, it is fatuous to talk as though women in 1987 formed an oppressed aesthetic class." (Hughes, 48) In the light of Hughes' statement, it is ironic that these are the same artists who, while not oppressed in the larger art world, form an underclass at the NMWA. As previously stated, Rothenburg and Sherman are entirely excluded from the collection. The collection contains only 13 works total by the remaining 6 artists. This paltry sum must again be the result of the museum's lack of interest or foresight when it comes to contemporary art.

Furthermore, some artists who are included in the NMWA are not represented adequately by the works that the museum holds in its collection. Works by many well-known artists are not prime examples from their oeuvres; it is as if the museum had quotas of certain artists that they wanted to make sure to represent in their collection. This fact was not lost on critics after first viewing the permanent collection. Robert Hughes commented that the collection "is short of major works by women whose historical significance has been admitted for decades." (Hughes, 48) Hilton Kramer remarked that the museum "put together a collection that consists of historical curiosities interlarded with mostly second-rate examples of the works of artists already widely-known." (Kramer, 2) Georgia O'Keeffe is an example of such an artist. The museum only owns one of her works, a charcoal drawing from 1923. Although a fine drawing, the work is hardly representative of her best work.

The question of quality again arises from some works in the permanent collection. Feminist art historians have generally disputed the notion of 'quality.' For years it was seen as a device for exclusion of women artists from the mainstream art
world. Because the museum solely accepts works on the basis of gender, they do seem to have lower standards of quality than other major museums. Therefore, some of the works in the NMWA do strike the viewer as mediocre, which can hardly be advantageous to the cause of women's art.

Exhibition History

Between the opening of the NMWA in April 1987 and November 1999, the museum has held 141 changing exhibitions that included artists of numerous nationalities working in media ranging from painting to textiles to book illustrations. Analysis of the museum's exhibition history provides insight into the numerous functions of the NMWA and shows that the museum has been more inclusive in its exhibitions that in its permanent collection.

Inclusions

The first 141 changing exhibitions at the NMWA displayed a wide variety of artists, subject matter, and media. Many of the exhibitions fall into sub-categories typical of the art presented at the NMWA. Eleven of the 141 exhibitions were an annual "Book as Art' display held in the library of the museum. Another eleven consisted of states' exhibitions. Six of the exhibitions are classified as one woman retrospectives whose subjects included: Louise Dahl-Wolfe (1987), Margaret Bourke-White (1989),
Joan Personette (1990-1); Setsuto Migishi (1991), Audrey Flack (1992) and Sarah Charlesworth (1998). {The museum also held a retrospective of works by Romaine Brooks in 2000.} Understandably, all of the top seven women in the permanent collection have been featured in large-scale exhibitions at the museum.

The NMWA has also presented numerous exhibitions that help to flesh out the history of women's art. Many of these exhibitions would not get gallery time in other museums. The museum presented one woman shows by lesser-known artists [i.e. Beatrice Whitney Van Ness (1987), Lilla Cabot Perry (1990-1)] who did not receive them in their lifetimes and probably would never have at any other venue. The exhibition history includes such varied topics as "Chalchihuitls: Pre-Columbian Jade and Other Precious Stones" (1987), "Isadora Duncan and Her Inner Circle" (1993) and "The Soul of Ellis Island" (1990-1). The record includes exhibitions which brought previously devalued media to the forefront: "Stitches in Air: 5th International Lace Biennial" (1992), "Ayako Miyawaki: The Art of Japanese Applique" (1991), and "The First Generation: Women and Video, 1970-75" (1993-4). Alternate viewpoints are also represented: "Incarcerated Women from the Inside Out" (1998) and "Through Sisters' Eyes: Children's Books Illustrated by African American Women Artists" (1991-2). Although the exhibition history does contain some stereotypically feminine titles such as "Scents of Time: Reflections of Fragrance and Society" (1987), the record consists of numerous exhibitions that have enhanced the history of women's art.

The choice to exhibit two artists, Carrie Mae Weems (1993) and Mary Ellen Mark (1998), contrasts sharply with the museum's conservative stance with regard to contemporary art. Works by both artists could be deemed 'controversial' or
'inappropriate' by the museum because they stray from the decorative norm of the museum in subject matter and media. Photographic and mixed media works by Weems deal explicitly with issues of racial, ethnic, and gender identity. Mark has photographed overlooked peoples including women in mental institutions and street kids for over thirty years. Both artists deal with sensitive contemporary issues and depict real-life people and many of their works are difficult to view, so the museum is admirable for including them. Exhibitions such as these, however, are long overdue and too few. Every five years does not constitute a trend.

