

Women Painting Women Painting

This brief piece attempts to show, through the ages, how women artists have chosen to portray themselves or other women as artists. This sample of art works spans four centuries, from the mid sixteenth century to the mid twentieth century.

Sofonisba Anguissola (1532-1635) was an Italian Renaissance painter, daughter of relatively poor noble parents who sent her to apprentice with local painters. She later became painter to the Spanish court of Phillip II. She was well regarded during her lifetime for her portraiture. Sofonisba painted one of the longest series of self-portraits, from adolescence to old age. The self-portrait below was completed when Sofonisba was 24 years old.



Sofonisba Anguissola, *Self-Portrait Painting a Devotional Panel*, 1556, Lancut Castle, Lancut, Poland

Judith Leyster (1609-1660) was a Dutch Golden Age painter. Until 1893, her work was often attributed to Frans Hals or to her husband. Her self-portrait, presented below, is believed to be her presentation painting for the Saint Luke's Guild of Haarlem and is now considered to be one of the most popular Dutch paintings in the collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.



Judith Leyster, *Self-Portrait*, 1630, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653) was an Italian Baroque painter, now regarded as one of the most expressive and progressive painters of her time. Her achievements as an artist were overshadowed by the story of her rape by Agostino Tassi. Nevertheless, she was one of the few female painters of her generation to achieve fame during her own era. Artemisia is the subject of a biographical novel, *The Passion of Artemisia* by Susan Vreeland (2002). A television series based on her life is slated for production this year.



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting*, 1638, Collection of the British Royal Family

Rosalba Carriera (1673-1757) was a Venetian Rococo painter who started her career painting miniatures. Carriera is best known for her innovative approach to pastels, which had previously been used for informal drawings and preparatory sketches. She is credited with popularizing the use of pastels as a medium for serious portraiture. The self-portrait below shows Carriera with a portrait of her sister, Giovanna.



Rosalba Carriera, *Self-Portrait*, 1715, Brooklyn Museum

Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun (1755-1842) was a prominent French portrait painter. Her artistic style has been described as late Rococo with elements of the neoclassicism that was emerging during her career. Le Brun was the portraitist of Marie Antoinette, completing 30 portraits of the queen. Some of her portraits were considered scandalous at the time: she dared to show teeth in her portraits (contrary to the tight-lipped rules of French painting) and she painted Marie Antoinette in a simple cotton dress...considered too informal and inelegant. She was admitted to the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in 1783, in part due to Marie-Antoinette's influence. Le Brun is the subject of a two part television documentary, *The Fabulous Life of Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, Portraitist of Marie-Antoinette* (2018), available for rental on Amazon or available free with Amazon Prime.



Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, *Self-Portrait with a Straw Hat*, 1782, National Gallery, London

Adélaïde Labille-Guiard (1749-1803) was a French miniaturist and portrait painter. Like Le Brun, Labille-Guiard was one of the first women to become a member of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture; in fact, the two women were admitted during the same session (1783). Labille-Guiard was the first female artist to receive permission to set up a studio for her students at the Louvre.



Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, *Self-Portrait with Two Pupils*, 1785, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC

Angelica Kauffman (1741-1807), born in Switzerland, lived the bulk of her life in England, where she achieved quick success as a portraitist. Remembered as a history painter, she, along with Mary Moser, was one of two female founders of the Royal Academy in London. Kauffman was also a talented musician, and had to choose between music and art. Her self-portrait below illustrates the struggle she experienced between the two.



Angelica Kauffman, *Self-Portrait of the Artist Hesitating Between the Arts of Music and Painting*,
1794, Nostell Priory, West Yorkshire.

Marie-Denise Lemoine Villers (1774-1821) was a neoclassic French painter who specialized in portraits. She was married to an architect who, uncommon for the times, supported her in her artistic endeavors. The painting below was initially attributed to a male artist, Jacques Louis David, but is now believed to be by Villers. The portrait hangs in the Metropolitan Museum in NYC close to artwork by her sister, Marie Victorine Lemoine.



