

The Awakening of Feminist Artistic Expression: A Comparative Study of the Self-Portrait of Frida Kahlo and the Self-Portrait of Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun

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Abstract. The topic of feminism was not discussed by scholars until the 20th century, but it has become a highly debated issue in today's society. Female portrait artists have been historically marginalized due to the origins of portraiture being intended to please male viewers. In the past, women were predominantly viewed as mothers and housewives within the social context. However, the research has revealed that numerous female artists defied the societal norms of the time and made unique efforts to achieve independence as professional women. In the long history of painting, there have been many female painters who have expressed feminist ideas through their art. This article compares the self-portraits of two portrait painters, Frida Kahlo and Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, in terms of painting themes, methods, and the representation of women. This study explores how female artists' paintings were influenced by the rise of female consciousness in different periods. The final result concludes that feminist awakening is depicted in female-themed paintings across different social periods by female artists.

Keywords: Female Artists; Portraits; feminism; Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun; Frida Kahlo.

1. Introduction

This study examines the influence of feminism on female artists and its significance for both feminist progress and art history. This study mainly compares the self-portraits of two female portrait artists of different ages and backgrounds -Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun and Frida Kahlo. The research performed a thorough comparative analysis of the two individuals' painting themes, professional skills, and distinctive qualities. The aim was to observe how the growth of feminist awareness impacted art in various eras. The research utilized comparative and document analysis methods to gather relevant information, documents, and readings. The advantage of this method is that it can analyze and compare the commonalities and differences between two female artistic portraitists of different eras, which is conducive to the conduct of research; the ultimate research goal of this study is the impact of the awakening of feminism on the different influence of female artists during this period, as well as their impact and role on today's art world.

2. Profiles of the Two Painters

2.1. Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun

From a young age, Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun received artistic instruction from her pastel portraitist father who encouraged her passion for drawing. She learned the techniques of painting by copying pictures created by famous painters such as Rubens, Rembrandt, Van Dyck, and Greuze. Although her father's early death was a significant obstacle to her success, she was already earning money from her portraiture work, which helped her support her family. Later, she was admitted to the Academy of Saint-Luc, and she exhibited her artwork at Salon de la Correspondance. After marrying the art dealer Jean Baptiste Pierre Le Brun, her opportunities to learn from the old masters expanded. She was just twenty-three when she received an invitation to paint her first portrait of the Queen, Marie Antoinette. However, during the Revolution, she fled France to avoid a fate similar to that of her Queen, leaving behind her husband. During the Revolution, she fled Paris with her daughter and left

her husband behind, avoiding the same fate as her famous patron. She spent three years in Italy, two years in Austria, and six years in Russia before returning to Paris in 1801 and eventually settling in England for three years. Throughout her travels, she was well-received and gained admission to many Academies. She painted portraits of aristocratic patrons, just as she had done in France, and became very wealthy. She passed away at the age of eighty-seven in 1842 [1].

2.2. Frida Kahlo

Frida Kahlo, a Mexican artist who lived from 1907 to 1954, is renowned for her figurative and colorful paintings. Her works are filled with symbolism and executed in a deliberately naive style. Kahlo was part of a community of artists and intellectuals in Mexico during the early part of the 20th century who were proud of their Mexican heritage and committed to social reforms through Communism. In 1925, Kahlo experienced severe injuries to her pelvis, spine, and foot while riding a bus that was hit by a streetcar. The consequences of the accident had a profound impact on her life. Kahlo was confined to bed for a significant period of time and underwent numerous surgical procedures. Furthermore, she was unable to conceive, exacerbating the emotional turmoil of her tumultuous marriage to muralist Diego Rivera. These experiences and their effects are evident themes in many of her paintings. Most of Kahlo's work features her image in the central picture plane, exploring both physical and psychological aspects of herself. Her reputation is worldwide, with her work being the subject of many critical reviews and books [2].

3. Comparison of Frida Kahlo and Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun's Painting Features

3.1. The Subjects of Paintings

Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, a celebrated portrait artist during the 18th century, showcased her stunning paintings at the esteemed Salon de la Correspondance following her acceptance into the Academy of Saint-Luc. Her remarkable talent and exceptional social skills paved the way for her to become the official painter of the Queen in no time [1]. Amidst the Revolution, she fled Paris with her daughter, leaving her husband behind to avoid the same fate as her renowned patron. Although politically, Vigée stayed faithful to her pre-Revolutionary ideals [1]. While Vigée enjoyed a prosperous living, particularly overseas where she demanded steep fees for her portraits of the upper echelons, she endured financial uncertainty. Over three years, she journeyed through Italy, followed by two years exploring Austria, six years traversing Russia, and ultimately settling in England for three years upon returning to Paris in 1801. Her travels were met with warm welcomes and she was invited to join numerous Academies. She maintained her practice of painting portraits for aristocratic clients, which had previously brought her wealth in France, and continued to thrive financially [1].

