
In 1971, art historian Linda Nochlin wrote the seminal essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" which jump-started the field of feminist art history, calling forth a re-examination and exploration of the work women artists, and questioning their place in the field of the visual arts. Artist and collector Linda Lee Alter has taken up this cause in her collection of art by women that she has given to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA), Philadelphia which is the basis for the subject of this book. Included in her collection are close to 500 works of art (including paintings, photographs, drawings, watercolors, pastels, collage, prints, fabric pieces, ceramics, bronze, wood, and sculpture in other media) by over 150 women artists.

When Alter began collecting art in the 1980s, she realized that despite the efforts and inroads made by the Women’s Movement, women still had less visibility in museums than men. Thus, Alter decided to collect work by a wide variety of women artists in a variety of media and themes. However, all artworks are united by the female gaze either outward-looking or inward-looking and self-reflective. With no hierarchy in her collecting strategy, Alter acquired works by famous, established women artists as well as those who were lesser known or emerging artists. The collection is marked by its depth and diversity being composed of artists of varied races and backgrounds, yet it is united by a high aesthetic quality in all the work.

The book is composed of essays written by art historians and art curators. An interview with Linda Lee Alter, by Robert Cozzolino, Senior Curator and Curator of Modern Art at the PAFA begins the book, and gives insight into the motivations and process of this collector. Ten essays follow on a wide variety of themes covered by the art in the collection. These include a history of women artists at the PAFA, women and American modernism in New York in the early twentieth century, women artists in Chicago and feminist artists in Philadelphia, self-portraiture, and gender and racial identity in works by Elizabeth Catlett and Faith Ringgold among others.

Although many other books have been written on women artists, art and feminism, as well as on gender and identity, this book is unique in that it examines a specific collector and collection, and includes interesting lesser-known artists. Fine color illustrations and binding add to the quality of the book, and a checklist of the artists at the back of the book is an excellent quick reference section. This book would complement academic, art school, museum, and public library art book collections.

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