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Professional Women Painters in Nineteenth-Century Scotland

Commitment, Friendship, Pleasure

Janice Heiland

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FOR
MY GRANDMOTHER, ROENA CARY CLARK (1892–1958)
AND
HER MOTHER, CASSIE SCOTT COURSER (1867–1932)

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Abbreviations

ARSA	Associate Member of the Royal Scottish Academy
GSA	Glasgow School of Art
RSA	Royal Scottish Academy
RSW	Royal Society of Painters in Water Colours
SSA	Society of Scottish Artists
SSW	Scottish Society of Water Colour Painters

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Introduction

'Women are at last learning the lesson that "Unity is Strength" ' wrote C. Gasquoine Hartley in her review of the first exhibition of the Paris Club which had opened in London's Grafton Galleries in 1900. Organized in the spring of 1898, the Club intended to provide 'for the mutual help of all women artists who had been trained in Paris' and, accordingly, required two qualifications for membership: the artist must have studied in Paris and she must do 'strong work'.[1] Edinburgh artists Christina Paterson Ross (1843–1906), Florence Haig (1855–1952) and Mary Rose Hill Burton (1857–1900) exhibited pictures in the first exhibition; the slightly younger Scottish artist Mary Cameron (1865–1921) joined them within four years. Uniting with other women artists to exhibit and sell work was a concept familiar to the Edinburgh women – they had organized to form the Edinburgh Ladies' Art Club in 1889. Exhibiting work in Britain's art centre was also familiar – these women offered their pictures for sale in exhibition venues in London as well as in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Manchester, Liverpool, Stirling and Kirkcaldy, to name but a few. Mary Rose Hill Burton, for example, in addition to participating in large exhibitions with organizations such as the Royal Scottish Academy and the Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts had at least three solo exhibitions in London during the 1890s. Mary Cameron had solo exhibitions in London, Paris and Madrid as well as in her home city of Edinburgh.

These women and others like them worked and travelled. Some, like Christina Paterson Ross, based themselves in their home city travelling within Scotland and occasionally to the Continent. Others, like Mary Cameron and her Edinburgh friend Emily Murray Paterson, chafed at the city's conservative environment and spent large blocks of time away from Scotland. Cameron spent part of each year in Paris and lived for months at a time in Spain and London; Paterson lived between Edinburgh and London

and, at one point in her career, spent three years in Switzerland. Paterson's many and colourful pictures of Venice signal her attachment to a city distantly removed from her northern home, while her much later pictures (1919) of war-torn Belgium attest to her willingness to confront difficulties and challenges.[2] Mary Rose Hill Burton's travels took her to Japan but she remained firmly attached to Scotland's (or more specifically to Patrick Geddes's) Celtic revival. The mural she painted for the Geddeses' Ramsay Garden flat portrays the enigmatic mystery of a Walter Scott novel or an Ossian poem with its gloomy, dark castle barely visible through a Highland mist, the greyness relieved only by blooming yellow and purple flowers in the foreground.

While the women artists whose stories appear on the following pages often worked outside an established art centre, in this case London, they negotiated constantly with that centre in their attempts to sell their art. Selecting Scottish women for this discussion provides a case study informed by location, class and gender. Although most of the women studied art in Edinburgh or Glasgow, they moved in and out of those cities seeking subject matter for the pictures they needed to sell from exhibition venues, the most important of which in Scotland were the Royal Scottish Academy (Edinburgh) and the Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts. In addition, I have selected artists whose careers are well documented in exhibition reviews and catalogues, who exhibited widely, but whose pictures remain virtually impossible to locate. My contention is that art history recycles information about established artists whose pictures exist in public collections; however, the conditions of production and consumption surrounding the art-making of (particularly) women has been ignored when pictures cannot be found, thereby perpetuating the discourse of art history within and around a commercial market-place. Social historians can discuss the work of female farmworkers, for example, without viewing their gleanings; female art-workers may have to be discussed without viewing their pictures.

Concomitantly, writers of history far too often have accepted an ideology of the female-occupied separate or domestic sphere as a confining, restrictive space; even though monographs and narratives of independent, adventurous women abound, the myth of domestic place and private space haunts historical women just as it does contemporary women, by 'exoticizing' those who 'make it' into the record and ignoring so many others. That the women in this study worked is clear from the number of pictures they exhibited and sold. However, the British census, which is not a reliable indicator of women's work, reveals that women artists were neither employees nor employers but 'independent workers'. Edinburgh artist Christina Paterson Ross, for example, listed herself as an 'artist' who was neither an employer nor employee but an independent worker. Because changing census classifi-

cations in the nineteenth century reflected and constructed a definition of work which increasingly was defined as an activity 'carried on outside the home, for a wage',[3] this categorization has relegated artists' labour to a liminal region which exists neither in the realm of waged labour nor in a capitalistic market economy. Thus, while some women artists entered census statistics as 'independent workers', the irregularity and non-permanence of their occupation ensured that they did not fare well in comparisons with the 'norm' which rapidly became the 'permanently employed' and 'waged' worker.

