

History's Beauties: Women and the National Portrait Gallery, 1856–1900

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Studies of the National Portrait Gallery have analysed its history as an institution, as an architectural space, or as instrumental in the development of portraiture ([1](#)). Lara Perry focuses on the role of women 'in' the National Portrait Gallery during the nineteenth century as: the subject of portraits; artists; the sellers or donors of portraits; the informal contributors to the social life of the Gallery; and, finally, the visitors, sometimes unruly, of its collection. This contributes to our understanding of portraiture, and the history of women, as objects and subjects of representations used to forge the ideas of the nation. The book is most successful in analysing the complicated negotiations across ideologies of gender, class, history, and national identity, revealed by the trustees' decisions about what portraits to include or exclude from the collection, and how to display them. Women could be at once elevated to the status of celebrated individuals, and 'put in their place' by being represented as exemplary; fulfilling roles consistent with dominant modes of nineteenth-century femininity. At times, however, women and their representations could resist the control of the Gallery and become difficult to incorporate in its narrative.

The main aim of the National Portrait Gallery then, as today, is to collect and make available to the public portraits of 'those persons who are most honourably commemorated in British History as warriors or as statesmen, or in the arts, in literature or in science' (*Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 2 March 1856, still quoted in the Gallery website). Perry's book 'explores the gendering of the nation in a period when women had little access to national politics, but when an institution such as the National Portrait Gallery—established by the national government to display the nation for the public—collected and displayed over one hundred portraits of women' (p. 1).

The concept of separate spheres, of the division of society into a private, domestic, female domain, and an

active, public, male world, has come to dominate our understanding of the nineteenth century. The implications and extent of this ideology in the organization of social and cultural norms, and the impact it had on the lives of women from different classes and locations, has been a hotly debated topic. Feminist historical analysis has been particularly concerned with unpacking this division, emphasizing how any seclusion of women into the 'private' was different for different classes, and often symbolic rather than actual. Women's separation from the world of formally paid work did not stop them being productive, even if only at the level of cultural rather than economic capital. It was, on the contrary, what guaranteed elite women their power and effectiveness as agents of moral, social, and cultural improvement, not only for their family but also for society at large. Perry complicates descriptions of the role of women in the nineteenth century as one secluded within middle-class domesticity, showing how the contribution of women to the nation's history was publicly acknowledged and celebrated. As recent scholarship has suggested, domesticity was constructed as a matter of national importance, and the role of women within it as having political and even heroic dimensions. If the history of the nation was constructed by the Portrait Gallery as including women, this was partly because the ideology of separate spheres was not as rigid as some of its representations (in both the nineteenth century and since) have implied; and partly because of the continuing importance of the aristocracy, where women were never expected to confine themselves to the care of family and home, but performed important roles in the privileged yet public stage of 'Society' (2). Within middle-class feminine culture, the image of the lady continued to be a figure of desire and identification, even as the word became inflected by the moral values that the middle classes considered important.

The Gallery itself can be seen as an institution at once representing a new political order—a parliament elected by a constituency including middle-class men—but modelled on the portrait galleries celebrating the dynastic continuity and achievements, including those of taste, of aristocratic families. This was part of a wider process in which the middle classes were making their own cultural forms that had aristocratic origins and connotations, repackaging them as being now available to the whole nation. In other words, the National Portrait Gallery was doing for the nation what galleries in country houses had been doing for their owners. In this tradition, women were important for their role as curators of family collections (3).

Lara Perry's interdisciplinary approach weaves together in a complex pattern many ideas, topics, and strands of thought. Each chapter is arranged around a cluster of themes, reconfiguring and developing her argument, which is at times in danger of getting lost in the wide-range of her research. Running through the book, however, is the central theme of the role of women in the public space of the Gallery.

The first chapter focuses on representations of women that were active in the civic sphere—corresponding loosely to the 'warriors and statesmen' in the Gallery's aims. Perry analyses the Gallery's acquisitions and rejections to understand how these recognized and constructed certain types of femininity as worthy of celebration. The trustees rejected, for example, various portraits of Lydia Becker, a notable suffragist, and group portraits including women's rights campaigners Emily Davies and Elizabeth Garrett Anderson. They seemed to prefer representations of 'women's activities in civil life which were less overtly associated with challenges to the masculine prerogative of national politics' (p. 16), such as Haydon's *The Anti-Slavery Society Convention, 1840* (1841). This portrays women present not as active campaigners, but as there to show support.

Women were excluded from the category of warriors. The trustees declined a 1750 print of Hannah Snell, a celebrated sailor who had enrolled by passing as a man. Acts of physical bravery were however admissible, as exemplified by a bust of Grace Darling (1838), who had helped her father to rescue people from a shipwreck. Young, working class, and demure, her heroism in a supporting role remained womanly, and her strength class-appropriate.

