

The Myth of the Female Muse: The Underrepresentation of Female Artists in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

Why do we see more famous male than female artists in the 21st century? And why are muses always women? Historically, the myth of the female muse is part of a patriarchal order, where the artist is male, and the female assists him with his artistic process. The myth of the muse impacts the art world today, resulting in a vast underappreciation of female artists, implying that women can inspire creation, rather than be creators themselves. Yet the Mexican surrealist artist Frida Kahlo, famously declared, “I am my own muse,” claiming her image for herself and ascribing creative inspiration from her own life. In its exploration of gender (mis)appropriations and inequalities in the 21st-century art market, this study asks: 1) How do the origins of the female muse express the systemization of contemporary gender roles? 2) What are the gender norms associated with female artists in the 21st-century art industry? 3) How does Frida Kahlo’s “self-as-muse” approach invalidate the gendered concept of the muse? The underrepresentation of female artists in the 21st century stems from the genderization of the muse, where the idea of the woman as a passive source of inspiration coincides with Western social mystifications of art and gender. This study does not draw from primary research and is limited to an exploration of gender and artistry in Western art and culture. Future studies should consider conducting a comparative analysis of gender, the muse, and art inequalities in Western and Eastern cultures.

Introduction

Why do we see more famous male than female artists in the 21st century? And why are muses always women? Homer’s epic *Odyssey* began with the call, “Sing to me, Muse...” (Porter 9)—as he invoked the nine Muses, goddesses of the arts and sciences (Asif), he cemented the myth of the female muse.

The art world is defined by the relationship between an artist and his muse, represented by ancient Greek ideals of female divinity (Brandow-Fallow); the link between femininity and inspiration is especially difficult to extract from the relationship between males, females, and the creation of art itself. Historically, the myth of the female muse is part of a patriarchal order, where the artist is a male actor and the female simply accompanies him in his process (Jandl). As women in Western culture are traditionally associated with taking on emotive, supporting roles to their male counterparts, the art world reciprocally represents the stratification of gender and the challenges of altering the “dichotomy of men and women’s roles” (Casey 8). The question becomes: to what extent is the female muse unconsciously assimilated into gender and art today?

The 21st-century art market encompasses a vast underappreciation of female artists, represented by income disparities and gendered biases. In 2015, journalist Maura Reilly conducted a survey of the art market, gathering data from museums, biennales, and news reports to identify the ongoing inequalities between male and female artists throughout the past 30 years (Cameron, Goetzmann, and Nozari). According to the art gallery-erist Susan Ely, although more than 50 percent of BA and BFA graduates are female, female artists represent

only 30 percent of the artists whose work is displayed in galleries (Cameron, Goetzmann, and Nozari). As the art market is a microcosm of preconceived notions of what art—and artists— “should” look like, the myth of the female muse, as a *source* of inspiration rather than a creator *herself*, remains a conceptual barrier to female artists today.

Yet in the art world, women do not have to be either “muses” *or* “artists”: the Mexican surrealist artist Frida Kahlo, famously declared, “I am my own muse”; claiming her image for herself and ascribing creative inspiration from her own life (Antoniou). This research project utilizes Frida Kahlo as a case study to debunk the myth of the female muse. In its exploration of gender (mis)appropriations and inequalities in the 21st-century art market, this study asks: 1) How do the origins of the female muse express the systemization of contemporary gender roles? 2) What are the gender norms associated with female artists in the 21st-century art market? 3) How does Frida Kahlo’s “self-as-muse” approach invalidate the gendered concept of the muse? The underrepresentation of female artists in the 21st century stems from the genderization of the muse, where the idea of the woman as a passive source of inspiration coincides with Western social mystifications of art and gender.

The Muse and the “Male Genius”

In art history, female inspiration is closely tied to women’s bodies, and their adjacency to male creation. The sexualization of the female body by a male artist is simultaneously linked to his creative process and desire to “possess” his muse (Jandl 3). As the female body, which is closely connected to beauty and pro-creation, becomes a source of inspiration, it contrasts with the lack of agency associated with women themselves. The female muse is often more of a “dreamy abstraction” than a reality, contributing to concepts of women as a “generalized idea” rather than an “actual person” (Pierpont 10). Although iconic muses, such as Oscar Kokoschka’s Alma Mahler and Gustav Klimt’s Emilie Flöge, were artists in their own right, the myth of the female muse perpetuates the idea that women and their bodies can be acted upon, rather than autonomously harnessed in the process of artistic creation. Rather than viewing women as artists, the word “artist” has taken on masculine attributes (Casey), associating artistic “genius” with male characteristics.

In art history, the “male genius” is linked to post-structuralist concepts of what masculinity is—and what femininity is not. The post-structuralist concept of the “male genius” is linked to Enlightenment thinkers, such as Jean Jacques Rousseau, Emmanuel Kant, and Arthur Schopenhauer—all of whom adamantly argued that women “can’t be geniuses” (Mangattu 2). According to Rousseau, “Women, in general, possess no . . . genius . . . [because] the celestial fire that emblazons and ignites the soul, the inspiration that comes and devours . . . are always lacking” (Mangattu 2). If “genius” is associated with masculinity, it is because men were historically conceived as action-based, while women were seen as emotional and less “capable” of acting (Koza 4)—grounds for exclusion from salons or artistic organizations. While Romanticism transformed the male artist into a “demi-god,” women were “otherized,” and the concept of femininity directly contradicted that of a “creator” (Jones 11). As femininity was seen as counterproductive to artistic “genius,” countless female artists were “written out of history” (Currier 1), in effect, validating the myth of the muse. In 2023, with more famous male “geniuses” than female ones, the genderization of the muse is rooted in ongoing gender biases that extend into the statistics of the contemporary art market.