One artist, Claude Cahun, whose inclusion in an exhibition at the NMWA ["Women Photographers in Camera Work"(1992)] is worth mentioning due to the irony of the inclusion. Cahun, a Surrealist photographer known for gender-bending self-portraits, dressed and presented herself as a man in both her life and art. She would hardly approve of being included in an exhibition held at a museum for 'women in the arts. Even the more 'feminine' artist, Cecilia Beaux, would have scoffed at being included in a museum for women. She objected to the term "Woman in Art" and hoped for a day when the term would sound as strange as the term "Men in Art." Both Cahun and Beaux, however, are long dead and can have no say as to whether they are included in the museum or not.

While many of the exhibitions supplement the history of women's art, some exhibitions serve an entirely different function. Over the years, the museum has presented large exhibitions of works by international artists such as "Ten Contemporary Korean Artists (1991)," "Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World (1994) and "Latin American Women Artists: 1915-1995" (1996). Although these exhibitions could fall
under the rubric of multiculturalism, it seems very unlikely. The plausible reasons for the international exhibits are most likely political and diplomatic in nature. The NMWA has a unique niche in the museum scene in Washington D.C. Unlike many of the museums in the nation's capital, the NMWA is not part of the federal system as are the museums of the Smithsonian. Therefore, the NMWA could be perceived (incorrectly, of course) as being politically neutral.

Through the years, however, the museum has attracted numerous dignitaries and political heavyweights. Former first lady Nancy Reagan oversaw at least three charitable events held for the museum in the late 1980's. Not only did Barbara Bush cut the ribbon at the opening ceremony of the museum, she and her husband, former president George Bush, were honorary chairpersons of the "Texas Women" exhibition in 1988. The Clintons frequently appeared at openings for the museum throughout the 1990's. Attention by such political luminaries is not surprising considering the prominence of the Holladays in Washington. The Holladays are large fund-raisers for the Republican Party and Wilhelmina Holladay once served as the Washington social secretary for Madame Chiang Kai-shek. The museum's founder, therefore, is fully aware of the political machinations in Washington and does not hesitate to use her museum for diplomatic purposes. For example, Queen Margrethe II of Denmark made her first official state visit to the United States in 1991. The queen, also an artist, had some of her watercolors on display at the NMWA. Her visit also coincided with the exhibition "Ten Danish Women in the Arts (1991)." Although the use of museum exhibitions for political and diplomatic reasons is far from reprehensible, such use is further proof that art is not the only interest of the museum.
Another example of the museum’s close ties to Washington government is that three works from the permanent collection of the museum, two botanical prints by Maria Sybilla Merian and a Madonna and Child by Elisabetta Sirani, made their way onto U.S. postage stamps. Although it is common practice for works of art to adorn stamps, the depicted works generally come from federally sponsored museums such as the National Gallery. The stamps further accentuate the political finesse of the museum.

Exclusions

The central criticisms of the permanent collection extend to the exhibition history: too few exhibitions by contemporary artists, feminist artists, and artists that tackle controversial issues. The exhibition history, however, has a more inclusive record than the permanent collection—the museum could display a variety of works through loan exhibitions than by purchasing the works outright for the permanent collection. The exhibitions by Carrie Mae Weems and Mary Ellen Mark are examples of this phenomenon. Although the museum presented large-scale exhibitions of both artists' works, they do not hold works by either artist in the permanent collection.

Successes and Failures

Twenty years after the museum’s foundation’s the benefit of hindsight aids in addressing the concerns of the past. One question asked in a 1986 issue of ARTnews
was: "Will Washington's new museum focus long overdue attention on women artists of the past and present or will it segregate them in a female ghetto?" (Day, 111) This question addresses three issues related to the museum: women artists of the past, women's art of the present and the idea of a 'female ghetto.' Two issues can be considered successes; one is a failure. The museum has been triumphant in championing women artists of the past, yet has fallen short when dealing with contemporary women artists. The NMWA is no 'female ghetto.' The term 'ghetto' denotes something that is in disrepair and not flourishing; that is definitely not the state of the NMWA today.

