Women and Printmaking: 
An Approach Informed by Gender and Technology Studies

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Abstract:
The combination of features of the printmaking process, qualities of the print, and uses to which prints have been put forth historically, have relegated printmaking to a secondary status in the history of art; furthermore, social roles and training in the arts have excluded many women from making prints. Even those who managed to create prints are at a disadvantage in terms of scholarly documentation and interpretation of their work. The unfavorable position of women printmakers in the realm of art history does not contribute to women working in printmaking today, and is also detrimental to art history scholars attempting to carry out research about the standing of women in art. Printmaking is expanding to include a broader range of disciplines in the humanities, including language, culture, technology, history, and visual arts. The goals of this research are to readdress the historical topic of women printmakers in a more interdisciplinary fashion that identifies print as an area of the humanities and to encourage an interdisciplinary approach that is in keeping with the study of the humanities. By integrating the areas of art history and studio art with the history of gendered use of technology, the study of women printmakers can be identified as an area of the humanities and as an important interdisciplinary field of study.
Introduction

Printmaking branches into several disciplines in the humanities. In its development as an artistic medium, prints engage technology, language, culture, the visual arts, and history. Interestingly, several things have relegated printmaking to a secondary status in at least one discipline – art history. These things include the printmaking process, qualities of the prints, and historical uses of prints. Moreover, social roles and an absence of training in the arts have excluded many women from making prints. Women who have managed to produce prints have been disadvantaged in terms of scholarly documentation and interpretation of their work. The unfavorable position of women printmakers is detrimental to women working in print today, as well as to scholars attempting to carry out research about the relationship between women and art. The goals of this paper are first, to clarify the lack of attention to women in art history narratives and, secondly, to respond by chronicling the history of the activity of women printmakers. Second, I will outline an interdisciplinary model, integrating the fields of art history, studio arts, and relationships between gender and technology that can be used in the study of women printmakers.

Women’s Disadvantaged Status in Printmaking

It was not until the 17th century that printmaking began to come into its own as a fine art medium. In its origins, printmaking was employed mostly to reproduce works of art in other media. A byproduct was that by reproducing other art, printmaking provided affordable copies, which expanded the audience for art. Also, because print has long served other media, art historians have considered it a secondary art form.

To be sure, the changing nature of the modern art world accepted the print more readily as original art in its own right. Yet research and scholarship on printmakers continued to pale in
comparison to the scholarly attention paid to painters and sculptors. In response, this research
calls attention to this deficiency and redresses it by combining historical studies of women
printmakers with scholarship from other fields that deal with women and technology in a
humanities context.

Thus, the question presents itself: Why study women printmakers? By reviewing the
history of women artists’ relationship to printmaking, we can consider their cultural importance
and place in the field of humanities.

The close of the 18th century saw the end of printmaking as a male-dominated medium.
Until this time, the production of prints in America had been limited to a small output, as few
artists were able to find a market for their work. Thus, women’s role in early printmaking was
limited. Training was hard to come by, and patronage was limited. However, the industrial
transformation of the nation led to a growth in opportunities in the print medium.

During the 19th century, the introduction of the steam-powered press meant a larger
production and wider distribution of books and magazines, which created a demand for
illustrations to be executed through print (Peet 27). Family owned print workshops began to
emerge, giving American women their first opportunities to train for work in the printmaking
realm.

It had been customary to teach women artistic skills in hopes of making them more
appealing marriage candidates. Thus print, with its commercial opportunities, provided a realm
in which women could make a living while still obeying social mores. It was thought that art
kept women away from commerce, eliminated them as competition in the job market, and still
allowed them to perform maternal and social duties. While there were still few training
opportunities, women were permitted, and even encouraged to work in printmaking. It was
economically sound to hire them and even conducive to their domestic roles in an industrial, patriarchal society. Although the role of women as artists was denigrated by a male-dominated structure, women were able to find a taste of independence.

The start of the 20th century witnessed a changing place for women in the print studio. Women gained knowledge through instruction and self-directed experimentation, until the advent of the first formal printmaking program at the Art Students League of New York in 1922 (Seaton 25). This institution, along with the creation of the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Art Project printmaking unit, proved to be the most significant development for women printmakers in the early 20th century (Seaton 37). Over a quarter of the artists who passed through the government’s printmaking workshops were women. Through instruction, they acquired knowledge that allowed them to continue to work in the graphic arts after the close of the workshops in the early 1940s. The women who participated in the program could still fulfill maternal duties due to the flexible nature of the program’s requirements, so traditional gender roles continued to be upheld.

