

31 WOMEN

AN EXHIBITION

BY PEGGY GUGGENHEIM

In 1943 the collector Peggy Guggenheim organized one of the first exhibitions dedicated exclusively to the work of women artists in the United States at her New York gallery Art of This Century. Titled *Exhibition by 31 Women*, one of Guggenheim's objectives was to highlight the contribution of women artists, who had often been dismissed as muses, imitators, or companions of famous male artists by the patriarchal mindset of the time. The artists selected for *31 Women*—which included well established female creators and emerging talents—came from Europe and the United States, many of whom were linked to Surrealism and abstract art.

Aware of the challenges they faced for being women, the artists in *31 Women* often went against the grain by utilizing the dominant artistic languages of their time: they reinterpreted the contributions of Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism to highlight the patriarchal precepts such movements were based on.

31 Women. An Exhibition by Peggy Guggenheim presents a reinterpreted selection of works from The 31 Women Collection repository; a collection that includes works by artists who participated in the historic show. The sections within the exhibition propose an approximation to some of the main thematic axes and strategies explored by these creators, who sought to assert their independence and avoid clichés associated with the label “female artist” that were commonplace in the world of art at the time.

Patricia Mayayo
Curator of the exhibition

Art of This Century

After developing her vocation for modern art in Europe, where she was often in contact with key members of the avantgarde, Peggy Guggenheim began her very own collection before leaving France in 1941 due to Nazi occupation. Once she had settled in New York, she directed the Art of This Century Gallery between 1942 and 1947; a museum/gallery that had a profound impact on the artistic scene through its solo exhibition program. These shows would help to consolidate the careers of some of the most important artists of the time, turning the space into an essential meeting point for European and North American avant-gardes.

The gallery opened its doors in 1942, on the top floor of a duplex loft on West 57th Street. Guggenheim was determined to create a space that generated excitement. She hired the Austrian architect Frederick Kiesler, who designed custom furniture and developed a groundbreaking display device that stimulated interactions between viewers and artworks. The space was divided into four Galleries. In the Abstract Gallery—which included moveable walls made of dark blue fabric—frameless works were hung with ropes and pulleys that stretched from the ground to the ceiling forming a triangle. This structure allowed works to seemingly float in space. The Surrealist Gallery presented a more dramatic ambience with black ceilings and walls; paintings were also installed without a frame and were hung on cantilevered wooden arms that protruded from curved rubber panels. The Kinetic Gallery hosted works that required viewer participation, while the Daylight Gallery—which was a more conventional space—was used for temporary exhibitions, among which was *Exhibition by 31 Women*.

In addition to exhibiting Peggy Guggenheim's collection, Art of This Century organized several solo exhibitions, such as those dedicated to Sonja Sekula, Irene Rice Pereira, Pegeen Vail, and other artists who participated in the exhibition of 1943. Although it is difficult to fully ascertain if Peggy Guggenheim's was a feminist approach, the press release published on the occasion of the exhibition opening signals her will to question the prejudice against women artists of the time. Two years later, Guggenheim's determination would lead her to organize another exhibition dedicated to women at the gallery, this time under the title *The Women*.

The list of works published for *31 Women* did not include photographs—only titles—many of which were quite unspecific: *Still Life, Composition...* With the exception of a few particular cases, it is hard to know which works were on display. The exhibition garnered much attention from the press, although reviews contained a mix of admiration, condescendence, and rejection; a reflection of gender perspectives of the time. Nevertheless, *31 Women* was undoubtedly an important milestone in the history of contemporary art, laying the grounds for a greater recognition of the contributions made by women artists.

The “Self” as Art

In their quest to escape from social expectations and gender roles, self-representation became one of the creative strategies most widely adopted by women artists in the first half of the 20th century. Through elaborate costumes and extravagant make-up, which they wore in their daily lives or during improvised performances, Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Leonor Fini constructed alternate identities that allowed them to elude the rigid female behavioral models determined by bourgeois ideology. Likewise, Hedda Sterne, Dorothea Tanning, and Meret Oppenheim spoke of their interest in blurring the boundaries of conventionally constructed identities through doubling, masquerades, and the confusion of reality against its reflection, which can be observed in their self-portraits. Similarly, Gypsy Rose Lee reinvented the genre of striptease—traditionally linked to popular culture—by challenging the contemporary understanding of the pose and of female nudes.

Gypsy Rose Lee

Gypsy Rose Lee images for Tru-View stereoscope film:
Striptease Stereoview #1306 Burlesque

1933

Vintage Tru-View 16 pictures in film (13 of Gypsy Rose Lee)
The 31 Women Collection

Gypsy Rose Lee began performing as a stripper in burlesque shows and went on to appear in Broadway theaters. Her stripteases were greatly successful, allowing her to transform the genre. The fact that she talked while stripping was truly groundbreaking and enabled her to draw attention away from the mere act of stripping, while presenting herself as a modern and entertaining woman. Likewise, her enunciation was unlike street slang: she recited with an outlandish high-class accent and incorporated phrases in French.

Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven

*Forggten Like This Parapluie Am I By You—
Faithless Bernice!*

Forgotten – Like This Umbrella Am I by You –
Faithless Berenice!

1923-1924

Gouache on foil

The 31 Women Collection

The autobiographical component of this work has been linked to the closed umbrella, which lies uselessly at the center of the image and represents the loneliness felt by Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven at a point when she had been abandoned by those who supported her both emotionally and financially. The treading foot that appears on the left of the composition symbolizes the passing of the years. The title of the work also expands on this notion, which is a direct interpellation to her friend and patron Berenice Abbott. On the other hand, the silhouette of the urinal alludes to the famous readymade by Marcel Duchamp, a work that a number of recent studies have attributed to Freytag-Loringhoven.

Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Gypsy Rose Lee, and Leonora Carrington completed their self-creation work with the writing of their autobiographies, which seamlessly combined reality and invention. Writing novels about themselves allowed these artists to reflect on aspects of their past that might have been considered lurid—for instance, becoming the victim of rape by a group of men in Madrid as Carrington recounted in *Down Below*—or imagining alternative narratives of their lives.

In similar fashion, Leonor Fini frequently took photographs of herself posing in black feather wigs and other props through which she fabricated imaginary personalities. Both Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Gypsy Rose Lee, who had worked as dancers and strippers in burlesque shows and as professional models in art schools, were very aware of the need to take control of their own image, subverting the passive role that muses and female models still played within the avant-garde.

Dorothea Tanning

Untitled (Self-Portrait)

c. 1940

Watercolor, ink and crayon on paper

The 31 Women Collection

In this self-portrait from the early 1940s, Dorothea Tanning experimented with the limits of reality and representation. In a style akin to fashion figurines that often appeared in women's magazines of the time, the artist portrayed herself in a room full of empty canvases. Her naked legs are reflected onto a framed glass that is pointed at the viewer, creating an impossible interplay of mirrors and altering the relationship between reality and reflection; inside and out.

Strangely Familiar

In 1919 Sigmund Freud coined the term *unheimlich* (the uncanny) to describe the horror one experiences when familiar things suddenly acquire unknown traits. This concept seems to traverse the works of several artists in *31 Women*, who broke the conventional relationship between the feminine and the domestic, imbuing everyday objects and landscapes with an aura of unease.

Hence, Aline Meyer Liebman's yellowish dunes are striking for their anthropomorphic forms, the Connecticut night sky appears as a fantastic explosion of flowers and stars in Jacqueline Lamba's painting, and the viewer is unsettled by the incongruent characters and scenes that disrupt the peacefulness in Hazel McKinley and Pegeen Vail's colorful landscapes. Furthermore, familiar objects seem to have lost their usual meaning in the puzzling dreamlike still lives by Meraud Guinness Guevara, Anne Harvey, Meret Oppenheim, and Gypsy Rose Lee, while Eyre de Lanux and Evelyn Wild's rug designs combine primitivist and avant-garde elements that question the ideals of purity associated with modern domestic interiors. Kay Sage and Dorothea Tanning's paintings are particularly unnerving as they transform the bourgeois house into a strange territory inhabited by ghostly figures and elongated shadows.

Meret Oppenheim

Souvenir of the *Lunch in fur*

1936 / 1972

Fabric, paper, artificial fur and artificial flowers encased under glass
The 31 Women Collection

Produced in 1972, this piece is a reinterpretation of one of Meret Oppenheim's most renowned works, *Déjeuner en Fourrure*, which was on display for the first time in 1936—the year it was produced—at an exhibition dedicated to Surrealist objects. The work garnered much recognition and was selected by Peggy Guggenheim for *Exhibition by 31 Women*. Dissatisfied by always seeing her name associated with this work, the artist wanted to make an ironic version of her infamous mug, recreating it with cheap materials: a perfect kitsch souvenir of the iconic work.

Jacqueline Lamba

Roxbury, stars

1946

Oil on canvas

The 31 Women Collection

In the mid-1940s, Jacqueline Lamba and the North American Surrealist artist David Hare took a trip together through the western United States, where they came into contact with the cosmology and art of the indigenous peoples of North America. The typical brown colors of Amerindian fabrics dominate the palette of this canvas, in which Lamba portrayed the surroundings of her house in Roxbury and captured the unexpected reality that lies hidden behind a seemingly mundane landscape.

