

In Honor of Women's History Month: An Homage to Some Great Women Artists

Since March is Women's History Month, I thought it would be fitting, before the month ends, to have a brief look at just a few amazing women artists, from the 16th to the 21st century.

Sofonisba Anguissola (1532-1635) was born to relatively poor noble parents in Cremona, Italy. Her parents made de sure that their daughters had a well-rounded education, including in the fine arts. Unusual for a woman at the time, she was able to apprentice with respected local painters and even was informally mentored by Michelangelo. Despite not being able, as a woman, to study anatomy or practice drawing models, Anguissola had a fairly successful career as an artist, in particular as painter to the court of the Spanish king, Phillip II. Well regarded during her lifetime for her portraiture, Anguissola painted one of the longest series of self-portraits, from adolescence to old age.

The drawing below, created when Anguissola was 22, depicts the artist's brother, Asdrubale, and sister, Europa. Asdrubale is crying in pain after putting his hand in a basket where a lobster was hidden.



Sofonisba Anguissola, *Child Bitten by a Lobster*, 1554.

The work below is known as a *mise-en-abyme*, or a painting within a painting. It shows the artist Bernardino Campi working on a painting of Anguissola. Notice the subject's third arm, as if reaching to take the brush from Campi.



Sofonisba Anguissola, *Bernardino Campi Painting Sofonisba Anguissola*, c. 1559.

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653) was an Italian Baroque painter, one of a few female painters to achieve renown when she was alive and now regarded as one of the most expressive and progressive painters of her time. Her recounting of her rape by artist Agostino Tassi, which she stuck to despite torture, threatened to overshadow her artistic career. Nevertheless, she managed not only to be one of few women to achieve fame during her own era, but to become regarded as one of the finest artists of her generation. Gentileschi is the subject of a biographical novel, *The Passion of Artemisia* by Susan Vreeland (2002), the subject of the 1997 film *Artemisia* and of a 2020 documentary, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Warrior Painter*.

Perhaps one of Gentileschi's most famous paintings, *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (ca. 1613–14), shown below, literally depicts the Old Testament figure Judith slaying an Assyrian ruler who had attacked Jewish peoples, has also been interpreted as a way for Gentileschi to avenge her rape by Tassi.



Another of Gentileschi's well-known paintings is her self-portrait in which she depicts herself painting.



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting (La Pittura)*, ca. 1638–39.

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. Leyster was one of only two women accepted as a master in Haarlem's painters' guild during the entire 17th century.



Judith Leyster, *Self-Portrait*, 1630.

Leyster was known for painting lively scenes of musicians and drinkers, capturing the leisure time and entertainments of the Dutch during the 17th century. The *Jolly Companions*, shown below is a good example. This painting was attributed to Frans Hals until 1893 when Leyster's signature was discovered.



Judith Leyster, *Jolly Companions*, 1630.

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 Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, Portraitist of Marie-Antoinette* (2018). Below are two of her self-portraits.



Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, *Self-Portrait with a Straw Hat*, 1782.



Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, *Self-Portrait with Her Daughter, Julie*, 1789

During her lifetime, the French painter, **Rosa Bonheur** (1822-1899) was widely acclaimed for her extraordinarily realistic paintings of animals. Her first major success was *Oxen Ploughing in the Nivernais* (1849), commissioned by the French government, and now hanging in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. Her most famous painting is probably *The Horse Fair* (1852-55). For a year and a half, Bonheur sketched at the horse market on the Boulevard de l'Hôpital in Paris, dressed as a man, perhaps to avoid attention. The painting is part of the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. In 1865, Bonheur became the first woman to receive the Légion d'Honneur for achievement in the arts. Presenting the award, Empress Eugénie, wife of Napoleon III, declared, "Genius has no sex."



Rosa Bonheur, *Oxen Ploughing in the Nivernais*, 1849.



Rosa Bonheur, *The Horse Fair*, 1852-55.

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 *Après le Déjeuner (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.

Morisot was the subject of the 2012 French film, *Berthe Morisot*, shows her passion for painting, focusing on her relationship with Edouard Manet.



Berthe Morisot, *Self-Portrait*, 1885.



Berthe Morisot, *Après le Déjeuner*, 1881.

American artist, **Mary Cassatt** (1844-1926), spent most of her adult life in France, where she was invited by Edgar Degas to join the independent artists later known as the Impressionists. Cassatt's first impressionist painting is often considered to be *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair* (1878).



Mary Cassatt, *Little Girl in A Blue Armchair*, 1878.

Cassatt often created images of the social and private lives of women, with particular emphasis on the intimate bonds between mothers and children. One of the most celebrated is *The Child's Bath* (1893), influenced by her study of Japanese art.



Mary Cassatt, *The Child's Bath*, 1893.

Mirrors were a common device in Cassatt's work. In *Woman with a Sunflower*, there are two mirrors. The small handheld mirror effectively acts as the medium of communication between mother and child. As for the large sunflower on the mother's dress, the sunflower had become the official symbol of the National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1896. Cassatt herself was a fierce advocate for women's rights.