Lots of articles argue that she is not only very confident about her talent but also her social connections to the queen and she benefits from the relationship a lot. Her upbrings may also play a big factor in her success. She was born into a very artistic family and received a high-quality education when she was young. Besides after the sudden death of her father, her mother remarried well to a very wealthy and resourceful jeweler. She managed to grow herself in art and at the same time secure herself a good wealthy husband too. Articles showed that her fiancé was engaged to another woman at the time for a very lucrative family deal. All these indicate that she is a very ambitious woman who sets her bar very high for herself and wants to achieve her goals by all means.

Frida Kahlo, a prominent female artist from Mexico, encountered various challenges and adversities in her personal life and creative process. Nonetheless, she adeptly channeled the pain she endured as a central motif in her self-portraits, expressing her innermost emotions through a grandiose and narrative approach [3]. The core themes of her literary pieces are intricately woven into the following subjects: the enduring agony from a traumatic car accident, her complex relationship with her spouse after being betrayed, her profound admiration and affection for the indigenous culture,

and her fervent belief in communism. All of these themes were born out of Frida's personal life experiences. At this stage of her writing journey, the author's emotions intersected with her subject matter, elevating it to greater heights. Her life experiences inspired and prompted the creation of the subject matter.

Frida is a fighter by all means. She fearlessly challenged societal norms that limited women's actions by actively participating in male-dominated communist movements and bravely entering the political arena to make her voice heard. Frida Kahlo's work unquestionably challenges the privileges that have been granted to European-American male sensibilities by modernism. There is no other example quite like hers [4]. She has such a huge impact that Frida's reputation will continue to grow as individual political strategies move to address the growing multicultural demands and sensibilities of non-mainstream people [4].

Frida Kahlo's artistic legacy continues to inspire young artists today, as her work embodies a deeply personal identity that stands apart from conventional norms. During the 1930s and 1940s, Kahlo's messages were crafted on the fringes of Mexican society, sparking a dialogue that has since become a blueprint for contemporary self-expression among feminists, members of the LGBTQ+ community, Chicanas, and others seeking to assert their individuality through self-generated representations of self [5].

3.2. Painting Skill

Despite the numerous challenges faced by female artists, Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun fearlessly utilized all her connections to gain access to the prestigious 18th-century art world. Despite being mainly self-taught, she boldly secured admission to the Academy of Saint-Luc and showcased her exceptional work for the first time in 1774. Her undeniable talent left audiences in awe. Having honed her skills at the Academy of Saint-Luc, she exhibited her paintings at the prestigious Salon de la Correspondance. Her exceptional abilities and social prowess soon landed her the coveted position of the official painter of the Queen. The "Portrait en robe à paniers" of Marie-Antoinette, which she painted in 1778, marked the beginning of her illustrious career as the Queen's portraitist. Over the course of the next decade, she produced numerous portraits of the Queen with her signature style. In 1783, she boldly secured admission to the Royal Academy, with the help of the Queen, despite her husband's involvement in money trading. Undaunted, she presented her history painting titled "La Paix remnant l'abondance", which translates to "Peace Bringing Back Abundance". Gaining acceptance into the Academy was an absolute necessity for any artist who aimed to belong to the elite artistic community of the country. It provided exclusive training, access to royal patronage, the chance to participate in the Salons, and the ability to build an unwavering clientele. Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun was aware that to become the best female artist, she had to overcome every obstacle and relentlessly pursue every step along the way.

Before being admitted to the academy, Vigée began her studies by closely analyzing the greatest artists. Artists were trained to create art through the process of copying engravings, plaster casts, and recipe books like Charles Lebrun's treatise on the Passions before attempting to "imitate nature". In the 18th century, artists often imitated the styles of great masters. They did so by creating parodies or by working self-consciously in an identifiable manner [6]. Vigée Le Brun did imitate Rubens, she did not simply produce a bland copy of the original painting. Instead of replacing Susanna, the subject, with herself, the artist included herself in the painting as the object of her own gaze and the creator of the artwork. She presented herself in the same manner as she preferred to portray her peers in her paintings [1]. Her artistic style is considered part of the Rococo aftermath with elements of neoclassical influence [4].