Kay Sage

The Fourteen Daggers

1942

Oil on canvas

The 31 Women Collection

The conversion of domestic space into unusual territory reached its pinnacle in works such as this one. Sage imagined a bizarre interior space that opens up to a door behind which lies a staircase leading to the sky. The scene is inhabited by two ghostly figures covered in fabric that cast elongated shadows on the ground and accentuate the air of mystery. The motif of the open door reappears in Dorothea Tanning's oil painting *Spanish Customs*, also on display in this room.

Pegeen Vail Guggenheim

The Dance

1945

Oil on canvas

The 31 Women Collection

In this work, Pegeen Vail continued with her iconography based on dancing figures portrayed with intense colors over flat backgrounds; a technique that had been explored decades earlier by Henri Matisse and André Derain. While the image of dance is associated with the joy of life or the promise of a return to a mythical Golden Age in the paintings of her predecessors, in Vail's canvas the costumes and disconnected personalities of the dancers—who barely touch each other—generate a sense of estrangement that is difficult to identify.

Bestiaries

Women artists close to Surrealism granted particular importance to the representation of animals. Such is the case with works by Barbara Poe-Levee Reis and Milena Pavlovic-Barilli, in which animals often inhabited fictional landscapes or mythical worlds where women could imagine themselves freed from patriarchal norms. Likewise, in works by Julia Thecla, Frida Kahlo, and Leonor Fini, the depiction of women's bodies being transformed into crows, deer, and cats refers to an alternate reality in which humans and animals are hybridized. Djuna Barnes imagined a collection of grotesque women with animal-like traits that challenged normative understandings of the feminine in an illustrated book of poems published in 1915. Valentine Hugo was inspired by the animals of the zodiac when designing costumes for a theatrical performance that took place at the Théâtre Champs-Élysées in Paris. Lastly, in Leonora Carrington's painting, the horse appears as a more ambivalent figure that simultaneously embodies patriarchal authority and the liberation of women.

Milena Pavlovic-Barilli

Juno and Vulcan

1936

Oil on canvas

The 31 Women Collection

The painting by Pavlovic draws from various sources: Mannerist art from the 16th century, Magical Realism, and Surrealism. It also incorporates motifs and mythical figures from classical antiquity, such as the Roman goddess Juno and her son Vulcan, protagonists of this canvas. The use of diluted colors, the impression that the characters are floating in space, and the apparently incongruent combination of a wide range of elements (the eagle, the piano, the wheel, the drapery, the bouquet of flowers, and the mirror) grant this painting a dreamlike and mysterious atmosphere.

Since the 1930s, women had a growing presence in Surrealist initiatives. For example, in 1936 Leonor Fini, Valentine Hugo, Meret Oppenheim, and Sophie Taeuber-Arp participated in the exhibition *Art, Dada, Surrealism* hosted at MoMA. Six years later, Leonora Carrington and Kay Sage exhibited their work at *First Papers of Surrealism*, organized by André Breton and Marcel Duchamp in New York. Women also collaborated on the movement's publications, either as authors or as illustrators; an example of which includes the series of eighteen drawings that Hugo produced in 1951 for Paul Éluard's book of poems *Le Phénix*.

Peggy Guggenheim's work as a patron undoubtedly helped to reinforce female participation. Many of the artists included in the exhibition of 1943 had attended the meetings between North Americans and exiled Europeans organized by the collector at her house in New York. Some of the works on display at *31 Women* were reproduced in the double issue of the Surrealist magazine *VV* in 1943; an acknowledgement that most likely contributed to the show's repercussion.

Leonor Fini

S'heldon. Costume design for *Les Demoiselles de la nuit*

1948

Gouache and pencil on tinted paper

The 31 Women Collection

Many of the creators who participated in *31 Women* displayed a deep interest in the world of animals through their work; an interest that was occasionally materialized in the creation of costumes and set designs for the theater, such as the those conceived by Leonor Fini in 1948 for *Les Demoiselles de la nuit*. The ballet narrates the story of a woman who transforms into a cat at certain times of day, a fable that went hand in hand with Fini's fascination with cats and the hybridization of humans and animals.

Djuna Barnes

The Book of Repulsive Women

1915

The 31 Women Collection

In the modern age of Taylorism and Fordism, women played a vital role in the functioning of the American system by efficiently arranging domestic life with a precision similar to that of the nation's industry. In contrast with this mechanical monotony, Barnes imagined the "repulsive women" that appear in her poems and drawings as the antithesis of the model housewife. Some of these figures, such as the woman with donkey ears and animal-like features that can be observed in one of her illustrations, manage to question the very the boundaries of humanity.

