

Review: Zoë Thomas, *Women Art Workers and the Arts and Crafts Movement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020) 268pp. ISBN 978-1-5261-4043-2, £80.00.

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BEFORE ANTHEA CALLEN'S pioneering work, *Angel in the Studio: Women and the Arts and Crafts Movement* (1979), most scholarship on the Arts and Crafts movement centred on William Morris as the leading figure of what was considered a male-dominated movement.¹ Since Callen's study, more attention has been paid to women's participation in the Arts and Crafts movement, but the tendency has been to focus on the contributions of individual women or on specific crafts.² In *Women Art Workers*, Zoë Thomas builds on a recent critical trend of considering nineteenth-century women and their artistic and literary practices within context – that is, not as isolated, marginalised figures, but as part of collectives and partnerships that contributed to their experiences.³ Through outstanding archival research of personal and professional accounts, and meticulous engagement with previous critical studies of the subject, Thomas examines the Arts and Crafts movement from the perspective of the collective of female artists who helped to bring the movement into the public eye. Thomas's mode of inquiry follows a

¹ Anthea Callen, *Angel in the Studio: Women and the Arts and Crafts Movement, 1870-1914* (London: Astragal, 1979). See also Fine Art Society, *The Arts and Crafts Movement: Artists, Craftsmen & Designers, 1890-1930* (London: Fine Art Society, 1973), and Holbrook Jackson, *William Morris & the Arts & Crafts* (Berkeley Heights: Oriole Press, 1934).

² For examples of studies which follow this tendency, see Cheryl Buckley, *Potters and Paintresses: Women Designers in the Pottery Industry, 1870-1955* (London: Women's Press, 1990); Pauline Rose, *Working Against the Grain: Women Sculptors in Britain c.1885-1950* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002); Anna Mason, *May Morris: Arts and Crafts Designer* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2017).

³ Zoë Thomas, *Women Art Workers and the Arts and Crafts Movement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020). See Alison Chapman, *Networking the Nation: British and American Women's Poetry and Italy, 1840-1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Lucy Ella Rose, *Suffragist Artists in Partnership: Gender, Word and Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

unique path by centring its discussion on the buildings and spaces where these gendered networks formed, thus exploring new views of the women as artistic professionals, of their crafts as entrepreneurial products, and of their practices as evidence of their individual and collective ambitions.

Through *Women Art Workers'* distinctive structure, Thomas invites the reader to navigate through the buildings, spaces, and events that shaped the lives and careers of most of the women involved in the Arts and Crafts movement between 1880 and 1920. The journey begins in chapter one with the places where women convened as a professional, artistic network: 'Clubhouses and Guild Halls'. Adopting a chronological approach from the first, male-exclusive societies, such as the Art Workers' Guild created in 1884, to mixed-gender and female-led clubs, Thomas offers a detailed account of the challenges and successes of women attempting to enter and become equal partners within these halls. These challenges and successes, she points out, lead to the formation of the 'revolutionary' Women's Guild of Arts in 1907.⁴ Thomas deconstructs the perception that, due to the women's lack of interest, Arts and Crafts was a 'male' movement, by demonstrating that women were equally invested in becoming part of the public domain through their artistic work.⁵

In the second chapter, the focus moves to exhibition spaces outside of the clubhouses as Thomas explores how these spaces relate to the women's professional, political, social, and artistic agendas.⁶ This chapter re-emphasises the women's desire to become and be seen as part of the public domain, by focusing on how they used their work to engage with the community, leading to the Englishwoman Exhibition of Arts and Handicrafts in 1911. The discussion, however, is not limited to women's participation in exhibitions. Thomas also addresses their involvement in organising committees and their inclusion in the press response to such exhibitions, offering a thorough account of how the women's works were used to formalise their professional goals.

The following chapters take us back into the buildings where the women's works were produced. In chapter three, Thomas demonstrates the relevance of

⁴ Thomas, p. 33.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 33-4.

