

**Claire Richter Sherman (ed.) with Adele M. Holcomb, *Women as Interpreters of the Visual Arts, 1820-1979*. Westport (Conn.) and London, Greenwood Press, 1981. (Contributions in Women's Studies 18) 487 + xxiv pp., 29 illus., 35,00\$ (cloth)**

Anne Cannon Palumbo

Volume 10, Number 1, 1983

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074645ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074645ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

**Publisher(s)**

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

**ISSN**

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

**Cite this review**

Palumbo, A. C. (1983). Review of [Claire Richter Sherman (ed.) with Adele M. Holcomb, *Women as Interpreters of the Visual Arts, 1820-1979*. Westport (Conn.) and London, Greenwood Press, 1981. (Contributions in Women's Studies 18) 487 + xxiv pp., 29 illus., 35,00\$ (cloth)]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 10(1), 99–101. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074645ar>

CLAIRE RICHTER SHERMAN (ed.) with ADELE M. HOLCOMB *Women as Interpreters of the Visual Arts, 1820-1979*. Westport (Conn.) and London, Greenwood Press, 1981. (Contributions in Women's Studies 18) 487 + xxiv pp., 29 illus., 35.00\$ (cloth).

The question 'Why have there been no great women artists' has received considerable attention since Linda Nochlin's seminal essay appeared in 1971. *Women as Interpreters of the Visual Arts, 1820-1979* focuses on a separate but closely related issue. Although one might very well make a case for the proposition that lacking a female Apollinaire we can hardly expect to discover a female Picasso, that is not really the major concern of this study. What it offers us is an historical account of the experience of women in the field of art scholarship and criticism and a consideration of their contributions to the enterprise. These are women who achieved professional careers as educators, writers, curators, librarians, archaeologists, and art historians rather than the often more glamorous keepers of salons or collectors, about which we already know a good deal. While many readers may be familiar with individuals like Margaret Fuller and Anna Jameson, unless they happen to have had similar research interests or been affiliated with institutions in which these women spent some part of their professional lives, few will know much, if anything, about the other women profiled in this study.

In choosing to plow a relatively uncultivated field, the contributors

to this volume have presented us, if not with a finished picture, at least with a good working sketch of women's experience in the world of museums, university art departments, and art publishing. Along the way they have also filled in some gaps in our knowledge of art scholarship in general as it has developed in the last 150 years. That today we tend to look for such scholarship in the university and the museum is made apparent by the fact that of the twelve women selected for in-depth treatment, only one of those whose careers fall in the twentieth century was without some kind of institutional association.

It was not always so, as the study itself demonstrates. In the first of the three periods into which the profiles of the twelve women are grouped, the period extending from 1820 to 1890, not only do we find that women like Jameson, Fuller, Lady Dilke, and Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer created careers for themselves outside established institutions, but, for the most part, they were self-educated as well. Typically, those who came later, when opportunities for higher education became available to women, held institutional appointments, often in women's colleges (Georgiana Goddard King), sometimes as museum curators (Gisella Richter). However, the art departments of the most prestigious universities and important posts in the larger museums have traditionally been male preserves. Only one of the women chosen to represent the period from 1890 to 1930 taught in a top-ranking

American university. But, though already a distinguished scholar and full professor at the University of Giessen in her native Germany when she fled the Nazis in the 1930s, Marguerite Bieber did not receive a full professorship at Columbia University despite her many years of teaching there. Erica Tietze-Conrat, who also came to the United States in the migration of European intellectuals, received no institutional support.

For the group who worked chiefly in the period 1930-1979 women's colleges continued to be important, both in terms of education and training and as places of employment. With the exception of Serapie der Nesessian, who was educated in Europe (but who taught at Wellesley), all of them began their art historical studies at women's colleges. Agnes Mongan and Dorothy Burr Thompson at Bryn Mawr, under the guidance of Georgiana Goddard King and Rhys Carpenter, respectively, and Dorothy Miner at Barnard. Their scholarly contributions were duly recognized, but even at this relatively late date women seldom received institutional appointments commensurate with their professional accomplishments. When they did, the appointments were either temporary or very late in coming. Mongan is a striking example of the tardy (often grudging) recognition women scholars could expect during this period. Years of teaching, research and curatorial work at Harvard went unacknowledged by academic rank. Until 1964 she was not even listed in the Harvard catalog. Mongan was finally re-

warded with an appointment to the directorship of the Fogg Museum of Art – two years prior to her retirement.

