

Feminist Art

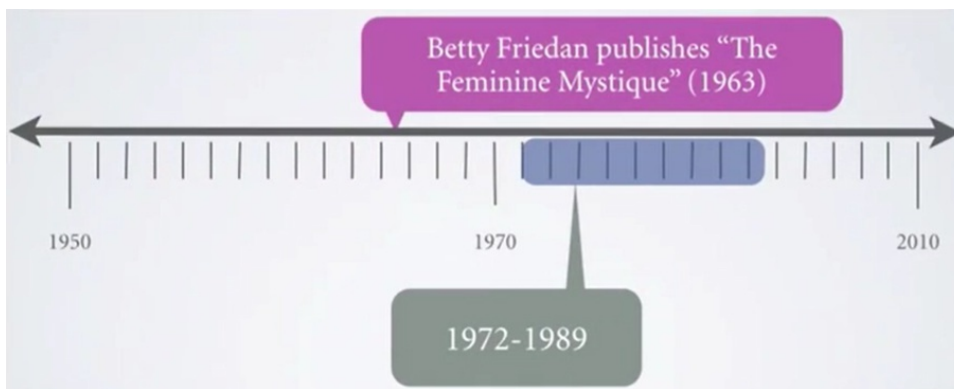
by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson is about feminist art. Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" was especially influential in raising the question of the exclusion of women from exhibitions and from the art world in general. By the end of the lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms, describe the influences on the development of feminist art, and identify examples of feminist art. You will cover:

You'll be looking at artwork from between 1972 and 1989 today.



1. "Untitled Film Still #35"

This is a photograph from a larger collection that parodies clichéd depictions of women:



Untitled Film Still #35 by Cindy Sherman

1979

Photograph

Cindy Sherman's work, and the other artists' work you'll look at today, shares inspiration and influences that can be linked to the second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s. It began in the 1960s, around the 1963 publication of Betty Friedan's book titled *The Feminine Mystique*.

This work challenged the contemporary notion of the female's role in a male-centric society. The **civil rights** movement and second-wave feminism of the 1960s informed the **feminist art** movement of the 1970s.

The feminist art movement was also strongly influenced by Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", which helped raise the question of the exclusion of women from exhibitions and from the art world in general.

Feminist art transcends a specific style. It represents the empowerment of women in bringing attention to important feminine issues through art. It could fall within any stylistic genre.



BIG IDEA

Nochlin's essay was especially influential in raising the question of the exclusion of women from exhibitions and from the art world in general.



TERMS TO KNOW

Civil Rights

A set of legal, social, and economic rights that advocate for equality for all individuals and minority groups.

Feminist Art

Artwork that is focused on raising political and social awareness of the experiences of women.

2. “Your Body is a Battleground”

Barbara Kruger took a rather unique approach to her form of conceptual art, using bold colors and short messages to grab the viewer’s attention and deliver the message with as much impact as possible. She’s essentially taken the mass media approach of advertising, but translated it to fine art.



Your Body is a Battleground by Barbara Kruger

1989

Silkscreen on vinyl

3. “The Dinner Party”

Judy Chicago is a well-known artist within the feminist movement. She actually coined the term “feminist art” during the 1970s. She was born in Chicago, but she changed her last name from “Cohen” to “Chicago” as a personal display of female independence. Then, she moved to California, where she first taught at Fresno State before moving onto CalArts, located north of Los Angeles. Here she co-founded a project called “Womanhouse.”

“Womanhouse” was a large installation project where numerous women from the community contributed works of art that function as props within the home. It was a house essentially built by and for women with no male influence, and a concept that challenged traditional gender roles.

However, her masterpiece is the work titled “The Dinner Party,” pictured below. It is a large installment piece on permanent exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in New York.



The Dinner Party by Judy Chicago

1979

Mixed media

As the name suggests, it’s set up as a large table setting for a dinner party, alluding to the fact that throughout history, women have been omitted from the historical record. The open triangle is symbolic of equality, and it’s populated with place settings and objects created by dozens of people that Chicago hired to embroider the tablecloth and placemats, cast the plates, and paint them.

There’s an emphasis on crafts, such as embroidery and China painting, which are typically female-centric categories of art. These types of art fell outside of the male focus and historically weren’t considered forms of high art, at least from the male perspective. There’s also the use of **central core imagery** in the butterfly and flower imagery on the dinner plates, which represent the female vulva.

It’s a monumental form of conceptual art, with each of the place settings representing 39 important women from history, and an additional 999 names of women inscribed on the Heritage Floor, as it’s called, where the table is located.



TERM TO KNOW

Central Core Imagery

A term used to describe artists whose work is focused on female genitalia and the body.

4. “The Liberation of Aunt Jemima”

Betye Saar’s assemblage work of art, “The Liberation of Aunt Jemima,” explores feminist issues in relation to race. The trademark of Aunt Jemima goes back to 1893, when the racist **stereotypes** of the late 1800s and early 1900s, such as the mammy, the pickaninny, and the Little Black Sambo, were prevalent. These stereotypes were still commonplace in American popular culture at the time that this work was created in

1972.



The Liberation of Aunt Jemima by Betye Saar

1972

Assemblage

Saar chose to create a parody of the depiction of Aunt Jemima to address these stereotypes and, in a sense, reclaim them from popular usage. She created a stereotypical depiction of a house servant with an inset of a similar image of a housekeeper holding a biracial child. The background is that of the repeated image of the Aunt Jemima advertisement.



DID YOU KNOW

The inclusion of the gun and hand grenade weren't condoning violence but rather were a sign of assertiveness to gain the public's attention. She once stated in an interview that although she dislikes guns, they definitely get someone's attention.

The reclamation and parody of the imagery seems to function as a form of artistic catharsis, marginalizing an antiquated and derogatory depiction that was emotionally challenging and harmful for African Americans, particularly during a time when these images were really the predominant ones in the media.



TERM TO KNOW

Stereotype

A process of fixed thinking that standardizes groups of people, images, or values; often negative, biased, and derogatory.

5. Guerilla Girls

The work of the Guerrilla Girls includes posters and interventions that point out continued bias and sexism in the art world. It began in the mid-1980s and continues to exist with anonymous female artists and feminists who assume the names of dead female artists.



Do Women Have to be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum? by Guerrilla Girls

1989

Poster

Protests and the aforementioned advertisements, such as the one pictured above, function as a form of social awareness of how females are depicted unfairly in the art world internationally.

This particular image from 1989 poses a question about the catalog of the Metropolitan Museum in New York by creating a poster of a reclining nude with their trademark gorilla mask based upon the “Odalisque” painting by Jean Ingres. It is a painting whose subject matter concerns a fascination with sexual subjugation of women.

Guerrilla Girls poster with original “Odalisque”:



SUMMARY

Now that you’ve seen the lesson, are you able to identify and define today’s key terms? Can you describe the influences on the development of feminist art? Can you identify examples of feminist art?

You looked at several important examples today that included “Untitled Film Still #35”, “Your Body is a Battleground”, “The Dinner Party”, “The Liberation of Aunt Jemima”, and work by the Guerilla Girls.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Ian McConnell

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