Perry shows how the Portrait Gallery was conceived as a new means through which to articulate and represent existing structures of power' (p. 24), including gender. Women's actions could become 'historically significant' (p. 15) not by challenging male prerogatives and modes of activism, but by fulfilling unofficial roles based on familial and personal connections. This informal model was replicated within the Gallery itself. Women were excluded from appointment as trustees, but were involved in the social networks in

which appointments might be discussed and made, and portraits coming up for donations or purchase evaluated. 'Women were also the ones to offer portraits of family members' (p. 29). Here, it would have been interesting to consider in more detail the continuing role of women as curators of family collections, and the powers, pressures, and meanings bound up in the act of selling or donating portraits to a public collection.

In chapter two, the book goes on to analyse the representations of royal women. As wives and mothers of kings, this is perhaps the least controversial area of inclusion. Perry shows how their significance went beyond that of dynastic continuity, and how it was used in the collection to 'evoke affective moments' (p. 35) in the history of a nation that was being imaged as a family. The chapter is at its most interesting when discussing how the organization of the displays emphasised the role of men—even Queen Elizabeth I was positioned as subordinate to her heir James I. It demonstrates the power of curators and trustees in authoring the collection with a degree of independence from the original meaning of the portraits. By being incorporated into the family, queens were shown as exemplary femininity, rather than as holders of royal power, especially as the trustees preferred portraits that avoided depicting them bearing the symbols of power.

'Sentimental Histories', the third chapter, focuses on cultivated women as national treasures. In their case 'personal attributes' rather than 'events', were considered 'suitable for historical concern' (p. 60). Women's cultural achievements were represented as a prerequisite of successful marriages and families. In this context, even portraits of women that were professional writers or artists became absorbed by representations of women as accomplished, their work an extension of their homemaking skills.

The trustees were not always entirely successful in recuperating all portraits of women to the stereotypes of genteel and companionate femininity. Perry argues that Mary Wollstonecraft, included in a series of family portraits donated by Jane Lady Shelley in 1899, was accepted only because by then a 'suitable biography' (p. 77) had been created for her. Catherine Macaulay, an equally well-known writer of history, was rejected throughout the century. She was not only a republican—male republicans were accepted—but also politically active in ways that defied conventions of genteel femininity, and had had an unusual private life, marrying a much younger man.

Authors were the greatest number of contemporary women in the collection, especially writers of scholarly works and long novels, rather than popular works with a less serious reputation. It might have been interesting here to see if, and how, contemporary writers too had to produce 'suitable biographies' to be accepted. How, for example, was the portrait of George Eliott negotiated, given her unconventional private life? At any rate, the portraits of contemporary women writers acquired for the Gallery were usually 'watercolours, pastels, pencil sketches and miniatures' (p. 81), different from the oils of male writers and learned women from earlier generations. This was partly due to the perceived difficulties of portraying contemporary women writers in oils. Attempts to do so tended to produce uneasy mixtures of literary symbols and fashionable props, as documentary realism gave in awkwardly to the pressure to depict all women as beautiful. Works on paper were smaller, less detailed, more sketchy and abstract. In the displays dedicated to authors, the difference between the sombre oils of male writers, and the 'light grounds of the drawings of women created a highly visible gendered difference' (p.84). The qualities intrinsic to the medium—drawings and watercolours are less durable and more associated with domestic practice—could seep from the image to the reputation of the writer and her work. 'The phrase "she was not a genius", repeatedly used in the Dictionary of National Biography entries on women writers, is given visual expression in the Portrait Gallery's collection' (p. 87).

Chapter four is dedicated to the theme of beauty. Gallery policy stipulated that portraits should be evaluated for their historic rather than aesthetic value; yet the collection has 'artistic as well as historical significance, and these dual interests have always been held in tension within the institution' (p. 89). Portraits of women were the lynchpin of this balancing act. An interest in beautiful women was an important part of aristocratic culture, and this remained so in the nineteenth century. Beautiful women could still become 'professional beauties' not through success at court, but in the emerging celebrity culture associated with illustrated periodicals and mass-circulated photographs.

Beauty was a morally ambivalent word—it could be used to refer to virtue and inner beauty, or to visual, sensual beauty. The play between virtuous and vicious beauty was one of the staple plots of nineteenth-century fiction. Perry shows how the trustees were able to deploy portraits of women to colour the representation of particular periods. Morally ambiguous beauties from the late Georgian courts were avoided, as 'too close to the bone of the present' (p. 96). But unruly beauties from the more distant past could be used as a foil to emphasise contemporary notions of appropriate female behaviour and how much elite society had improved. They figured freely in the Gallery's representation of the Restoration, where the immorality and excess of the Stuart monarchy, with its tendencies towards absolutism and Catholicism, was 'indexed by the behaviour of women' (p. 96).

By the end of the century, the significance of beauty in portraits was losing its moral connotations, by becoming not a function of the character or the appearance of actual women, but an aesthetic quality. Female beauty became 'the central trope of artistic practice [...] understood as a testament to the professional skills of the artist, rather than the appearance of a sitter' (p. 90). While the Portrait Gallery resisted suggestions that it should merge with the National Gallery, it began to use aesthetic ideals in selecting works, even if the official rules were never changed, and to collect and display not only the history of the nation but also that of portrait painting, seen as a particularly British area of excellence.