Marie-Denise Villers, *Marie Josephine Charlotte du Val d'Ognes*, 1801

Edma Morisot Pointillon (1839-1921), a French painter, was the sister of the more well-known Berthe Morisot. The sisters trained together and shared studio space. Her landscape paintings were highly influenced by the Barbizon style; one of her instructors was Corot. In 1863, Edma painted her sister Berthe in front of her easel.



Edma Morisot Pontillon, *Portrait of the Artist's Sister*, 1863, Private Collection

Berthe Morisot (1841-1895) was an Impressionist painter, and known as one of the three “grandes dames” of impressionism (the other two were Marie Braquemond and Mary Cassatt). Morisot was a long-time friend and colleague of the French painter, Edouard Manet; she married Manet’s brother, Eugène. Edouard Manet painted several portraits of Morisot. Morisot exhibited with other impressionists, including Manet and Monet. In regard to the impressionists’ 1874 exhibition, *Le Figaro* art critic, Albert Wolff proclaimed that the Impressionists consisted of “five or six lunatics of which one is a woman... [whose] feminine grace is maintained amid the outpourings of a delirious mind.” By 1880, Wolff, had however, decided that Morisot was among the best.

In February 2013, Morisot became the highest priced female artist, when *After Lunch* (1881), a portrait of a young redhead in a straw hat and purple dress, sold for \$10.9 million at a Christie's auction achieving approximately three times its pre-auction estimate.

The portrait below is of Morisot’s sister’s (Yves) daughter, Paule Gobillard.



Berthe Morisot, *Paule Gobillard Drawing*, 1886, Private Collection

Marie Bracquemond (1840-1916) is the least known of the three “grandes dames” of Impressionism, overshadowed by her husband, Felix Bracquemond. According to the Bracquemonds’ son Pierre, Félix was often resentful of his wife, brusquely rejecting her critique of his work, and refusing to show her paintings to visitors. In 1890, Marie, worn out by the continual household friction and discouraged by lack of interest in her work, abandoned her painting except for a few private works and became somewhat of a recluse. The following is an etching by Marie Bracquemond, completed around 1880. The subject of the etching is subject to some uncertainty. Some have called it a self-portrait. It has also been called *Femme à la palette devant sa toile* - Nelly Jacquemard.



Marie Bashkirtseff (1858-1884) was a Russian artist and diarist. She decided early on that she wanted to be famous. She set out to be a singer, but her chance at success ended when illness destroyed her voice. Subsequently, she was determined to become a painter. By the time of her death from tuberculosis at 25, she had had only minor success as a painter. A number of her paintings were destroyed by the Nazis during World War II. Nevertheless approximately 60 survive.

However, it was her journal that ended up bringing her the most fame, albeit posthumously. Originally redacted considerably when published in 1887, a complete translated version was subsequently published. The two volumes, entitled, respectively, *I Am the Most Interesting Book of All: The Diary of Marie Bashkirtseff* (1997) and *Lust for Glory* (2013), are available on Amazon. The following is a link to an interesting article about Bashkirtseff's efforts to achieve celebrity. <https://publicdomainreview.org/essay/marie-bashkirtseff>

The painting below depicts Bashkirtseff and other students in the studio; she is the central figure in the foreground.



Marie Bashkirtseff, *In the Studio*, 1881, Denver Art Museum

Vanessa Bell (1879-1961) was an English painter and interior designer known for her post-impressionist paintings emphasizing bold forms with pronounced brush strokes and rich colors. After her parents' deaths, she settled in the Bloomsbury area of London with her siblings, including her sister, Virginia Woolf. The group of artists, writers and intellectuals who came to frequent their home became known as the Bloomsbury Group. Vanessa was married to Clive Bell, an art critic, although they had an "open marriage", each conducting romantic relationships with others throughout their time together.