Looking at women who displayed artistic goods for sale in public venues highlights the working experience of the middle-class female, a category that remains elusive and defies definition. Catherine Hall insists upon the gendered development of the middle class between 1780 and 1850 which incorporated the ideals of masculinity and femininity into 'the construction of a specifically middle-class culture'. According to Hall it is this gendering of class that separated the middle class 'from the aristocracy and gentry above them and the working class below them', and characteristic of the designation was a tendency to consider man as having dependants and woman as being dependent.[4] However, by the last half of the nineteenth century numbers of women, including women artists, were working. Deconstructing the ideology of the so-called 'separate spheres' has been addressed and continues to be addressed by feminist historians and geographers.[5] For example, Esther Breitenbach and Eleanor Gordon suggested that 'the view of women as confined to the domestic sphere was not only inappropriate to the reality of working-class women's lives, but as the nineteenth century progressed it became less and less appropriate to the reality of middle-class women's lives'.[6] Rather than highlighting the 'conflict of interest between middle- and working-class women',[7] I shall attempt to elaborate upon middle-class women who sought to establish themselves as professional artists and often did this whether they required income or not. That is, rather than direct their energies toward philanthropic or 'rescue' work, they organized a career for themselves (sometimes this paralleled volunteer work), or, if the artist did require income, rather than work as, for example, a governess, she sought to work independently by locating markets for her product.

My intention is to explore a social history which accepts and emphasizes historical women producers of pictures and applied arts as middle-class workers. While, in the twentieth century artists are rarely referenced as workers, such was not the case in the late nineteenth century. The *Glasgow Herald*, for example, when it reviewed the 1888 annual exhibition of the Glasgow Society of Lady Artists, recognized the women as 'an earnest and painstaking band of workers in the field of art'.[8] The following year the

Scotsman applauded the Royal Scottish Academy exhibition as 'a genuine harvest of Scottish art' that represented 'workers in the West of Scotland' as well as Edinburgh artists.[9] Thus, in the following pages, I shall seek to understand how specific women worked, where they worked, where they exhibited and how their work was received by their viewing public. A concern I wish to weave through my discussion is one which brings the late-nineteenth-century artist together with the late-twentieth-century feminist historian. My contention is that until feminist historians and art historians write about the nineteenth-century artist as a working woman, that is until her place within an economy of production and consumption is insisted upon, women will continue to inhabit an insecure space within society. Our place is still underwritten by the historical ideology of the separate spheres which functioned to stabilize patriarchal capitalism; as long as the historical ideology remains intact, struggles for day care, equal pay for equal work, and equity in hiring will flounder. A displacement of the dichotomy of public and private requires more than a writing of unpaid labour – it requires also a recognition of self-employment and/or partial employment as it is found in cultural work.

In the winter of 1894, Christina Paterson Ross, an artist who supported herself by making art, exhibited two pictures with the Stirling Fine Art Association: *A Spanish Town Gate* (1894) and *A Corner in Crail, Fife* (1894).[10] A juxtaposition of the titles of the two pictures combined with the artist's inclusion in an exhibition venue located in the heart of Scotland where Highland and Lowland meet, could act as a metaphor for the following pages. Stirling is almost halfway between Scotland's two largest cities and, in addition to Ross's paintings, the gallery exhibited for sale pictures made by a number of Ross's Edinburgh colleagues including Mary Cameron, Margaret Dempster and Emily Murray Paterson as well as many Glaswegian artists such as Agnes Raeburn, Janet Aitken and Jane Cowan Wyper. The titles of Ross's pictures, one representing a foreign country she visited on at least one occasion and the other depicting a Scottish village north-east of Edinburgh, denote the kind of travelling women artists engaged in as they plied their trade. That all the pictures were for sale demonstrates intent on the part of the artists to earn money, perhaps even make a living, from their labour. Finally, Ross was typical of many late-nineteenth-century Scottish women artists: she was well-trained, began exhibiting when she was in her early twenties and exhibited widely, belonged to professional organizations which served her interests as an artist, and travelled either to further her education or to sketch and paint saleable pictures.