Perhaps a census taken today would reveal greater concentrations of women in top-level institutional posts. If so, we should undoubtedly consider that an important measure of progress. Nevertheless, there appears to be something of an anomaly which this study brings to light. In the earlier period, women like Dilke, Jameson, Fuller, and even Van Rensselaer, though hampered by social constraints and the lack of educational facilities, became public personalities. Their range of interests was broad, and they were in the forefront of contemporary debate over issues of widespread concern. This has rarely been true of those who came after. In most cases, their work was highly specialized, known to and appreciated by a small group of fellow specialists.

Reasons for this seeming contradiction are not hard to find. In the initial stages of industrialization, the arts were consigned to the female sphere, thus becoming one of the few areas in which women of intellect and ambition could achieve distinction. Half a century later, a Margaret Fuller or a Lady Dilke might have been drawn to a very different sort of career. Another factor has been that the changing nature of the enterprise itself has encouraged a narrowing of interests. Interpretation of the visual arts moved from books and journals aimed at raising the level of public culture to the academy. Access to resources and training are concentrated in institutions, and institutions tend to erect barriers to keep out the uninitiated. Where women have been able to breach these new barriers, it has usually been by intensive cultivation of a narrow and highly specialized piece of turf.

Though there are sharp differences between the experience of nineteenth and twentieth-century women, this study reveals that continuities also persist. From the time of Jameson and Fuller (who were themselves inspired by the example of Madam de Staël) to that of archaeologist Dorothy Thompson, women have found in travel, translation and immersion in cultures removed from their own by time or



FIGURE 1. Calotype portrait of Anna Brownell Jameson, ca. 1845. From *Women As Interpreters of the Visual Arts, 1820-1979*.

space, independence and an area which welcomed the exercise of their talents. This pattern was not confined to women for whom the visual arts were the chief focus of study – women missionaries and anthropologists provide us with other examples – but the tradition clearly influenced many of the women studied in this volume in their choice of career. Such patterns and relationships are admirably illuminated by the introductory and concluding chapters written by Claire Richter Sherman, assisted by Adele M. Holcomb. It is their skillful editing which gives the book coherence, no small achievement in a project involving many hands. Of varying quality, however, are the individual biographies, and this suggests the need to consider whether the biographical mode is the best choice for a study of this type. As a rule, the lives of scholars and academics are not notably rich in incident. This is not to say that scholars are necessarily dull subjects, but that the claim they make on our attention rests more with the quality of their minds and work than with the events of their lives. Not all contributors possessed the necessary expertise to enable them to assess adequately these qualities. Too often, especially in the essays treating more recent figures, the



FIGURE 2. Photograph of Dorothy Burr Thompson and Homer Thompson, 1975. From *Women As Interpreters of the Visual Arts, 1820-1979*.

tendency is toward hagiography. One can sympathize with the authors' desire to insure proper regard for the achievements of these women. Since the help and encouragement given students and other scholars is significant, it is proper to take note of it. But when individuals are presented as unfailingly helpful, generous, and warmly gracious, we begin to suspect that too much time was spent in talking to fond students and not enough in other kinds of research. We can hardly help wondering whether these women were invariably easy to work with? Did they never exhibit suspicion or impatience? Was none possessed of a sharp tongue or an overweening sense of self-importance? Paragons are infinitely less interesting and less believable than personalities.

Problems of this kind are not serious enough to impair markedly the value of this pioneering study. The use of the biographical format can be defended on the grounds that it is particularly successful in bringing to notice similarities in women's experiences that tell us a good deal about the circumstances that promote or deter achievement. For example, it is certainly relevant to our understanding of women's experience as professional inter-

preters of the visual arts to learn that, with few exceptions, women who have made notable contributions to the field have been unmarried or had husbands with whom they shared joint careers. Whether such generalizations will hold true as more research is done in this area remains to be seen. The women in this study were selected on the basis of accomplishments that could be measured by publication in the English language. Other selection criteria might result in somewhat different findings. Incidentally, though none of the women treated in the study is Canadian by birth, two of them, Jameson (Fig. 1) and Thompson (Fig. 2) spent a portion of their lives in Canada. Jameson's stay was brief, but produced a vivid traveler's account, *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada* (1838). Dorothy Thompson, wife of the Canadian archaeologist Homer Thompson, was closely associated with Canadian archaeological circles and held the post of acting director of the Royal Ontario Museum for a short period after World War II.

Doubtless many readers will regret the absence of one or more individuals whose contributions may seem to them to be more representative or of greater significance than those of some of the women profiled. My personal choice would have been Violet Paget, better known by her pseudonym, Vernon Lee. The kind of original thinking and bold theorizing that characterized her work, an assessment of which is long overdue, is an element lacking in that of many of the women included. However, one of the outstanding merits of this book is that an effort has been made to identify and briefly describe the careers of a host of other women involved in the interpretation of the visual arts, among whom Paget does find a place. It is to be hoped that this and the very useful bibliography will incline others to do further research in an important area which has too long been overlooked. It would be a pity if this ground-breaking study were to remain in lonely isolation for long.