The three part television series, *Life in Squares*, dramatizes the lives of members of the Bloomsbury group over a 40 year period, focusing on the relationship between Bell and her sister, Virginia Woolf. It is available on Amazon Prime. The relationship between Vanessa and Virginia is also explored in two novels, the 2010 novel by Susan Sellers, *Vanessa and Virginia*, and the 2014 novel by Priya Parmar, *Vanessa and Her Sister*.



Vanessa Bell, *Frederick and Jessie Etchells Painting*, 1912, The Tate Gallery

Alice Bailly (1872-1938) was a Swiss avant garde painter who participated in the Fauvist, Cubist and Dada movements. Her most noted work is her 1917 Self-Portrait, pictured below.



Alice Bailly, *Self-Portrait*, 1917, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC.

Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941), a Hungarian Indian artist, has been called one of the greatest avant garde women artists of the early 20th century and a pioneer in modern Indian art. Her paintings are among the most expensive of female Indian artists today, although few acknowledged her work while she was alive.

She often used her paintbrush to depict the daily lives of Indian women in the 1930s, often revealing a sense of their loneliness and even hopelessness. With her style and her emphasis on women, Sher-Gil became known as the “Indian Frida Kahlo.” The artist died at the young age of 28, just as she was beginning to gain widespread popularity.

The photo below is of a self-portrait, painted by Sher-Gil when studying in Paris in the 1930s.



Amrita Sher-Gil, *Self-Portrait (5)*, 1932, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi

Lois Mailou Jones (1905-1998) spent seven decades as an artist. She was the first African-American graduate of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Jones started out in textile design, and created bold, art deco influenced designs for draperies and slipcovers. She was recruited to teach at Howard University in 1930, where she became one of its most eminent professors, teaching watercolor and design, retiring 47 years later, in 1977. Married to a Haitian, Jones produced numerous Haitian inspired oil and water color paintings. Her work also echoed her pride in her African roots and ancestry. Jones felt that her greatest contribution to the art world was "proof of the talent of black artists". She wished to be known as an American painter with no labels.



Lois Mailou Jones, *Self-Portrait*, 1940, American Art Museum, Smithsonian

Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) was a Mexican painter known for her portraits, self-portraits, and scenes inspired by Mexican popular culture. Despite being disabled by polio as a child, she was headed to medical school until she was critically injured in a bus accident at the age of 18, which subjected her to lifelong pain. During her recovery, she returned to her childhood interest in art. Interested in politics, she joined the Mexican Communist Party, where she met her husband and fellow artist, Diego Rivera.

Kahlo's work as an artist remained relatively unknown until the late 1970s. Today, Frida Kahlo is viewed as an icon. Kahlo's body of work is relatively small. She painted herself over and over. Of her 143 paintings, 55 are self-portraits. Of her penchant for painting self-portraits, Kahlo said "I paint myself because I am so often alone and because I am the subject I know best." Her self-portraits often reflect interpretation of physical and psychological wounds.

The painting below is Kahlo's last signed self-portrait. In this portrait, she painted herself with her surgeon, Doctor Juan Farill. Farill performed seven surgeries on Kahlo's spine in 1951. After her recovery (she spent nine months in the hospital), this self-portrait with Dr. Farill was her first painting, which she dedicated to her surgeon.



Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait with the Portrait of Dr. Farill*, 1951, Private Collection

Alice Neel (1900-1984) was an American painter known for her Expressionistic and daringly honest portraits of friends, family and lovers. She is widely regarded as one of the foremost American figurative artists of the 20th century. She called herself “a collector of souls”. This year, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC, will present her solo exhibition, *Alice Neel: People Come First* (March 22-August 1, 2021).

Neel led a troubled life. Her first child died of diphtheria just before her first birthday. Another daughter was lost to her estranged husband’s family in Cuba two years later. That daughter later committed suicide. As a single mother, she raised two sons in Spanish Harlem while on welfare. For most of her life, she was a neglected artist, achieving acclaim only towards the end of her life.

In 1980, four years before her death at age 84, Neel painted her first and only self-portrait, a nude. Though her body appears physically fragile, her gaze is formidable.



Alice Neel, *Self-Portrait*, 1980, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian, Washington DC