Gender Inequalities in the 21st-Century Art World

The 21st-century art world is gendered rather than gender-neutral (Stalp): In 1971, Linda Nochlin famously questioned the concept of “male genius” in her essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (Bocart, Getsberg, and Pownall). According to Nochlin, “If women really *are* equal to men, why have there

never been any great women artists?” Moreover, Brown finds that in 1989, only 5 percent of art in the Metropolitan Museum in New York City were created by women; in 2005, the number lowered to 3 percent; while in 2023, it rose to just 4 percent. Since 2018, only 13 percent of artwork in iconic U.S. institutions belonged to women and 33 percent of the art in global exhibitions were created by women (Brown). In 2020, women made up only 35 percent of the artists in major galleries (Brown). As there is a 47.6% discount on women’s art at auctions (“Get the Facts About Women in the Arts”), the underrepresentation of female artists reveals a “gender hierarchy” (Ibrahim 1-2) within the art market, which places more value on the work of male, rather than female, artists. While women are evaluated less positively than men, even in domains outside of art, in the art market, critiques of women’s resumes and paintings would have been higher had they belonged to men (Miller). If the art market promotes more male artists than female artists, it sends two messages: one, that women’s art is not “good enough” (Nuno 3), and two, succeeding in the art world has something to do with being male. The underappreciation of female artists coincides with the ideology of the female muse, suggesting that women’s art statistically sells less than male art *because* of its inherently feminine, visual qualities.

The “Male Standard”

In art history, the “male standard” implies that “successful” art appears one way, and women’s art appears another. Historically, “women’s arts” have encompassed domestic work and are delineated as “crafts” on the lower end of the “art hierarchy,” and include textiles, pottery, and needlework (Casey 7). In contrast, men were encouraged to create and sell their art professionally in public spheres, labeling them as “artists” (Casey 7). Although there are more women than men in art schools (Casey), and more women are art educators (Piirto), the “male standard” invites a hierarchy that implies to make it to the top, female artists must create art that looks like it came from a man (Casey). Because women in art are viewed as “inferior,” stereotypes imply that women are unable to create something that is “good enough” for public appreciation and evaluation (Nuno 3). The view that women can trigger creative impulses (Ramsey) but cannot actually create, is one that iconic female artists, Georgia O’Keeffe and Frida Kahlo, famously contended with. As Kahlo stated, “I am the subject I know best” (Chadha 73); debunking the myth of the muse reveals the transparency of the “male standard” and the social history of gender embedded in its framework.

A Case Study: Frida Kahlo

Frida Kahlo’s self-portraiture represented her desire to express her own, deeply painful and feminine world. In her work, Frida emphasized that her paintings were rooted in “her reality, her pain, and her sorrows” (Li 199). Her artwork was not a figment of imagination but served as a narrative for her life and the events that defined her womanhood—Frida’s paintings were autobiographical, as she stated, “I never paint dreams of nightmares. I paint my own reality” (Li 199). While Kahlo grappled with her own identity and that of Mexico’s (Bakewell), as a female political activist (Mushro), her work was rooted in personal *and* action-based narratives: values traditionally associated with qualities of “male genius.” Yet Kahlo’s imagery is interpreted as an “expression of her femaleness,” defined by her connection to nature, exemplified by her iconic representation of an “earth goddess” (Garber 44). Rather than adhering to the “male standard,” Kahlo represented her own, feminine imagery, drawing from her “hybrid identities” (Reis 4; Haynes) and images of butterflies (Udall), plants, thorns, blood, animals, and hearts—pictures traditionally associated with femininity. As Kahlo famously claimed to be her own muse, by imagining herself in her portraits, she re-invented the myth of the muse, where her own, divine femininity is both a source of and fuel to her process of creation. The question then reappears: why, seventy years later, is the art market still stratified by gender?

Methods

In its exploration of the origins of the female muse and gender inequalities in the 21st-century art market, this research project examines the stratification of male and female artists. This study draws from journal articles, dissertations, theses, relevant statistics, and scholarly essays to extrapolate contemporary art market statistics. This research project asks the following questions: 1) How do the origins of the female muse express the systemization of contemporary gender roles? 2) What are the gender norms associated with female artists in the 21st-century art market? 3) How does Frida Kahlo's "self-as-muse" approach invalidate the gendered concept of the muse? Future studies should consider conducting a comparative analysis of gender, the muse, and art inequalities in Western and Eastern cultures.

Conclusion

In 1989, the Guerilla Girls, an anonymous group of feminist art activists, posed the iconic question: "*Do women have to be naked to get into the Met?*" (Koza 10). The inquiry reveals centuries of gender dichotomization that positions female artists as below—and less valuable—than male artists; a juxtaposition dually represented by the myth of the female muse. As the origins of the female muse are rooted in the ancient mythification of female divinity and the re-iteration that women can inspire, but not become, geniuses, the underrepresentation of female artists in the 21st century adversely "makes sense." Where the majority of art represented in galleries, biennales, and major museums belong to men, the social stratification of male and female artists is exemplified by the gender norms embedded in processes of creation. Yet if women's art should appear a certain way to garner mass appeal, why does Frida Kahlo remain an uncontested, female "genius?" Although the myth of the muse has been debunked, the stratification of the contemporary art world continues. If we are aiming for an equitable art market, perhaps the question should become: where are all the male muses?

Limitations

This study does not draw from primary research and is limited to an exploration of gender and artistry in Western art and culture. It does not include first-hand accounts of experts within the field nor does it evaluate price points on female artwork using statistical analyses.

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