Although Frida was born into an artistic family and her father was her first art teacher, her artistic path was more personal than Vigée's. All creativity originates from the heart. After a serious car accident at age 18, Frida began creating while recuperating in bed initially, painting was just a pastime for Frida. Her paintings mostly comprised portraits of her friends, relatives, and herself. As Frida was bedridden, this theme suited her well, as she could not go out to paint due to her poor health.

Since she was self-taught without guidance, her brushwork on the pictures was amateurish, and her handling of space was unskilled and illogical. The pictures took on a dark tone, reflecting Frida's depressed mood while she recovered from illness. She devoted much of her time to painting. After spending a lot of time reading relevant works on art history, Frida was able to absorb the master's style into her paintings [3]. Frida's paintings can be likened to raw diamonds that were later discovered by André Breton, the founder of the surrealism movement. Breton insisted that Frida's art was like a "Ribbons around a bomb." However, Frida was determined that her paintings were a personal expression of herself and could not be labeled.

The torture of the disease had a profound impact on her life, image, and psychology, hurting her soul and completely changing her future. Becoming the pursuit of perfection, through painting, she created a healthy and complete self, which was a manifestation of her inner self-feminine consciousness. This self-construction provided Frida with a safe haven from her bumpy fate and allowed her to rest assured. The pain of trauma remains unforgettable despite the passage of time. It may be impossible to articulate this pain in words, but it can be visually expressed in artistic works. It can be said that Frida utilized her physical pain as inspiration for her art [7].

3.3. Cognition and Expression

For Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, the most important details are not the expensive clothes and fancy background, are the details in her subtle expressions of the sitter. These seemingly subtle expressions and depictions can highlight the inner world of the person being painted. This allows the artist to use her brush to help the person being painted tell their story quietly. Mark the new one through posture, demeanor, matching of clothes, demeanor, etc. Because French society at that time began to rise and advocate neoclassicism, which was the rise of retro thought and the revival of Greek culture, as a female painter, the detailed depiction of the portrait highlighted her excellent painting techniques.

There are two most essential things for Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, one is perfecting her drawing skills, and the other one is to keep climbing on the social ladder and making more money and making her own name in such a competitive yet unfriendly environment for female artists. She sure didn't waste every opportunity to make her famous. One of her most well-known paintings is the Portrait of the Artist with Her Daughter, painted in 1786. In this portrait, she paid tribute to Rubens, implicitly claiming to be comparable to the old master. She also painted a portrait of herself and her daughter, imitating Raphael and his Madonna della Sedia. But again she goes beyond simple imitation. Initially, she bravely replaced the figures of Virgin and Child with herself and her daughter, omitting the figure of John the Baptist entirely. There is no male figure present. She dressed herself in her preferred attire, complete with a turban and shawl, and altered the colors in the original painting. She chose white, her favorite color, for her daughter's dress. The painting depicts a vertical composition of a mother embracing her daughter with both hands, portraying a loving bond between them. The artist deviates from the original oval frame and instead paints a series of circles that culminate in a soft pyramid, which includes the mother's headpiece, arms, and body. Through this artwork, Vigee conveys both her identity as a dedicated artist and a loving mother. All this, in an effort to shield herself from the attacks on her morality [1].

Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun is not just a capable mother, but also an exceptional artist with an expensive price tag, as evidenced by the unique way in which her portrait was painted. She needs to improve her financial situation since she considers herself the breadwinner of her household. One of her famous self-portraits depicts the artist facing the viewer, holding a brush in her right hand and a palette in her left hand. Besides including a sketch of the Queen, she also portrays herself as an object of her own gaze, indicating her continued loyalty to the queen who had supported her in France. This addition was undoubtedly a selling point, considering that her prospective clients were royalty and aristocrats [1].

In contrast to Vigee's portraits of women, Frida challenged social norms and broke the "so-called" rules. When painting her portrait, she frequently exaggerated her facial hair, fashioning herself as a mannish-looking woman. This gender-blend is particularly evident in a portrait she painted, merging

half of her face with half of her husband's, creating an androgynous whole, underscoring the pictorially created, sexual ambiguity that characterizes much of Frida's work [4].