The story of Ross's activities weaves in or around the series of linked essays that follow. In one way or another she enters each narrative about women artists working in Scotland during the late nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries; for example, she plays a large role in the second essay about professional organizations and exhibition venues as well as in the later essay which focuses upon women as landscape painters, while she has only a tiny part in the essay about four Glaswegian women who were part of a group called the 'Immortals'.[11] Thus, while the story is not linear and each chapter is discrete, there are actors, of whom Ross is only one, who reappear in different guises throughout the text. The major players, however, share two characteristics: they all belonged to and supported women artists' societies, and they all exhibited regularly in a number of different venues. Ross was the first president of the Edinburgh Ladies' Art Club while Kate Macaulay, Ross's colleague in the Scottish Society of Painters in Water Colours,[12] belonged to London's Society of Female Artists. Both women exhibited pictures in venues throughout Britain. The stories represent the life and work of selected women rather than a comprehensive narrative, but all the artists provide what might be called display as insight. By exhibiting regularly and supporting professional organizations they were visible to their contemporaries and they can become visible to the late-twentieth-century reader when their working patterns and subject matter are reconstructed: the artists' intent to display their work provides the historian with insight into their practices and their lives.

The women regularly exhibited and belonged to artists' organizations. Thus Ross, for example, belonged to the Edinburgh Ladies' Art Club but was a member of and exhibited frequently with, the Glasgow-based Scottish Society of Painters in Water Colours (RSW); Kate Macaulay, born in Malta of Scottish descent, lived in north Wales but painted and exhibited extensively in Scotland and England; Georgina Greenlees taught at the Glasgow School of Art, belonged to the Glasgow Society of Lady Artists and was active from its inception in the RSW. Mary Cameron belonged to the Edinburgh Ladies' Art Club as well as to the Society of 25 English Painters.[13]

The women's education differed depending on where they lived. For example, Edinburgh's Board of Manufactures' School remained inextricably linked to the conservative and traditional Royal Scottish Academy. The Glasgow School of Art although it was, like Edinburgh, under the umbrella of the so-called South Kensington system, escaped the ever-watchful, conventional eye of the Academy. When women artists formed their own professional organizations, Glasgow's was related in almost every way to the Glasgow School of Art and fostered its ties with the School; Edinburgh women reacted against the Academy and founded their organization in opposition to, rather than in co-operation with, an established institution. The Scottish Water Colour Society, established in 1878, included women from both cities and from outlying areas but was more or less Glasgow-based; similarly, the Edinburgh-based Society of Scottish Artists, established in 1891,

also included women from both the major Scottish cities as well as artists from other areas. Efficient and cheap railway transportation had connected Britain's major centres since the 1850s making possible the movement of artists and their pictures from one place to another – by the 1870s pictures would be exhibited in a Glasgow venue in the spring, for example, and if not sold, could be exhibited again in Liverpool in the autumn. This kind of mobility combined with the increased number of artists' societies opened opportunities for sales and increased income more than ever before. It is hardly coincidental that education for women artists opened up at about the same time the railways introduced easier movement between cities and across the countryside.

For many women, the classroom presented the opportunity to interact with others who shared similar ideas and interests. This contact, which might represent the first time young women encountered other females who shared their goals and aspirations, continued as women who studied together frequently obtained adjoining studios or shared studios. Such associations and the attendant camaraderie intensified as women combined their experience in educational institutions with the exhibiting venue. Thus, formal education provided another link between the so-called private, domestic world and the public forum. In addition, the friendships consequently established represented support for mutual endeavours as well as companionship.[14] Friendship ranges across a broad spectrum from intimate relationships to relationships which offer 'utility value', that is, relationships in which one person is willing to use time or resources to help another meet her goals.[15] While friendship is a voluntary association, attachments are often formed when plans and activities are shared;[16] women attending classes together formed varying degrees of attachment which continued when they began careers as artists.

Other ways existed for young women artists to establish friendships and build support groups – certainly, the institution did not guarantee emotive or useful friendships any more than did family connections but, while friendship is usually defined as a characteristic of the private and domestic, friendships that grew within the institutional environment often led to an overlap of the private with the public. For example, public friendships or those more related to career than to family could provide the impetus for studio-sharing or travelling together in order to collect subject matter for pictures. In this way, the domestic (or private) and the institutional (or public) became more inter-related than separate amongst artists. Another example that follows on from this can be found amongst female and male artists who kept studios in their own homes, thereby conflating the professional world with the domestic world. Edinburgh artist Mary Rose Hill Burton, for example, worked out of a home shared with her mother, her

stepsister and a family friend, Jane 'Jeanne' Currie. While Hill Burton kept her studio in her mother's seven-room home, her friend, London-born Florence Haig, rented studio-space in Edinburgh's Shandwick Place then, after the turn of the century, in Chelsea: whether the artist worked inside or outside her home, the studio could never be designated 'private' for out of this space came the product that the artist sold in a public market-place (the exhibition venue).