The Middle Way: Languages of Abstraction

Although many of the artists in *31 Women* were close to Surrealism, some of them adopted abstract languages. Distanced, for the most part, from Abstract Expressionism—the predominant style of painting in North America at the time—they were attracted to the wide range of creative possibilities afforded by abstraction. One example can be found in Suzy Frelinghuysen's reinterpretation of European Cubism, or in Esphyr Slobodkina's combinations of painting and collage that defy the ideal of pictorial purity propounded by art critics of the time. In truth, as proven by Sophie Taeuber-Arp's compositions, the hybridization of artistic practice and the interest in decorative arts had been one of the identifying traits of abstract art produced by women artists since the early 20th century. In turn, it is therefore possible to associate Maria Helena Vieira da Silva's intricate urban labyrinths with traditional Portuguese tiling, or Irene Rice Pereira's abstract paintings on glass with stained-glass painting. Likewise, Sonja Sekula began to experiment with a combination of primitivist symbols, dense decorative patterns, and multiple perspectives in the 1940s; a combination of avant-garde and non-western references that can also be observed in early painted terracotta sculptures by Louise Nevelson.

Suzy Frelinghuysen

Untitled (Brahms Abstract)

1945

Oil and collage on Masonite

The 31 Women Collection

Suzy Frelinghuysen was part of the group of artists known as The Park Avenue Cubists, who proposed a reinterpretation of European Cubist heritage from a North American perspective. In her works, Frelinghuysen combined the influence of Synthetic Cubism, which she expanded on through the use of blue, lavender, and rusty hues, with constant references to the world of music; a field in which the artist also excelled as an opera singer.

Esphyr Slobodkina

Peacock Garden

1938

Oil on board

The 31 Women Collection

From the late 1930s, Slobodkina developed a style of her own based on the poetic combination of curved forms painted in lyrical hues. Along with the influence of Cubism and the technique of collage, the artist also demonstrated her interest in sewing and working with scraps, which she learned from her mother, a professional seamstress. One of the defining traits of her work was its interdisciplinary nature: aside from painting, Slobodkina created assemblages, produced murals, illustrated children's books, and designed costumes and jewelry.

The association American Abstract Artists (AAA) was founded in 1936 with the objective of fostering the development of abstraction in the United States. It included members such as Suzy Frelinghuysen, Louise Nevelson, Irene Rice Pereira, and Esphyr Slobodkina. It is no coincidence that Slobodkina was one of the artists included by Ad Reinhardt in his vignette “How to Look at Modern Art in America” (1946), in which he traced the family tree of North American modern art. Other creators participated in key initiatives for the renovation of abstract practice in the United States, such as Gretchen Schoeninger, who attended the experimental art school New Bauhaus, founded by László Moholy-Nagy—a former professor at the historic German Bauhaus—in Chicago in 1947.

Regardless, few artists who took part in *31 Women* occupy an important place in the dominant narratives of North American abstract art. As Xenia Cage jokingly suggested in a collage produced from one of Jackson Pollock’s action paintings, perhaps the value of these artist’s works is compromised by the strong exaltation of masculinity, which at the time was characteristic of discourse. Buffie Johnson became aware of the marginalization suffered by women in Abstract Expressionist circles early on. In the 1940s, determined to give value to female legacies, she undertook a research project on the imagery of the goddess mothers of antiquity, culminating in a book published in 1988.

Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Jean (Hans) Arp

Vertical-Horizontal Composition

[Conceived by Sophie Taeuber-Arp and executed in relief by Jean Arp]

1927-1928 / 1943-1956

Oil on wood relief mounted on pavatex

The 31 Women Collection

Sophie Taeuber-Arp produced works that were marked by the dissolution of artistic hierarchies and were very much her own. She experimented with painting, dance, sculpture, tapestry design, and puppet making. *Vertical-Horizontal Composition* might be related to the designs that the artist produced for the Café Aubette in Strasbourg. Taeuber-Arp's protagonism in this work of total art, conceived on the basis of a dialogue between different artistic disciplines, has nevertheless been overshadowed by Jean Arp and Theo Van Doesburg's participation in the project.

Buffie Johnson

The Middle Way / The Great Mother Rules the Sky
(Astor Mural)

1949-1959

Oil on canvas

The 31 Women Collection

Between 1949 and 1959, Buffie Johnson produced what is considered one of her most important works: a great mural intended to decorate the Astor Theater in New York. This project was a true challenge for all those who negated women's ability to create large format paintings. Thanks to the recovery of the mural by part of the Women's Caucus prior to the theater's demolition in 1982, some fragments, such as the one on display in this exhibition, are today part of public and private collections.

Women artists often appear as secondary figures in traditional art history, whether in the form of muses, wives, or colleagues of their male counterparts. This relationship map, composed from photographs of the participants in *Exhibition by 31 Women*, does not only grant visibility to the contributions these women made to art at the time, but also to the networks of collaboration and connections that existed between them and Peggy Guggenheim.