

**BUCHHOLZ, AMREI / FUENTES VEGA, ALICIA / KLOSS-WEBER, JULIA
(EDS.) (2025): TURNING THE MIRROR. GENDERED ART HISTORIES OF
IBERO-AMERICA AND THE IBERIAN PENINSULA,
BERLIN AND BOSTON, DE GRUYTER**

Mirrors have long been a popular element in art employed in a variety of ways. Among other things, they can make certain aspects—which would otherwise remain hidden from view from a conventional perspective—explicitly visible, thereby highlighting them. Furthermore, they can draw attention to the viewer of the work of art. The editors of the anthology *Turning the Mirror: Gendered Art Histories of Ibero-America and the Iberian Peninsula* also find both the title and the thematic framework for their work in the mirror with its multifaceted symbolism. In doing so, they refer to Velázquez's *Venus del espejo*, as well as to contemporary responses to this artwork, such as that of the Spanish performance artist La Ribot, who literally rearranges the mirror and, through the explicit reflection of her (formerly tabooed) genitals, presents her own body as an act of resistance (and no longer as an object defined by the male gaze). What hidden aspects or blind spots—as the editors ask—become visible when we shift the focus of the academic mirror?

— Specifically, this anthology—which is distinguished by its high-quality printing, layout, and typesetting—aims to challenge established research traditions in art history through feminist, post- and decolonial approaches, to reexamine dominant narratives and adopt alternative perspectives. To this end, it focuses on women who, in the 19th and 20th centuries, were active on the Iberian Peninsula or in Latin America as artists, creative professionals, art historians, or other key figures in the art world. As the insightful introduction emphasizes, the case studies are not intended to simply add further examples to existing art history, but rather to highlight feminist research questions as central components of art history. The editors also situate their volume within post- and decolonial research traditions: they pose the overarching question of the extent to which the external perception of the cultural spaces of the Iberian Peninsula and Ibero-America as cultural *peripheries*—and, at the same time, their historically conditioned, distinct positioning within colonial history—influenced these dynamics. All in all, this anthology has two goals: first, to bring to light the largely systematically excluded stories of female artists, and second, to challenge existing narratives

that are closely intertwined with patriarchal power structures and have simultaneously emerged from them.

— The anthology resulted from the 2022 annual conference of the Carl Justi-Association for the Support of Art-historical Cooperation with Spain, Portugal and Ibero-America (Carl Justi-Vereinigung zur Förderung der kunstwissenschaftlichen Zusammenarbeit mit Spanien, Portugal und Iberoamerika). In addition to a detailed introduction, it brings together contributions from nine female scholars. As the editors point out, only women submitted papers for the conference in response to their call for papers. This—along with the all-female editorial team—demonstrates, on a structural level, that the integration of gender perspectives into art history academia is not yet a given.

— Depending on their respective focus, the articles explore artistic positions through which female artists reflect on and challenge existing power structures, examine the institutional and socio-political frameworks and conventions within which they operated, or discuss various strategies for engaging with the existing order, such as self-empowerment or networking. The editors deliberately chose not to arrange the contributions chronologically or geographically. Instead, they selected four thematic areas that also highlight the breadth of the anthology's content.

— The first section focuses on *political and institutional contexts*. It addresses not only the constraints faced by female artists within a patriarchal system of art education, but also the diverse, often creative ways in which they navigated these constraints—and thus their agency. Saray Espinosa demonstrates how the activities of female artists in the political context of the Franco dictatorship in Spain and the Salazar dictatorship in Portugal at the end of the 20th century can be interpreted as a dual act of resistance against a repressive regime, on the one hand, and patriarchal structures, on the other. Using the example of the *Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes* in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Lucía Laumann illustrates the strategies women employed to circumvent restrictions on access to art education. Esther Romero Sáez takes a different approach, examining representations of nudity—and specifically the depiction of genitalia—in 19th- and 20th-century Spain, demonstrating that women had more creative agency in the traditionally male-dominated field of nude painting than is commonly assumed.

— The second thematic section examines *transnational networks* as a specific strategy for the self-empowerment of female artists. Drawing on post- and decolonial approaches, the editors ask whether conditions of intersectional *subalternity*—such as being

women, but also being artists in the periphery—have given rise to specific strategies of self-empowerment, such as communities of female artists or transatlantic networks. Henar Rivière focuses on a transnational solidarity network in which the Argentine artist Graciela Gutiérrez Marx explores the theme of motherhood during the Argentine dictatorship, addressing its particularly ambivalent connotations at that time. Sol Izquierdo de la Viña investigates the complexity as well as the ambivalence in the work of the Austrian-born Jewish artist Lene Schneider-Kainer, who went into exile in Ibiza in the 1930s and ran a guesthouse there for the international intellectual elite. By interpreting Schneider-Kainer's activities as both an act of emancipation and a cultural endeavor, she not only restores visibility to a disregarded artist but also challenges traditional categories of art-historical discourse.