By discussing the studios and exhibition venues used by a number of Glasgow and Edinburgh women artists during the late nineteenth century, I hope to construct a physical as well as a theoretical space for these women as workers. While it was significant that women were kept out of the inner circle of the most prestigious of the artists' groups (the Royal Scottish Academy), and while it was also certain that this affected the way in which society perceived them (as not serious) as well as the way in which career opportunities presented themselves, some women did have a regular venue for their work as early as 1878. The Scottish Society of Water Colour Painters, from its inception in 1878, accepted women as associate members in addition to providing them with exhibiting space. This is not to deny its exclusionary characteristics for it, too, had a select membership, limited the number of artists who could join, and usually restricted its venues to members only but, unlike the Royal Scottish Academy, women were not excluded simply for being women. Moreover, it would be venues such as the Scottish Society of Water Colour Painters that would provide a meeting place for women artists: those who had attended institutionalized art classes could meet with those who had trained privately. Professionalism and the enjoyment of their careers would bring them together.

Lynne Walker has aptly demonstrated that London women moved about in the city frequenting offices, shops, women's clubs and various entertainments and, by the 1890s, did so without chaperones.[17] Their place in the built environment which, according to Walker, was 'the buildings and the spaces between them' expanded during the last half of the nineteenth century even though an ideology of domesticity always threatened to contain or constrain these independent women. Women artists, whether in London, Edinburgh, or Glasgow moved in the urban environment of commerce and social activity, particularly when they travelled from their homes to their studios (often on foot), bought their supplies and visited galleries and museums. Often the artists either shared studios or rented studios near to other artists: Florence Haig and Margaret Dempster, for example, rented studios near to other artists in Edinburgh's Shandwick Place. Shandwick Place attracted a number of women artists beginning soon after the building of the Albert Gallery in 1876–7. Built as a gallery to sell the work of contemporary artists, it was a large building that included studio spaces and was

located conveniently near to the Caledonian Railway Station.[18] Perhaps because of the gallery, other buildings in Shandwick Place, particularly near its intersection with Queensferry Street, soon included artists' studios. These were interspersed amongst studios rented by musicians, language teachers, dance instructors and the Edinburgh Association for the University Education of Women.

This story is also concerned to relate work and pleasure. The pleasure of work obtained by the makers of art whether it be landscape painting or embroidery follows from their material conditions of production and my discussion of this owes much to William Morris's attempts to integrate socialism with art. Morris declared that people should have work to do which is worth doing, that is pleasant in itself and which should be done 'under such conditions as would make it neither over-wearisome or over-anxious'. Art, according to Morris, is made by people for people 'as a happiness to the maker and the user'.[19] While Morris's ideas might be criticized as utopian, universal and therefore suspect in this age of poststructuralist relativism, he attempted to theorize the position of worker and product so that both producer and consumer experienced benefits from a cycle of buying and selling. In addition, although pleasure as a reading or viewing position has been theorized (often psychoanalytically), production is rarely looked at as work which gives pleasure. This is not to posit a romanticization of the role of the creative artist in society as a free worker or to suggest that the artist characterizes the non-alienated worker; rather I suggest that certain nineteenth-century women artists lived ordinary lives as cultural workers supporting themselves in a capitalist economy by following a career that gave them pleasure as well as income.

Mary Cameron, for example, in an interview she gave to the *Westminster Gazette*, insisted that she always 'wished to paint' and made clear to readers that painting meant hard work and pleasure: ' "It means hard manual labour" [Cameron] answered, holding out a pair of hands, small, strong, muscular and sun-tanned. "It means pulling up your sleeves," she continued, and her brown eyes twinkled as she drew her slim figure up to full height, "and setting to work!" '[20]

This book is composed of two parts: the first part includes three essays concerned with education, exhibiting practices and organizations as they pertained to women artists; the second part includes three essays concerned with specific women, their experiences, and their representations. Education provides the starting point for this series of discreet but interlocked essays. Chapter 1, 'Sexual Economics and the Gendered Spaces of Art Education', highlights the historical moment when female artists entered the Board of Manufactures' School in Edinburgh for the first time and, in the process, examines the similarities and differences between the Edinburgh school and