In contrast to her husband's nudes, Frida's nude paintings present female bodies that are imperfect, bloody, and unidealized, thus challenging traditional Western reclining nudes. Feminist art history rightfully claims that the painted odalisque, which has come to epitomize the genre of the nude in Western art, is the most objectified of visual representations of women. The passive female figure depicted in the reclining nude painting is often objectified by the male gaze, according to feminist art critics.

For nearly 20 years, Frida Kahlo's self-portraits have provided inspiration to many individuals, regardless of their gender, to challenge and redefine existing gender stereotypes. Her work gives a voice to emerging expressions of gender, racial, and ethnic diversity, which is especially relevant to contemporary feminist issues. It highlights the relationship between gender, race, class, and ethnicity, making her popular worldwide [4]. Frida unequivocally revolutionized the study of the Mexican landscape and the concept of self-revolution, just as she did with the study of female nudes. Celebrating the active, not passive nature of the female earth, she honors the representation of women in Mexican culture [4].

4. Results

Firstly, the feminist movement has played a significant role in increasing societal acceptance of female artists, resulting in female portraits being more widely accepted. Moreover, female self-portraits have also gained widespread acceptance. From an aesthetic standpoint, a self-portrait that showcases beauty predominantly represents the societal class from a male perspective that caters to the public. However, it gradually transforms into a more individualistic representation of beauty, even to the point of ugliness, which ultimately results in a true, meaningful self-portrait.

Secondly, female artists often use self-portraits to express personal views and political stances, rather than simply praising individualism. Portrait paintings offer a groundbreaking opportunity to challenge and defy established gender stereotypes by providing new models that challenge the status quo.

5. Discussion

Although the feminist art movement was proposed in the 1960s and 1970s, feminist consciousness sprouted much earlier. Most early art historians were men and portrait painting originated to cater to male viewers' interests. Many schools trained only male portrait painters to take anatomy classes and paint nudes. classes, women are not allowed to participate in these. The emergence of female painters, sculptors, and artists in art families and history can be attributed to the daring challenge of social norms by female artists who loved painting. However, from a current perspective, these girls may be viewed as privileged individuals born or married into artistic families. Although the portrait paintings of the 18th century may not meet the current feminist standards, it is important to acknowledge the social context of the time. Women were expected to fulfill traditional roles such as being housewives and mothers, and challenging social norms was difficult. However, female painters of this period challenged social authority and public opinion, paving the way for improved status of female artists in art history [6]. Female artists and creators face challenges in gaining recognition and respect within the art world, despite being a minority in terms of numbers. Artwork content can also pose problems, as both men and women create a variety of subjects, which may not reveal the artist's identity or gender unless their style or name is easily recognizable. This lack of information can sometimes detract from the viewer's experience, leading to a desire to learn more about the artist, including biographical details [8].

It is these female artists who use their practical actions to fight social injustice and dare to speak out that allow feminism to exist in today's art world. It is these female artists who use their practical

actions to fight social injustice and dare to speak out that allow feminism to exist in today's art world. Society has to thank a very well-known feminist group - The Guerrilla Girls. It originated in the 20th century. In the 1980s, in order to protest that female artists still did not receive the same respect and exhibition opportunities as men in mainstream museums and art galleries, an anonymous feminist organization initiated by all-female artists dressed in gorilla costumes came to the attention of the people of New York. Some very sassy fact-filled posters began appearing on the walls of Soho and in the East Village in New York City. It was the Guerrilla Girls who took credit for this renewed feminist assault on the art world, with promises of more to come [9]. It is precisely because all female artists gave up the battle of individualism and realized that only by uniting and acting together can they truly change society, they anonymously and voluntarily gave up their personal interests and joined a larger movement with feminism as the highest priority. art organizations and quietly contribute to art world feminism around the world. They are not only in the world of graphic art, but they are also paying attention to a wider range of art fields. They constantly examine themselves and constantly change society. The guerilla Girls saw that the globalization of the art world required new tactics and new ways of speaking to and with the audiences [10].

6. Conclusion

The study shows that the social environment influences the artistic styles of female artists during feminist awakenings. This leads to the conclusion that the feminist movement will encourage female artists to take a more self-aware and progressive approach when examining their works of art. The study is a valuable reference for research in the direction of feminism and female artists in the art world. It emphasizes the importance of feminism and female artists in the art world and suggests that future research should focus on exploring the relationship between them in greater depth. Specifically, researching the relationship between the art world and feminism would be a fruitful area to investigate.

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