Mary Cassatt, *Woman with a Sunflower*, 1905.

Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) is one of the most significant artists of the 20th century. As early as the 1920's O'Keeffe was recognized as one of the most important and successful American artists, known for her paintings of skyscrapers and enlarged flowers. She first visited New Mexico in 1929, whose landscape and culture inspired a new direction in her art. In 2014, O'Keeffe's 1932 painting *Jimson Weed/White Flower No. 1* sold for over \$44 million, more than three times the previous world auction record for any female artist. After her death, the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum was established in Santa Fe. The museum's collection has close to 150 of O'Keeffe's paintings as well as hundreds of works on paper. O'Keeffe and her husband, the photographer, Alfred Stieglitz, were the subjects of the 2009 biographical drama TV show, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, which received numerous Emmy nominations in 2010.



Georgia O'Keeffe, *Red Canna*, 1924.



Georgia O'Keeffe, *Ram's Head White Hollyhock and Little Hills*, 1935.



Georgia O'Keeffe, *Jimson Weed, White Flower No. 1*, 1932.

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 and Rivera married in 1929. Rivera was 20 years Kahlo's senior. Kahlo was Rivera's fourth wife. The two had a messy relationship, marked by fights, extramarital affairs and a divorce (followed by remarriage a year later). Kahlo died at age 47; the official cause was pulmonary embolism. After Kahlo's death, Rivera would go on to marry a fifth time.

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 first of Kahlo's paintings shown below is Rivera's and Kahlo's wedding painting, painted in 1931. The second is *Diego on My Mind (Self-Portrait as a Tehuana)* began in 1940, when she was divorced from artist husband, Diego Rivera, but did not finish it until 1943. The self-portrait incorporates a portrait of Rivera on Kahlo's forehead, indicative of her obsessive love for him. In the painting, Kahlo is dressed as a Tehuana, a matriarchal society located in Oaxaca, Mexico. The third 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.

The 2002 film, *Frida*, explores the life of the artist, including her relationship with Rivera.



Frida Kahlo, *Frida and Diego Rivera*, 1931.



Frida Kahlo, *Diego on My Mind*, 1943.



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

With a career spanning eight decades from the 1930s until 2010, The French-American artist, **Louise Bourgeois** (1911-2010), is one of the great figures of modern and contemporary art. She is best known for her large-scale sculptures and installations inspired by her memories and experiences.

Inspired by the Surrealists, in the early 1940's after emigrating from France to the US, Bourgeois created a series of totemic sculptures that evoke the human form and were referred to as Personages. The artist explained that the sculptures were a way of recreating all the people she had left behind. In this early piece (1941) shown below, entitled *Quarantania*, the figures not only represent a family of human figures, but also represent shuttles, one of the tools that Bourgeois' parents used when they restored tapestries at their family-owned business.



Louise Bourgeois, *Quarantania*, 1941.

Bourgeois started crafting her iconic spider sculptures late in her career. Her 30-foot-tall spider statue, *Maman (Ama)*, 1999, includes a sac containing 32 marble eggs and its abdomen and thorax are made of ribbed bronze. According to Bourgeois, “The Spider is an ode to my mother. She was my best friend. Like a spider, my mother was a weaver. My family was in the business of tapestry restoration, and my mother was in charge of the workshop. Like spiders, my mother was very clever. Spiders are friendly presences that eat mosquitoes. We know that mosquitoes spread diseases and are therefore unwanted. So, spiders are helpful and protective, just like my mother.”



Louise Bourgeois, *Maman*, 1999.

The American artist, **Helen Frankenthaler** (1928-2011) ¹, had an artistic career spanning six decades. She is widely credited with having a key role in the transition from Abstract Expressionism to Color Field painting.

Frankenthaler invented the "soak-stain" technique, in which she poured turpentine-thinned paint onto unprimed canvas, producing luminous color washes that appeared to merge with the canvas. Her breakthrough painting using this technique was her 1952 *Mountains and Sea*. She was only 23 at the time. The work was initially panned by critics; it was to become her best-known canvas. The work is considered to be a precursor to color field painting.



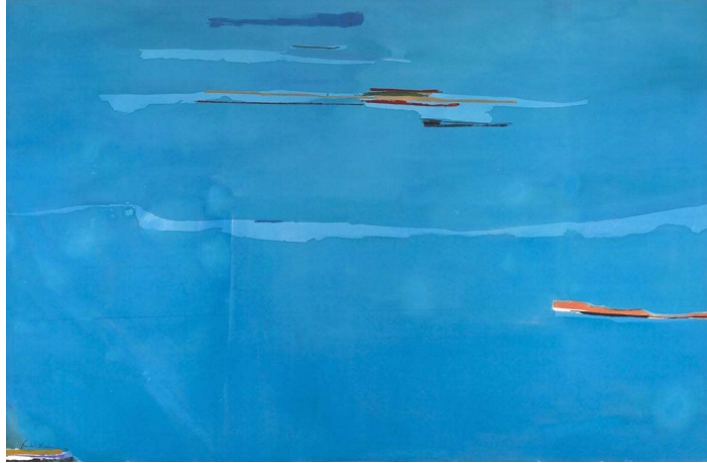
Helen Frankenthaler, *Mountains and Seas*, 1952.