Successes

The greatest achievement of the NMWA is that the museum has firmly established itself as a viable cultural institution. The director of the Milwaukee Art Museum, Russell Bowman, stated, "Today the institution is seen as a successful, strong museum on the national level." (Kennelly, D5) In terms of the nuts and bolts that make up the operating structure of a museum- a healthy income, a growing endowment, a capable staff and a large membership population- the NMWA is a fabulous success. "As American Association of Museums President Edward Able confirms, the women's museum has been unusually effective in meeting the greatest challenge to art institutions: financial security." (Kennelly D5) The Martin Marietta Hall, which seemed so ostentatious in the beginning, has been a large source of income for the museum- it is rented out nearly every night. The museum's original fledgling endowment has
grown, as has its staff. Wilhelmina Holladay remains the Board Chair, but she has relinquished control to the staff of the museum. The original staff of two has grown to almost forty staff members in sixteen departments. The museum announced the appointment of its fifth director, Judy L. Larson, on July 23, 2002. Larson, an American art scholar, replaces Ellen Reeder who resigned in October 2001 after only three months at the helm. Two staff members have had remarkably long tenures at the museum. The current head librarian Krystyna Wasserman started to work for the museum in 1982, first as a library consultant and then as a part-time librarian. She has been an integral part in the museum’s highly successful library and resource center and its continuing Book as Art series. Susan Fisher Sterling, the chief curator since 1990, was recently promoted to deputy director of art and programs. The driving force behind the Weems exhibition, she is responsible for widening the scope of the museum and its collection.

A large source of income for the museum comes from its legion of loyal members. As Mrs. Holladay noted, "We are one of the largest museums in the world when measured by membership." (Whitcomb, 97) The museum has over 90,000 members, most of whom pay a minimum of $25 for their one year membership. Apparently numerous people answered when the museum urged them to "help make art history:" the slogan for their membership drive. One early criticism has instead evolved into a benefit. "In the corporate bureaucracies where decisions about funding for the arts are made, there is nothing more appealing than the promise of a project guaranteed to enjoy a wide constituency while at the same time raising no difficult artistic issues." (Kramer, 3) Both corporate and governmental entities have taken note
of the museum's large audience and 'wide constituency' and have made funds available to them.

The museum is so adept at raising money that it has been able to correct some of its original shortcomings: it added the Elizabeth A. Kasser wing in 1997. The new wing provides an additional 5300 square feet of much-needed exhibition space in the form of two new galleries. One gallery will show works of art by women who did not have a museum show during their lifetime. A new sculpture gallery with a 24-foot ceiling located on the third floor will allow the NMWA to display its three-dimensional art and large-scale pieces.

Without a doubt the NMWA has succeeded in focusing attention on women artists of the past and securing a place for them in art history. As Mrs. Holladay said of one of her goals for the museum: "We set out to show the artistic contributions of women by tracking down great artists from the Renaissance to the present who had been forgotten or ignored. We discovered women in every era whose work was as respected in their time as, say, Georgia O'Keeffe is now. But they were left out of the histories and it only takes a couple of generations to be forgotten." (Pontello, 13) Although the extent to which some artists' works are respected may be overstated, the museum has achieved its goal of unearthing the works and histories of forgotten artists. The NMWA has preserved important pieces from the history of women's art.

The great success of the museum in terms of response, recognition and cultural viability mirror the greater successes that women have achieved over the past two decades. As Carol Duncan writes about the relationship between museums and a nation's well being: "The West, then has long known that public art museums are
important, even necessary, fixtures of a well-furnished state." (Duncan 1991, 88)

Although she is referring to 'state' here as a government of national entity, the reference can be expanded to include a societal 'state' as well. Therefore, the NMWA could represent the state of greater equality for women in society. When the museum opened in the 1980's, the female population held "a marginal status, that women are in the process of transforming into a politically powerful base." (Hauser, 26) The museum appears to be representative of and instrumental in this transformation.

The NMWA and Wilhelmina Holladay have accomplished something that the feminist movement of the 1970's could not- having previously ignored women artists brought into the mainstream, including into Janson's text. In 1986 the president of Harry N. Abrams invited Mrs. Holladay to celebrate the inclusion of multiple women artists for the first time in H.W. Janson's History of Art. (Mary Cassatt had been included in the sixteenth edition that came out in 1985.) Of course, books such as Janson's are not based on absolute truths about what constitutes art or art history; they are cultural constructions based on value judgements. However, the inclusion of women artists in the survey text is a definite benchmark in the history of women's art.

