

Feminisms and Tradition

Feminism came to the discipline of philosophical aesthetics rather late—approximately 1990—in spite of advances made much earlier in the 1970s by feminist scholars in related fields such as literary theory, art history, art criticism, and film studies (Hein and Korsmeyer, [1993](#); Brand and Korsmeyer, [1995](#)). This delay might be attributed to two causes: first, basic questions that define the aesthetic “tradition” within analytic aesthetics have historically been answered in ways that have discouraged the influx of feminist thinking from outside the established parameters of debate; second, unlike the higher number of female faculty and graduate students within departments of art, art history, film, and literature—often growing to 50 percent or more—philosophy has routinely suffered from lower numbers, for example, as of 2003, women constituted only 16.6 percent of full-time philosophy faculty in the United States and only 29.6 percent of doctorates awarded in philosophy (Norlock, [2011](#); Van Camp, [2011](#)).

Traditional aesthetics—proclaiming objectivity and universality—sought to eliminate personalized or idiosyncratic responses from the range of effects proper to the experiencing of works of nature and art. Individualized (i.e., gendered, raced) reactions yielding a multiplicity of diverse female “lived” experiences and value judgments were not tolerated, and uniformity of taste was idealized and encouraged. Explorations into the nature of art, theorizing about perception, and establishing criteria of beauty presupposed a particular type of person whose judgment was educated, discriminating, and universalizable: for example, David Hume’s indomitable paradigm of aesthetic judgment. In contrast, recent proponents of feminism have challenged these entrenched theoretical and philosophical traditions not only by objecting to the criteria utilized in the ongoing dialectic but also by bringing attention to its source. As characterized by Katy Deepwell, this person is predominantly upper class, white, and male, otherwise known as the privileged white “man of taste” (Deepwell, [1995](#); Deepwell, [2012](#)).

Before looking at the rise of feminism per se, it will be helpful to ask what sense can be made of the term *tradition*. One all-encompassing sense of tradition is that of a philosophical backdrop to the emergence of the activism of 1960s feminist artists and their accompanying theorizing; accordingly, separate segments can be delineated within this tradition’s long duration. Another approach is in terms of the many trends that have emerged within feminism itself as it has evolved in its first several decades. Let us look at these in turn.

First, the most familiar form—known as the Western tradition—is the most inclusive and captures the longest theoretical continuity. It extends back to classical Antiquity with the writings of Plato and Aristotle and flourishes in the eighteenth century with theories of taste, considered the beginning of the field of aesthetics: Francis Hutcheson, Anthony Ashley Cooper (Earl of Shaftesbury), David Hume, and Immanuel Kant. This continuum is refined and expanded in the nineteenth century with G. W. F. Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Friedrich Nietzsche. As radical new art seriously affected early-twentieth-century philosophical thought, focus shifted to the proliferating dimensions of the aesthetic: Clive Bell, Edward Bullough, John Dewey, Benedetto Croce, and R. G. Collingwood. Under the influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein, far-reaching objections arose to idealism and essentialism in art by authors Morris Weitz, John Passmore, W. B. Gallie, and Monroe Beardsley. The task of defining was reintroduced but in a

manner different than before; the “Artworld” and its institutionalized practices came to play a crucial role in the theories of Arthur C. Danto and George Dickie. Steeped in a self-consciousness of the art world context and its unique history, issues of representation, interpretation, and aesthetic value resurfaced as well in the work of Nelson Goodman, Joseph Margolis, and Richard Wollheim.

Within the vast scope of this two-thousand-year-old tradition, it is commonly held that the value of art transcends cultural differences and is a source of timeless and everlasting value. This presumption underlies the status attributed to so-called masterpieces of art—works created by “genius” that are seen as universally valuable. Such an experience of a work of art lifts a person of taste out of his menial concerns and into a lofty state of mind shared by others. Also basic to this tradition is the belief that aesthetic contemplation and appreciation are due to the work’s intrinsic value. A work of art derives its significance and enduring value from elements internal to the work, independent of extraneous ties.

Other, narrower senses of *tradition* within philosophy have also arisen. For instance, in the 1940s and 1950s, analytic philosophers developed their own idiosyncratic sense of the term in which it came to mean the pre-analytic writings by essentialist, idealist authors such as Arthur Schopenhauer prior to Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore. In one of the clearest statements of this phase, William E. Kennick stipulated that “traditional aesthetics” was the philosophical discipline that concerned itself with questions of beauty, aesthetic experience, creativity, aesthetic judgment, taste, and the role of criticism (Kennick, [1958](#)).