Information from the latter half of the 20th century shows women as important players in the world of printmaking. Their presence in the studio, however, must be understood in conjunction with the presence and dominance of the male printmaker’s role. While a painter or sculptor can work in nearly any environment, a printmaker must have access to expensive equipment to produce the final product. The expense of the presses dictated that they were more likely to be collectively owned, or owned by an established printer, which typically led to many printmakers working in a single studio space. Males often acted as support for female artists, and artistic exchange among genders was unavoidable. However, during the first part of the 20th century, women found themselves playing secondary roles to their male counterparts. Social
gender roles continued to bind women to the domestic sphere. As a result, some women artists used at-home processes to make prints in order to support their families while continuing to be active in the art world (Seaton 42).

World War II proved to be an important cultural and technological turning point for female printmakers. Though the WPA workshops had closed, new outlets for printmaking developed. In the U.S., the G.I. Bill created a surge in educational opportunities that allowed artists to pursue printmaking. Women played key pedagogical roles in developing printmaking programs at institutions of higher learning, non-profit workshops, convent schools, and psychiatric institutions. Past WPA participants were encouraged to seek employment as educators. While this choice was in keeping with societal norms, women printmakers took these duties, not because their options were limited, but because they had found their calling. Women took advantage of these positions to become practitioners of modernist, experimental teaching philosophies; consequently, their female students became the next generation of printmaking instructors (Seaton 66).

This historical record indicates that the female role in printmaking was strongly influenced by social expectations of gender and technology. Female artists used printmaking to succeed in accordance with their own goals and values without protest from society because it was in keeping with patriarchal ideals concerning women’s roles in society.

The Role of Women Printmakers in New Scholarship

The term, printmaking, refers to creating art by the method of printing, which can be accomplished using any of several methods including relief, lithography, and intaglio. A print is an object upon which a design has been formed that is then used to make an impression, thus
creating a print, usually on paper. A printmaking studio holds presses with which to create prints, as well as other materials needed by printmakers to create their art.

Printmaking is inherently connected with technology through its methods and processes. The connection between technology and printmaking inevitably creates interdependence among gender roles, technology, and print. Understanding this relationship will further assist in redressing the status of the history of women in printmaking.

To fully grasp the connection, a deeper understanding of technology is required. Technology is a kind of knowledge that “encompasses tools and practices deliberately employed as natural means for attaining clearly identifiable ends” (Richter 7). Technology encompasses both material and organizational tools. It is a facet of living that is intertwined in life. Yet, technology does not determine or cause social developments; rather, technology interacts reciprocally with society so that technology shapes and is shaped by social and cultural developments, including economics, politics, and science (Cockburn 34).

This definition may broaden the way technology is defined, and it impacts how printmaking is perceived. Women’s involvement in the history of print must be studied in terms of gender and this definition of technology in order to allow for further exploration.

Scholarship that analyzes gender-technology relationships theoretically and historically concludes that in pre-modern and modern Western society, technology is gendered masculine. Masculinity is defined in terms of technical competence, and this correlation between technology and masculinity can be traced to the roots of Western patriarchal society. A division of labor created a hierarchy between the sexes defined by sexual difference. Men placed themselves in the middle of commerce and technological advancement, while women were restricted to maternal and domestic duties (Richter 8). Labor and technology were regarded as masculine
duties while women’s involvement was overlooked. Moreover, women’s duties were undervalued and often went undocumented in technology studies, which reinforced a narrow definition of technology. How we define technology and apply it to our studies of printmaking history shapes our ideas about printmaking, and impacts who is thought to be involved with its development. Thus, we may question why studies of print history focus on male figures like Alois Senefelder, the inventor of lithography, rather than June Wayne. While Senefelder’s invention is traditionally associated with technology, Wayne’s establishment of a groundbreaking studio is not as highly regarded. Gender is a tool developed from a capitalistic, industrial society through which men are rendered as more important. In its own sense, gender can be regarded as a technological development. As a technology, gender serves as a way to establish hierarchical social structures and maintain dominance that has been rooted in tradition.