Although the corporate culture means are antithetical to feminist values, the ends, in the case of the NMWA, do justify the means. It also seems that feminism has made its peace with the museum. Feminist art historians are frequently speakers and guest curators at the museum. Even Mary D. Garrard, a feminist art historian at American University in Washington who was so outspoken against the museum in the beginning, has recognized the positive influence of the museum. She frequently speaks at the museum, has consulted on the museum's Romaine Brooks retrospective, and is
often pictured at events in the museum bulletin. The museum provides an important forum for feminist art historical scholarship and exhibitions that might be overlooked elsewhere.

Also, at this point in the history of feminism, Wilhelmina Holladay is considered a feminist. American feminist history is now outlined in 'waves.' The first wave included the suffrage movement and the second wave occurred with the Women's Movement of the 1970's. The third wave of feminism encompasses the current time in history and the definition of feminist has been broadened "to include any woman who believes that inequality between women and men exists, that it affects their lives, and that action is needed to balance the scales." (Buszek, 38) By this definition Mrs. Holladay is certainly a feminist. She believed that inequality between women and men exists- she saw more art by men in museums than art by women. This inequality affected her life- she could not find scholarly information on a painting by Clara Peeters in her collection. She took action to 'balance the scales'- she founded a successful museum that has greatly increased awareness of art by women.

Luckily, Hilton Kramer's vision of the museum's future did not come true. At the time of its opening he said: "My own prediction, for what it is worth, is that the National Museum of Women in the Arts will become, like the building that houses it, a white elephant among Washington's art museums. No doubt it will attract some of the feminist faithful- for a while. But in the long run no one with a serious interest in art, not even the feminist faithful, will want to waste any time on its meager offerings- not so much else of real aesthetic interest, and for that matter, of real political interest, to look at in Washington." (Kramer, 3)
Failures

Although the National Museum of Women in the Arts has flourished over the past two decades and achieved overall success, the museum has failed in the area of contemporary art. This failure has been noticeable since the inaugural exhibition. "Rather than opening the museum with a selective survey of strong contemporary work (which more than holds its own with the work of men who are touted today)" (Loughery, 62) the museum chose to exhibits marginal works from an era when women were less prolific: 1830-1930. The inaugural exhibition, most of the following exhibitions and nearly all of the permanent collection is "much more focussed on the past than on the present." (Kramer, 2) The museum has attained success in highlighting past achievements, but the tendency to over-emphasize the past has left a major gap in its ability or willingness to display contemporary art.

The museum's over-emphasis on women artists that are no longer living is disappointing because of the positive impact that it could have on living artists. In the U.S. today, over half of all students in art school and more than half of all practicing artists are women. Surely these artists could benefit financially from exposure at the museum. Instead, roughly 70% of the artists who have works in the permanent collection are dead; collectors and investors are the beneficiaries of their revived reputations.

Much contemporary art does not adhere to the museum's aesthetic of beauty, elevation and decoration and, therefore, art from the present is conspicuously absent.
"However much one dislikes the idea, the world is a far more complicated place today—economically, socially, politically, and therefore artistically—than in the recent past." (Risatti, 29) Most art that deals with these new economic, social, political and artistic issues is still not welcome at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. From the beginning the museum announced policy of not displaying works of art that might be judged 'too controversial'. Artists frequently deal with controversial issues in contemporary art and the museum is stubborn about not including them. "While clearly adept at fundraising and organizing, she [Mrs. Holladay] does not seem very adept at entertaining opposing views, which began as early as 1963...Thus what are strengths-purpose, direction, self-assuredness—can turn into weaknesses." (Risatti, 28) Mrs. Holladay's personal inability to entertain opposing views and her policy of imposing her aesthetic standards on what the museum exhibits is still a major weakness for the museum. The entire museum is based on the notion that museums have unfairly excluded women, so how can the museum itself exclude controversial women artists? Is the museum not helping to re-write a history that is limited by its own ideology and definition of art? By excluding artists integral to the history of women's art they are just as bad, if not worse, than the (male) art historians who wrote women artists out of art history in the first place.

Instead of displaying contemporary works by feminists or already established female artists, the museum turns to another source for its 'contemporary art.' "It is through the states' selection committees that we will be able to give contemporary artists a chance," says Mrs. Holladay. Women artists from each state may be selected for their state's exhibition here." (Day, 113) One state is chosen each
year for an exhibition at the museum. Committees from each state select works by women artists who are residents of that state. "Organizers want very much for the museum to be a truly national museum and the state committees are an important mechanism for generating local support and continued interest in the museum." (Jevnikar, 20) While this project is a novel idea that the museum should not discontinue, the states' exhibitions are really an evasive action against having to show contemporary art by professional artists. Mrs. Holladay explained the state exhibitions as part of "the museum's goal...to reach into the grass roots and in a meaningful way give every woman a chance- or at least encouragement." (Whitcomb, 97) Again, the project is a novel idea bordering on charitable, but it does not seem to be the most efficient way to ensure that the museum exhibits museum-quality work.