The final chapter begins with a discussion of women artists in the Portrait Gallery. They were not many, but a lot more than in the National Gallery—twenty-seven, while the National Gallery in the nineteenth century had only five. But then portraiture was considered a genre suitable for women—it did not need nude models and it could be practised at home. Lack of aesthetic value could be compensated for—or implied by—the Gallery's interest in the historic status of its objects. There were exceptions. Perry singles out for discussion two 'beautiful' self-portraits by Angelica Kauffmann (c. 1770-75) and Ann Mary Newton (c. 1863) as 'instances where particular women's lived (and in this case painted) experience transcended the institutional discourse of the feminine' (p. 125). Both half-length oils—a format 'rarely accepted for women who were not courtiers' (p. 125)—they quietly assert the professional status of the sitters, while avoiding confrontational poses.

Both Kauffmann, as a Royal Academician, and Newton, as a painter to the Queen and illustrator for her archaeologist husband Charles, succeeded in their careers as artists within institutions which were recognized by the National Portrait Gallery as conferring "national" significance. [...] Entering [it] through self-portraiture was perhaps the highest accolade that the Gallery could confer on their careers. (p. 126)

With their demure poses and beautiful faces, the self-portraits might conform to the visual tropes of femininity, but they were too powerful to be considered amateur practice. They succeeded in doing what most portrait painters found difficult; to reconcile the demands of femininity and aesthetic practice by portraying women as professional and creating at the same time beautiful paintings.

Finally, Perry discusses women as visitors to the Gallery. Existing records demonstrate that women were an important constituency of its public, and that the Gallery was part of an established 'itinerary of social consumption and sociability' for women of a variety of classes, including artists who used the gallery to copy

works. These ranged from east-end mothers and their children, particularly when the Gallery was at Bethnal Green to students of history, from the queen of the Netherlands, who visited anonymously in 1875, to a group of school girls in 1889 who vandalized seventeen portraits by scratching them vigorously with a hatpin.

As Perry argues, 'the discipline of the museum is challenged by the diversity of both its objects, and of its interpreters' (p. 136). Amongst these challengers were the suffragettes, who in 1914 mounted a campaign of attacks on paintings in the National Gallery, Royal Academy Exhibition, and the National Portrait Gallery. When Annie Hunt 'wielded a cleaver against J. E. Millais's portrait of Thomas Carlyle' in protest against the re-arrest of Mrs Pankhurst, the Portrait Gallery as a 'stage for the display of the (gendered) nation became for a brief moment [...] a battlefield' (p. 137). The suffragettes were also creating their own alternative by commemorating female achievement with portrait banners of women, often also represented in the National Portrait Gallery.

This is perhaps at once the most interesting and the least satisfying chapter, as material with much potential is covered all too briefly. More could have been said about the National Portrait Gallery as a space connected to a wider feminine culture where portraits circulated as a staple image in prints, illustrations, photographs, and adverts. Photography, in particular, was instrumental in blurring the boundaries between the time-honoured and the ephemeral, public and private people, portraits of national importance, and those with personal or affective significance. From Queen Victoria to her servants, the photograph album was making many women collectors and curators of their own portrait gallery.

Overall, Perry successfully shows how the role 'inhabited by women in the National Portrait Gallery bears less comparison with the Angel in the House, than it does to [...] a culture of femininity which had long been established in elite English life' (pp. 139-140). The roles fulfilled by elite women in the social, political and cultural life of the nation, were celebrated by the Gallery as a matter not of class privilege, but of 'national pride' (p. 140). Perry is very careful to contextualise her argument and qualify her analysis in terms of current debates. Given the interdisciplinary nature of her topic and her approach, this means having to deal with a wide range of material, from the historiography of gender, class, and nation in the nineteenth-century, to contemporary studies of museums and their audiences. In the opening chapters, this care is welcome, as Perry summarizes the debates and uses existing material effectively. By the end, the running summary of her argument and its position in current scholarship seems to take up space that might have been more productively engaged with the concluding topics. This, however, might also be the generosity of the writer. This is a stimulating book, offering much to provoke further studies.

Notes

1. C. Saumarez Smith, *The National Portrait Gallery* (London, 1997); G. Hulme, B. Buchanan and K. Powell, *The National Portrait Gallery: An Architectural History* (London, 2000); M. Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth Century England* (New Haven and London, 1993); P. Barlow, 'Facing the Past and Present: The National Portrait Gallery and the Search for "Authentic" Portraiture', in *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, ed. J. Woodall, (Manchester, 1997). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. The best analysis remains L. Davidoff, *The Best Circles: Society, Etiquette and the Season* (London, 1986). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See for example K. Retford, *The Art of Domestic Life: Family Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London, 2006). [Back to \(3\)](#)

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