However, technology does not necessarily imply the oppression of women. Instead, interdisciplinary approaches call for a new outlook that rewrites women printmakers into the history of technology.

Conclusion

An interdisciplinary humanities approach allows an understanding of the relationships between gender, technology, and printmaking. In addition, it invites us to appreciate technology as more than mechanical, insofar as what counts as technology includes social relationships in the studio and prints created.

Printmaking is bound up with social and technological transformations that inherently call gender into question. The division of gender that is found in patriarchal society is similarly found in the realm of art. However, it is the most current feminist writings about gender-technology relations that call for a new interpretation of the history of women printmakers.
While most scholarship in the realm of gender and technology is not being written by art historians, the subject matter, with its close tie to culture, and, by definition, art, has much to contribute to a new perspective for future research and reporting for the history of women printmakers. It is, therefore, necessary to understand printmaking as an area of the humanities. Thus, using an interdisciplinary methodology is relevant to better understand the role of women in the history of prints. The separation of women and men throughout history is important to note when analyzing the role of women printmakers. However, the assumption that women are passive victims in the gender-technology relationship is to discount women artists and their contributions by writing them off as less important than if they had been deemed equal to men; it is necessary to view women’s roles from another perspective. Technology allowed women to be active and influential in the print studio, beginning in the mid-19th Century. While men were dominating the industrial economic mainstream, women were permitted to work within the arts, without regulations on what was produced. Women involved in print were not forced into teaching, but chose to teach and were able to develop advanced methods and become forerunners of print technology. The advancements made did not become any less significant or noteworthy just because their choice, as women, was deemed culturally acceptable by males. It is ironic that women’s separation from traditionally defined technology allowed them to be active in the technology of the print studio.

Female artists used their positions advantageously to build strong relationships with fellow artists, resulting in new print workshops and programs at the Cincinnati Art Academy, School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), and University of Texas at Austin – all are examples of women printmakers capitalizing on the situations in which they found themselves (Seaton 73). These contributions are a result of technology, and are themselves technologies, or
ways to apply knowledge to achieve an effect. This new insight on technology and gender-technology relationships allows us to understand these women as the forerunners of printmaking technologies.

The most impressive example is June Wayne founding the Tamarind Lithography Institute. Since her participation in WPA workshops, June Wayne was an active advocate of printmaking. She had experience working with French master-printer Marcel Durassier and, as she matured as an artist, began to travel more regularly and became aware of the declining state of lithography (Adams 16). After she returned from a trip to Paris, Wayne contemplated the status of the American studio and realized that none was equal to those in Europe. The ultimate conclusion of her trip was that American artists should be able to access and experience the benefits of European traditions, and she hoped to give the lithographic medium an American renaissance. She secured over two million dollars in grant money to fund the opening of the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles in 1960 (Seaton 76). Wayne’s plans for Tamarind were ambitious, as she was hoping to raise the level of American lithography, while also increasing public popularity of the print medium. Her project was developed for the benefit of lithography in its entirety, rather than only for Tamarind master printers. The workshop had a dual program that involved artists and printers granting fellowships so artists could come to print, train, and learn (Adams 17). It was Wayne’s hope that this type of rotating structure would make possible a new and important tradition in the humanities. She set high standards for artists and printers, engaging them in long-term planning that took into consideration political and sociological consequences. Wayne’s experiences and accomplishments support the belief that women printmakers were not only significant but also pivotal in fostering access to print technology.
The goals of Wayne’s project exceeded expectations, and her contribution to the humanities benefited the Tamarind Institute and printmaking. Artists gained new interest working with the medium, and the master printers trained at Tamarind have gone on to open workshops of their own, continuing the legacy of lithography.

A revision of the history of women printmakers is supported by Wayne’s story and those similar to it. Within the framework of art history, printmaking is an undervalued art medium, and women are the undervalued artists. As a result, scholarship researching the history of women printmakers is scarce; furthermore, women’s interactions with and effects on technology have been vastly overlooked. Future research must redefine the typical view that women have limited technological contributions. While it is not without question that technology is gendered, women, especially those involved in printmaking, have not been its passive victims. Instead, these artists have used their gender roles to their advantage, and have forever changed the print medium for both women and men.
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