Color Field painting is a term that was coined by the art critic Clement Greenberg to describe the works of Abstract Expressionist painters who composed paintings with broad expanses of saturated color. Below are two of Frankenthaler's works which fall under the rubric of Color Field painting.



Helen Frankenthaler, *Riverhead*, 1963.

¹ For those of you who attended VAC's Annual Meeting in January 2022 and heard our guest speaker, Kit Porter, you may recall that she cited Helen Frankenthaler as one of the artists who influenced her own work.



Helen Frankenthaler, *Ocean Drive West #1*, 1974.

Leonora Carrington (1917-2011) was a British-Mexican surrealist painter, as well as a novelist. She often painted narrative scenes inhabited by mysterious people and creatures participating in strange rituals. While critics were often dismissive of women surrealist painters, she was encouraged by the artist Max Ernst (whom she lived in France with after he divorced his second of four wives). World War II resulted in both Carrington and Ernst fleeing France, Carrington to Spain and Ernst to the US with the assistance of Peggy Guggenheim. Carrington suffered from extreme emotional distress while in Spain and was institutionalized and treated with shock therapy and experimental drugs. Eventually, she was able to make her way to Mexico, where she remained the rest of her life, becoming a force in the Women's Liberation movement and in the art world. Carrington died in 2011, the last link to the Surrealist movement.

Among Carrington's best-known works are her self-portrait, the first of her surrealist pieces, and her portrait of Max Ernst.



Leonora Carrington, *Self Portrait (The Inn of the Dark Horse)*, 1938-9.



Leonora Carrington, *Portrait of Max Ernst*, 1939.

An hour-long 2017 documentary, *Leonora Carrington: The Lost Surrealist*, is available on YouTube.

Betye Saar (b. 1926) is an African-American artist known for her assemblage and collage works of art, mostly using found objects, for which she scavenges. At 93 (2019), she had a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art in NYC. When asked why major attention was finally coming her way, she responded, "Because it's about time! I've had to wait until I am practically 100."

Saar's first assemblages include the insertion of her own prints and drawings into window frames. Her *Black Girl's Window* (1969) is not only an iconic autobiographical work but it also demonstrates her interest in addressing race and contemporary events in her art. After the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., her assemblages became increasingly radical. For her best-known work, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972), Saar armed a Mammy caricature with a rifle and a hand grenade, transforming her from a derogatory image into a warrior against derogatory stereotypes and imagery. Saar has continued to create art into her 90s; *Gliding Into Midnight* (2019), a sculpture of a canoe filled with ceramic hands hung to hover above a diagram of a vessel used during the transatlantic slave trade, speaks to the legacy of slavery.



Betye Saar, *A Black Girl's Window*, 1969.



Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972.



Betye Saar, *Gliding into Midnight*, 2019.

The Japanese artist, **Yayoi Kusama** (b. 1929), is one of the most popular contemporary artists in the world. She works primarily in sculpture and installation, but is also active in painting, performance, film, fashion, and literature. Her work is so popular that visitors to museums line up for hours only to be allowed to view one of her installations for a minute. Part of the explanation for her popularity is Instagram: viewers take selfies at her installations and post them. Kusama has lived voluntarily for the past 40 plus years at the Seiwa Hospital for the Mentally Ill in Tokyo since 1977.

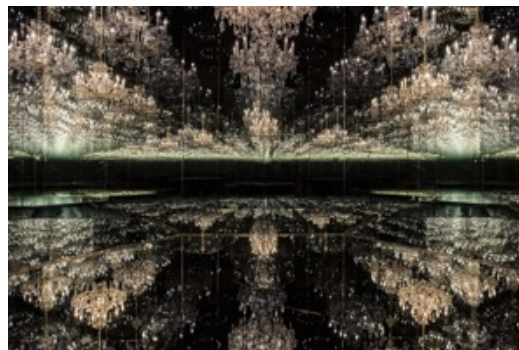
Kusama is famous for her repeating polka dot patterns. She has been called the “Princess of Polka Dots”. Apparently, her obsession with polka dots is tied to a childhood trauma. She also has a passion for pumpkins, which she views as representative of stability, modesty and comfort. The piece below combines pumpkins and polka dots.



Yayoi Kusama, *Pumpkin*, 1990.

Kusama is also known for her infinity rooms. *Chandelier of Grief* has as its central element a rotating chandelier of Swarovski crystal, which comes to life in a room lined with mirrors. The room gives the illusion of being in endless space. You can view the installation at this link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LnOmA3_cqEs&ab_channel=VictoriaMiro



Yayoi Kusama, *Chandelier of Grief*, 2016/2018.