⁶ Ibid., p. 66.

homes and studios for women's artistic careers by considering domesticity and marriage as a plausible artistic route. By reinforcing the role of the home in terms of women's access to art, Thomas argues that homes provided a unique space for creativity and professional development.⁷ While acknowledging the disparate household experiences of married and unmarried, middle and upper-class women, she demonstrates that domestic partnerships contributed to the idea of the home as a workspace.⁸

Chapter four continues the focus on workspaces, turning our attention to businesses and workshops. Thomas explains how women adopted the practice of the stereotypically masculine 'medieval workshop', thereby revealing their ability to surpass gendered spatial norms.⁹ Another distinctive element in this chapter is the incorporation of the entrepreneurial dimension of Arts and Crafts from the women's perspective – not as consumers, but as designers, makers, and sellers.¹⁰ Whilst this challenges the idea of entrepreneurship as a separate category from artistic professionalism, it also demonstrates how a deeper understanding of artistic entrepreneurship can broaden our perspectives of the women workers' path to professionalisation.¹¹

In chapter five we follow the women as they continue to navigate the public sphere through the movement's involvement with the events of the early twentieth century, such as World War One, and the campaign for women's suffrage. Thomas demonstrates that the women's participation in the public sphere was by no means limited to the occupation of public buildings. Instead, she highlights the strong connection between social and political affairs and Arts and Crafts in this period, thereby reaffirming the position of the women art workers as active contributors to both the public expansion of the movement and to public needs. For instance, following the increasing demand of metal production during the WWI period, E. C. Woodward's metalwork business became the first oxyacetylene workshop for women in 1915, where Woodward trained over a hundred women

⁷ Ibid., p. 109.

⁸ Ibid., p. 129.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 156-7.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 151.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 176.

welders in one year.¹² The adaptation of an Arts and Crafts studio to meet the industrial demands of the war period contributed to the perception of the crafting process as a professional, public service, and of women as crucial actors within the industry.

One limitation of this otherwise comprehensive study is the minimal assessment of how the women's final products, and the materials used to produce them, contributed to the expansion of the collective and its recognition as a professional group. This omission of artistic analysis is, nonetheless, what distinguishes *Women Art Workers* from other studies within the field.¹³ In order to more comprehensively address the public and professional aims of the women's involvement, Thomas justly focuses on the spaces the women occupied rather than the art itself. This is not to say that the women's crafts are completely neglected, as evidenced by the various illustrations incorporated into the discussion. Highlights include the handmade map reflecting the Rope family's artistic and geographic network through the studios they owned across London, and the suffrage protest banners which are illustrative of the connection between the women's works and political matters.¹⁴

Women Art Workers demonstrates how feminist revisionism can recover neglected figures whilst considering the broader context of their experiences. While acknowledging the importance of singular, prominent art workers, Thomas demonstrates that the achievements of the Arts and Crafts movement were also due to a collective of lesser-known figures. Additionally, her concern with broadening our sense of artistic professionalism leads to an expansion of the crafts explored from those more popularly associated with the movement, such as textiles and illustration, to lesser-studied practices, such as woodworking and goldsmithing. The consideration of diverse figures and practices extends to include references to women workers outside England who were involved with the Arts and Crafts movement. While further work is required in reviewing potential

¹² Ibid., p. 201.

¹³ For more analysis of the artworks produced, see *Women Artists and the Decorative Arts, 1880-1935: The Gender of Ornament*, ed. by Bridget Elliott and Janice Helland (Farnham: Ashgate, 2002); Imogen Hart, *Arts and Crafts Objects* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).

¹⁴ Thomas, p. 137; pp. 185-8.

ramifications of the movement outside Britain, this is a step forward in unveiling the transnational networks formed within this artistic phenomenon. Thomas's mode of rethinking the movement has set a new trend that will inspire students, teachers, and researchers alike.



BIOGRAPHY: Cátia Rodrigues is a PhD candidate at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her doctoral research, funded by TECHNE/AHRC, focuses on the diverse artistic networks formed by women who became involved with the Pre-Raphaelite Movement in its first stage (1850-1870), not only as painters, but as writers, illustrators, patrons, and models. She aims to explore the extent to which their participation reveals a collective artistic identity, and how their gendered contributions affected the artistic expansion of the movement. Cátia is currently part of the Association for Art History's DECR Steering Committee, and is the Newsletter Editor for the Women's History Network.

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