Another sense of *tradition* arose during the period just after World War II: a number of writings in analytic aesthetics coincided with the shift of the art world from Paris to New York, and the rise of Abstract Expressionism and its attendant critical discourse. Not all philosophers, however, found this newest tradition to be the remedy for all critical and philosophical ills. What was new eventually became old; and in the 1980s and 1990s philosophers began to critique the writings of their predecessors from the 1950s through the mid-1980s. At times, the tradition included not only the body of analytic writings that dominated during this period but also the preanalytic—essentialist and idealist phase—thereby combining two recent shorter traditions into a single, more continuous one. This exercise of “counting” traditions is admittedly less important than noting their presence as a stimulus to philosophical dialectic, and it is worth noting that advances in philosophical thinking often utilized the rhetoric of “the tradition” to symbolize the past.

Just as there is a multiplicity of historical notions of *tradition* within the history of aesthetics, there is variety within feminism in its emergence from those patriarchal traditions and its confrontation with existing philosophical practices. Steeped in the political roots of the women’s movement of the 1960s, feminist art and theorizing are multifaceted. There is no monolithic feminist approach to traditions in aesthetics, just as there is no one feminist approach to political, ethical, or legal issues (Felski, [1989](#)). Whatever sense of unity is apparent, it rests on a foundation of numerous feminisms, as expressed in critical writings accompanying the 2007 “Global Feminisms” exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum (Reilly, [2007](#)). There is ample room for variation in the shared goal of addressing inequalities toward women’s creativity within art world and art historical traditions: some feminist artists would eliminate the notion of artistic value, whereas others seek to be valued within entrenched systems of institutional recognition.

The practical application of these views once resulted in some artists choosing to show their works in women-only co-operative galleries instead of competing to gain entry into mainstream art world venues; however, these galleries eventually dwindled in number and stature. Moreover, feminist challenges to oppressive historical and contemporary art world practices that served to exclude and undermine the import of women's contributions initially created rebels who spurned the art world. But given the harsh economic realities and a booming art market, women eventually sought inclusion—while simultaneously attempting to subvert and transgress its norms. Maura Reilly's statistics showed that in 2005 women's artwork constituted under 10 percent of the permanent holdings of major American museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art (the Guggenheim Museum boasted 11 percent women artists' solo shows between 2000 and 2004), in spite of women comprising a majority of art school graduates (60 percent by 2007) (Solomon-Godeau, [2007](#)) and 70 percent of self-declared artists (as reported in 2010) (Lindemann and Tepper, [2010](#)). The number of works by artists of color in these major collections is even lower. Thus, the beginnings of feminism within aesthetics can be traced back directly to women who, as authors, artists, art historians, and critics, clearly felt outside any recognized artistic and critical traditions; it is no surprise that feminists in aesthetics felt positioned outside their own philosophical traditions as well. All sought the reasons for their exclusion and entertained strategies for a greater voice and presence within the mainstream art world and the academy.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, feminist scholars issued a challenge to art historians and literary critics that ironically shared a certain orientation with analytic aesthetics, especially a skepticism about the definition and autonomy of "art," the purported universal appeal of art, and the enormous impact of art-critical language and the success of critics such as Harold Rosenberg, Leo Steinberg, and Clement Greenberg in bringing about unparalleled success for male artists within the art world. Linda Nochlin's groundbreaking essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1971) launched an entire movement centered on women's involvement in the arts. In her review of the systematic exclusion of female artists from teaching studios and other realms of art instruction that persisted for centuries, Nochlin suggested that the historical notion of "fine art" continued to overlook creative output by women.

From then on, feminist scholarship unearthed women writers and artists of the past who were well known, amply commissioned, and self-supporting in their day but subsequently omitted from the canonical histories of art. Exhibitions of works by women initiated a rediscovery that brought to light works that had been attributed to male artists, lost in archives, and obscured by the preponderance of male-created "masterpieces" dominating the limelight. The first collection of feminist art-historical essays, *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany* ([1982](#)), edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, sought to distinguish itself from catalogs and monographs by examining Western art history and the extent to which the discipline had been distorted in every major period by sexual bias. Similarly, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock's pioneering work, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* ([1981](#)), introduced strategies to subvert and collapse stereotypes about women's art by analyzing women's historical and ideological position within the world of art production. Hilary Robinson's anthology, *Visibly Female: Feminism and Art Today*, introduced Americans to British art and criticism in [1987](#). In Germany, Gisela Ecker's [1986](#) collection of essays, *Feminist Aesthetics*, sought to demarcate important terminological differences between *feminine* and *feminist*. French feminists coming