— In the third section, the focus shifts explicitly to the discipline itself. Much like the book's title suggests, it aims at *gendering the narratives of art history*. This is achieved, on the one hand, by specifically addressing female positions, but also, on a broader level, by scrutinizing the discipline's methods to determine whether they contribute to the marginalization of female artists and their work. Mercedes Valdivieso turns her attention to Margarita Nelken, a largely unknown art historian, and aims to demonstrate how Nelken's internalized patriarchal mindset actually reinforced prejudices against female artists. Maria Llüisa Faxedas Brujats's essay analyzes abstract art from a feminist perspective and, by exploring the intertwining of the physical presence of the body and abstraction, opens up a research perspective that has thus far been largely neglected.

— The final section, *Revisiting Female Art Stories*, presents two case studies that highlight the imbalance in art-historical analyses of works by male versus female artists. In contrast to the analysis of artworks by their male colleagues, the analysis of artworks created by women often focuses on the artist rather than on the artwork. With her essay on Frida Kahlo, Julia Kloss-Weber contributes to a paradigm shift in this area by focusing not on the artist's biography but on her artistic concept of *autopoiesis*, which has received little attention to date. Fernanda Pequeno examines how the Brazilian artist Lygia Pape provocatively highlighted the commercialization of the female body in three different works from the 1970s. As Pequeno demonstrates, Lygia Pape succeeds in challenging both political and gender-specific mechanisms of oppression through the use of complex communicative strategies. Pape, too, worked under a dictatorial regime. This raises the question of whether a different

structure for the contributions—one more closely aligned with the (partially overlapping) political contexts—might have been more enlightening: for example, by combining Pequeno's contribution with that of Saray Espinosa on the Spanish/Portuguese dictatorship, or also by linking political and feminist resistance.

— Overall, this anthology succeeds in illustrating, through a variety of thematic approaches, the diverse and multifaceted ways in which female artists were able to navigate the power structures they faced: from artistic engagement to concrete strategies for gaining access to the academic world or specific artistic fields, to strengthening their own positions through the formation of networks. In this context, it seems worthwhile to deliberately adopt a broad definition of the term *artist* because—as Sol Izquierdo de la Viña's contribution in particular demonstrates—it is sometimes only through a new interpretation of artistic expression (in this case, the operation of a guesthouse as a cultural practice) that a nearly forgotten artist can be rehabilitated.

— The editors thus fully live up to their claim to challenge the traditions, the canon, and the dominant narratives of art history. The post- and decolonial lens, however, remains somewhat underdeveloped, as none of the contributions addresses the question posed at the outset—namely, the influence of the external perception of the Iberian and Ibero-American world as a cultural *periphery* and the simultaneous division by the *colonial wound*—with the desired depth. Here, at least some initial observations would have been useful—or, alternatively, a (perhaps ultimately more stringent) limitation to the feminist lens applied in all the contributions, which is in itself sufficiently illuminating.

— It may be due to this underdeveloped theoretical strand that the specific nature of the topic as it pertains to the cultural sphere of Ibero-America and the Iberian Peninsula remains only partially apparent. While it is certainly compelling that the editors aim to diversify feminist art histories beyond the English-language canon through this geographical focus, and the publication undoubtedly makes a significant contribution to research in this regard, the potentially distinctive manifestations of artistic feminism within this cultural sphere remain vague.

— In a certain respect, the editors do not entirely escape their own critical approach: while they designed the conference proceedings to be multilingual as a critical response to the dominance of Anglo-centric feminist studies, the English-language contributions in fact predominate. In addition to five English articles, three are in Spanish and—surprisingly—one is in German. This highlights both

the dominant position of English as a language of science and that of Spanish within the Iberian world. At least one article in Portuguese would have been highly desirable. A similar imbalance is reflected in the local focus of the topics: only one of the articles deals with Portugal, and another with Brazil.

— Despite these minor shortcomings, the anthology is well worth reading and enriches art history with vivid case studies, new perspectives, and critical questions. It is to be hoped that art history will now, in a similarly ambitious manner, open itself up to questions that move beyond the binary gender perspective, and, not least, that other disciplines will also dare to turn the mirror around in such a stimulating and intelligent way. Publications such as these—owing especially to international collaborations among researchers—could bring about a truly new reorientation of (not only art-historical) research.

// About the Author

Leonie Schuster studied Latin American Studies, Spanish Language, and Modern History in Berlin and Porto Alegre, Brazil. She earned her Ph.D. in 2017 from the Department of History and Cultural Studies at Freie Universität Berlin. She has been a lecturer at the Department of Romance Languages at Kiel University since 2019, and has also been teaching at Leuphana University Lüneburg since 2025. In addition, she works as a freelance trainer in education for sustainable development and global learning. Her research interests focus on Latin America and on cultural and global historical approaches. Publications: Representations of the first South Atlantic air crossing by the Portuguese Sacadura Cabral and Gago Coutinho in the Brazilian press: between colonial continuities and national self-assertion (1922), in: Dominique Faria / Alan Dobson / António Monteiro / Luís Nuno Rodrigues (eds.): *L'aviation et son impact sur le temps et l'espace*, Paris 2019, pp. 161–188; *Brasilianische Höhenflüge. Luftfahrtpioniere und Imaginationen von Nation und Welt in Brasilien, 1900–1922*, Stuttgart 2019.

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