ANNE CANNON PALUMBO  
National Museum of American Art  
Washington, D.C.

ROBERT CARON *Inventaire des permis de construction des archives de la ville de Québec, 1913-1930*. Québec, Direction des lieux et des parcs historiques nationaux, Parcs Canada, Environnement Canada, 1980. (Histoire et archéologie, n<sup>os</sup> 32a, 32b, 32c) 1188 p. en 3 vol., 40,00\$.

ANDRÉ GIROUX, RODRIQUE BÉDARD, NICOLE CLOUTIER, ROBERT GUITARD, RÉAL LUSSIER et HÉLÈNE VACHON *Inventaire des marchés de construction des Archives nationales du Québec à Montréal, 1800-1830*. Québec, Direction des lieux et des parcs historiques nationaux, Parcs Canada, Environnement Canada, 1981. (Histoire et archéologie, n<sup>os</sup> 49a, 49b) 574 p. en 2 vol., 37,95\$.

GENEVIÈVE GUIMONT-BASTIEN, LINE CHABOT et DORIS DROLET-DUBÉ. *Inventaire des dessins architecturaux aux archives de l'université Laval*. Québec, Direction des lieux et des parcs historiques nationaux, Parcs Canada, Environnement Canada, 1980. (Histoire et archéologie, n<sup>o</sup> 31) 392 p., 20,00\$.

Depuis 1975, Parcs Canada publie dans la collection « Histoire et archéologie » des inventaires de différents fonds conservés aux Archives nationales du Québec, aux Archives civiles de Québec, aux archives de l'université Laval, aux archives de la ville de Québec, etc. Ces inventaires, comme leurs titres respectifs le laissent entendre, sont conçus comme des instruments pour la recherche spécialisée; fruits d'un travail de compilation et de mise en ordre plus que d'une analyse ou d'une synthèse, ils se composent généralement d'un court texte d'introduction, d'un catalogue et d'un index.

L'*Inventaire des dessins architecturaux aux archives de l'université Laval* répertorie les dessins et autres documents provenant du fonds Raoul Chênevert (en première partie) et des fonds Jos.-Pierre Ouellet, E.-Georges Rousseau, Gérard Venne et Paroisse Saint-Sauveur (en deuxième partie). À travers maintes associations, des plans et des documents de diverses provenances ont été transmis à la firme d'architectes Chênevert: les plans sont signés par

les architectes Georges-Émile Tanguay, Alfred-N. Vallée (le rédacteur de l'introduction lui prête à tort le nom de Prudent Vallée), H. Lebon, Raoul Chênevert, Henriette B. Chênevert, Guy Chênevert, Raymond Martineau, Wilbrod Dubé, etc. Chronologiquement, le fonds couvre les années 1860 à 1965; il compte des projets qui se situent pour la plupart dans la province de Québec, avec une forte concentration dans la ville de Québec. Le catalogue compte 1 233 entrées classées par toponymes, puis, à l'intérieur des sections, par ordre chronologique. Chaque entrée comprend la référence du dossier aux archives de l'Université Laval, le nom du projet, le nom du propriétaire, la localisation, la date, le nom du ou des architectes et une description du contenu du dossier (nombre de feuilles, types de dessins, matériaux, nature de la documentation s'il y a lieu). Un index des noms propres (noms de l'édifice, du propriétaire et des architectes) et un index des lieux facilitent la consultation du catalogue.

En deuxième partie, l'inventaire du fonds Jos.-Pierre Ouellet compte 16 entrées, correspondant à des travaux d'églises, projetés ou réalisés par cet architecte entre 1924 et 1958. Le fonds E.-Georges Rousseau, où figurent 243 entrées, regroupe des plans et de la documentation préparés par les architectes E.-Georges Rousseau, Étienne Bégin, Henri Talbot, etc., entre 1940 et 1970. Le fonds Gérard Venne contient 175 entrées, principalement des plans de l'architecte Pierre Lévesque, mais aussi de David Ouellet, Georges-Émile-Tanguay et Gérard Venne; il couvre les années 1903 à 1952. En dernier lieu, le fonds de la paroisse Saint-Sauveur se compose de 32 dossiers concernant surtout les édifices religieux de cette paroisse de la basse-ville de Québec; plusieurs des plans sont de l'architecte Joseph-Ferdinand Peachy. Le classement et l'organisation du contenu du catalogue de ces fonds suivent les règles mentionnées plus haut. Les noms d'édifices et de personnes sont regroupés en un seul index pour les quatre fonds, alors que les toponymes sont indexés séparément.

Ce volume ne constitue pas un inventaire exhaustif des dessins architecturaux conservés aux archives