from poststructuralist and psychoanalytic backgrounds rejected hierarchical binary oppositions typical of patriarchal thinking and sought to develop unique linguistic expressions of the *jouissance* of women's writing and thought; such authors included Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous. The concept of "genius" was identified as uniquely attributable to male artists (Battersby, [1990](#)) and feminist theorists such as Toril Moi ([1985](#)), Rita Felski ([1989](#)), and Janet Wolff ([1990](#)), noted at least two clearly demarcated "traditions" established in less than twenty years: Anglo-American and French. As a result, the entire tradition of the male-defined canon was jeopardized, leading feminists in the direction of more theoretical and abstract pursuits. They began to question the underlying assumptions of so-called universal standards of taste and their resulting value judgments.

A new, revisionist art history developed that emphasized the work of art within its sociohistorical context rather than as an example of a particular genre, style, or artistic trend. Definitions of "art" were rejected as limiting and oppressive. Attention was brought to the privileging of high art over low, fine art over craft, men's art over women's. Early on, enthusiasm ran high that something like a female nature was discernible and that a woman's art expressing a feminine sensibility or a female aesthetic could be easily delineated. It was eventually replaced by a strain of anti-essentialism that focused instead on gender differences and suggested that all art forms are open to multiple interpretations, all meanings are subject dependent. The entire foundation of interpretation and evaluation came under attack as feminists, in rejecting innate meaning, also rejected conventional modes of determining a work's intrinsic value. In hindsight, art theorists look back upon those early decades of second-wave feminism in the 1970s and its poststructuralist phase in the 1980s as a misleading dominant narrative constructed around the themes of essentialism (e.g., the work of Judy Chicago) versus anti-essentialism (Mary Kelly), American versus British artists, and older feminists versus younger (Meagher, [2011](#)). They argue that the social, political, and artistic dimensions of the work created by these generations were much more nuanced than realized and that a continuation of the telling of such mythical "stories" about feminist art only perpetuates the disidentification and rejection of our foremothers. In effect, meta-feminist analysis identified newly created traditions within feminist art theory itself: competing and multiple, feminist thought was—from the start—really a number of feminisms representing different ideologies, methodologies, and expressions.

Within the field of philosophical aesthetics, the attention to language and a self-consciousness about the conceptualization of the field has always been strong. Aestheticians also interrogated the definition of "art" and its requisite notion of disinterestedness; they questioned the established norms of the privileged man of taste; they unmasked the masculine sublime; they reassessed the autonomy of an artwork; and they sought to include external, or contextual information, in order to take gender and race into account in the creation and appreciation of a work of art's internal properties and value (Devereaux, [2003](#); Korsmeyer, [2004](#); Korsmeyer, [2012](#)). Emphasis on the body and its agency, plus a renewed interest in the idealization of female beauty—along with attendant re-positionings of the disabled body in art—have opened up new areas of investigation based on women's "lived experiences" of the male gaze (Brand, [2000](#), [2013](#); Felski, [2006](#); Silvers, [2011](#); Millett-Gallant, [2010](#)). Everyday aesthetics has brought attention to the daily continuum of life (Saito, [2007](#); Mandoki, [2007](#)) that includes the environment, that is, natural beauty (Lintott, [2010](#)) as well as significant discussion of pregnancy, motherhood, and parenting that is expressed in the maternal image in art (Liss, [2009](#);

Chernick and Klein, [2011](#); Lintott and Sander-Staudt, [2012](#)). The concept of taste has been ingeniously extended to include the everyday use of the senses, including the smell, touch, and taste of foodstuffs that elicit responses of disgust (Korsmeyer, [1999](#); Korsmeyer, [2011](#)) and the impetus of feminist bioethics has given rise to the correlative accusation that surgical improvements to the female face and body may count less as ethical medical procedures than as futile attempts to satisfy “the cosmetic gaze” (Devereaux, [2013](#); Wegenstein, [2012](#)). The future holds innumerable possibilities for a sub-discipline still in its initial phases: the interplay of areas of aesthetic, political, and ethical value will establish new traditions in the coming years as feminists forge new paths in exploring links with epistemology and metaphysics, non-Western cultures, and individual lived experiences that reflect deep gender, i.e., identities and voices with the intention and determination to be heard and appreciated for their artistic output and expression (Musgrave, [2015](#)).

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