Although the National Museum of Women in the Arts has accomplished many feminist goals, the museum has failed feminism by completely writing it out of the history of women's art. Carol Duncan writes, "To control a museum...means the power to define and rank people, to declare some as having a greater share than others in the community's common heritage- in its very identity." (Duncan 1991, 101-2) Feminism is an integral part of women's artistic heritage, yet the museum has ranked feminism as unimportant when portraying the history of women's art by completely ignoring it. The museum has succeeded because of the desire of the artistic community to expand the identity of 'women in the arts,' yet the museum disregards the community that spoke out for the changes that made the museum even possible. Duncan goes on to say, "Those who are in the greatest accord with the museum's version of what is beautiful and good may partake of this greater identity." (Duncan 1991, 102) Women artists who painted
'pretty' pictures such as Ellen Day Hale and Cecilia Beaux are the museum's representatives of what a woman artist should be.

The NMWA, however, is indebted to feminism in numerous ways. The museum should repay that debt by including feminism and its influence on the history of women's art in its exhibitions, programs, and collection. Thirty years have passed since Linda Nochlin asked the question "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" and feminism and its goals were hotly debated among the art world. Twenty years have gone by since the founding of the NMWA and the controversy surrounding it. Enough time has elapsed that the 21st century should see a more symbiotic relationship between feminism and the NMWA. In an article for Heresies written in 1987 (the same year the NMWA moved into its new building) which she reprised in a 1999 Art Journal article, Miriam Schor wrote, "Feminism has little institutional memory, there has been no collective absorption of early achievements and ideas, and therefore feminism cannot yet afford the luxury of storage." (Schor, 23) This statement is still applicable. A librarian at CalArts found the archives of its Feminist Art Program of the 1970's in a dumpster. Until the Brooklyn Museum recently acquired it, Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party" was in storage and had not seen the light of day in decades. Where would have been a more appropriate place to house these items than in a National Museum of Women in the Arts? [Note: Happily, a Judy Chicago exhibition which will include "The Dinner Party" is set for October 11, 2002 through January 5, 2003 at the NMWA. This exhibition represents a success on the part of the museum; it is indeed an impressive and historic step in the direction of the aforementioned cataloguing and displaying of feminist history.] Other than 30 Guerilla Girls posters, the only remnant of feminist
activism present in the permanent collection of the NMWA is an acrylic on canvas from 1976 entitled "Artemisia Gentileschi" by May Stevens. The painting is originally from a traveling project in which eleven women painted eleven female heroes larger than life. The female subjects ranged from Joan of Arc to Frida Kahlo. When assembled, the eleven paintings formed a pavilion that mimics male-dominated scenes of the Sistine Chapel. Unfortunately, the other ten paintings are not in the collection of the NMWA. Some explanation and representation of feminism and its place within the history of women's art is necessary for the museum to provide a complete picture of women's cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The twenty-year history of the National Museum of Women in the Arts has provided fertile ground for conversation and debate about the history of women's art. Although there is room for improvement, the successes of the NMWA outnumber its failures. The controversy initially surrounding the museum has dissipated and the museum has proven itself to be a viable cultural institution. The National Museum of Women in the Arts has emerged as a successful museum and should enjoy continued success throughout the 21st century.
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NMWA Exhibition History. Document provided by NMWA. 

NMWA Timeline. Document provided by NMWA. 

NMWA's Permanent Collection (as of 1/21/01). Document provided by NMWA. 


Figure 1 - NMWA Founder Wilhelmina Holladay

Figure 2 - NMWA Exterior View

Figure 3 - NMWA Main Lobby
Figure 4
Seven Most Represented Artists in the Permanent Collection

- Grace Albee = 243 Works
- Elizabeth Dix = 103 Works
- Maria Sibylla Merian = 72 Works
- Hester Bateman = 56 Works
- Louise Dahl-Wolfe = 105 Works
- Ellen Day Hale = 94 Works
- Beatrice Stein = 72 Works
- Remainder of Permanent Collection = 1830 Works

Figure 5
Seven Most Represented Artists as a Percentage of the Total Artists in the Permanent Collection

- Total Artists Represented in Permanent Collection = 805
- Seven most Represented Artists as a Percentage of Total Artists

- 99%
- 1%
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