

# CONTINUING THE DISCOURSE: FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP AND THE STUDY OF MEDIEVAL VISUAL CULTURE

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In 1992, Norma Broude and Mary Garrard published *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, a follow-up to their 1982 anthology of feminist essays, *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*.<sup>1</sup> The appearance of this second volume provoked a firestorm of controversy from medievalists for its exclusion of any western art prior to the Early Modern period, material which had been included in the 1982 volume. Paula Gerson and Pamela Sheingorn had already founded the Medieval Feminist Art History Project (MFAHP) in 1990, but *The Expanding Discourse's* omission of pre-Renaissance works reinforced MFAHP's mission of supporting feminist scholarship in medieval art history. The third volume of the Broude and Garrard series, *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History after Postmodernism*, appeared in 2005.<sup>2</sup> It, too, excluded any western art produced prior to the Early Modern period, but it has not invigorated feminist inquiry among medieval art historians, nor has it sparked a revival of the now-defunct MFAHP. In this essay, I will outline the history of the MFAHP and will survey and analyze the scholarship published in four leading art history and medieval studies journals between 1990 and 2006 in order to determine the impact of the MFAHP on feminist work in art history.

Broude and Garrard's decision to limit their selections to western art from the Renaissance on points to the central question of this essay: what is the status of feminist inquiry within the study of medieval visual culture? Does Broude and Garrard's omission of this period indicate the lack of such an orientation on the part of medieval art historians or merely the editors' ignorance or neglect of such work? Does the problem lie with medieval art historians themselves: are we reluctant to embrace a feminist identification for ourselves, causing scholars of other periods or fields to overlook our contributions? My essay will address these questions by assessing

the current place of feminist studies in medieval art history. I will proceed by presenting Broude and Garrard's justifications for their editorial decisions and critique the validity of their rationales. Since these volumes marked a major feminist statement aimed at historical rather than contemporary art, and since the editors claimed to present some of the most significant feminist art-historical scholarship from the past two decades and included lengthy overviews of feminist historiography in each volume, one can argue that the trilogy has had a significant impact on the direction of feminist inquiry into visual culture since the first book was published. Consequently, any consideration of feminist medieval art history must take account of the series. I will also examine the patterns in feminist art-historical scholarship, keeping in mind the model constructed by Broude and Garrard's introductory sections of their anthologies. I will conclude by offering some thoughts as to where feminist inquiry stands in current medieval art-historical investigation.

Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Italian Architects, Painters and Sculptors*, published in 1550 and traditionally considered the first art history book, arguably established the primary methodology by which western art has been studied ever since, a biographical approach which privileges the artist as a solitary creator producing his (mainly/manly) works out of sheer genius. Unfortunately, since much of artistic production prior to the Renaissance was anonymous, this art-historical methodology has always presented difficulties for those engaged in the study of ancient and medieval visual culture. It also proved an obstacle for feminist art historians interested in the contribution of women to western art, as few names of female artists were recorded in the written documents so valued by art historians.

Despite the scarcity of secure evidence concerning medieval women's artistic practice, "first-wave" feminist art-historians engaged in a recuperative operation largely generated by Linda Nochlin's groundbreaking article, "Why Are There No Great Women Artists?"<sup>3</sup> These scholars focused on resurrecting women artists from oblivion in an attempt to demonstrate that they were at least active if not great.<sup>4</sup> Most of these works used the Renaissance as the starting point for this enterprise, one exception being

Wendy Slatkin's, *Women Artists in History From Antiquity to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, published in 1985.<sup>5</sup> Her chapter on the Middle Ages features a broad overview of the status and experience of peasant, urban, and aristocratic women as well as discussing female artistic production, including the few named artists such as the manuscript painters En, Claricia, and Guda.<sup>6</sup> In the first volume of their trilogy, *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, Broude and Garrard consciously rejected this art-historical tradition claiming that theirs was not a book about women artists but about, as they put it, "an adjustment of historical perspective," demanded by feminist inquiry.<sup>7</sup>

Broude and Garrard's resistance to this feminist strategy should have provided room for those periods in which visual production was largely anonymous. Unfortunately for medievalists, the editors illustrated their anthology's mission through an anecdote about Petrarch in which the poet distinguishes between a glorious ancient history and his own period of darkness brought on by the advent of Christianity.<sup>8</sup> He goes on to envision a new era of enlightenment that will end the decline. Broude and Garrard noted that this story revealed the recognition of a certain historical self-consciousness, which allowed Petrarch to identify an intervening period between antiquity and his own time, which would now be defined as the beginning of a new historical era. The editors of *Feminism and Art History* obviously saw themselves as analogs to Petrarch in defining a new historical perspective that would reveal the previous historical bias that excluded women from the narrative. Unfortunately, the articulation of this new perspective reproduced the trite historical model of ancient glory, a Dark Age(s), and a cultural rebirth.

The essays selected for this first volume included studies of ancient and medieval visual production and supported the editors' determination to expose the sexual bias embedded in the history of art, and the resulting denigration of women's artistic production and relations to visual culture.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the fact that the essays were presented in chronological order from Egyptian through twentieth-century art, a structure maintained in the succeeding volumes and analogous to the organization of the traditional art history survey

course, suggested a progressive narrative in which women's status continuously improved from the ignorant past to the enlightened present. As the introductory essays make clear, both editors were, and have remained, firm believers in an essential female voice and experience, a view shared by many feminists at the time the first volume was published.

The preface to the second volume in the series, *Expanding the Discourse*, states that the editors decided to limit their selections to the post-medieval period of western art because, in their view, most feminist art history had addressed itself to these periods:

One of our earliest decisions was to limit the scope of this volume to the period from the Renaissance to the present, since much of the work done by feminist art historians in the last decade has focused on this time span. We felt that the connections among the essays, as well as the usefulness of the book, would be strengthened by this chronological focus.<sup>10</sup>

The other rationale offered for their selection was that the essays featured in the second volume employed what the editors described as a feminist rather than gender-conscious approach. The latter they characterized as avoiding the overtly political advocacy of feminism in favor of a neutral investigation of the function of gender in constructing subjectivity. In the eyes of Broude and Garrard, the displacement of feminism by gender studies has allowed masculinist cultural assumptions such as the understanding of creative production as a male prerogative to remain unquestioned and intact:

[. . .] a recent trend in gender studies has been the investigation of "gendered subjectivity" as the underpinning for art movements that have been masculinist preserves such as Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. Such gender-conscious analyses may show us, by implication, how and why it was that women had no access to the Abstract Expressionist and Minimalist myths, but this is not their stated mission or goal. Their focus remains male centered, like the canonical art history that enshrined these styles in the first place.<sup>11</sup>

The editors continue on to observe that this volume of essays serves as a corrective to a history of women that has been ignored or falsified by the male-dominated historical discipline.

Broude and Garrard's advocacy of a feminist rather than a gender studies approach to art history in their preface also informs the introduction to *The Expanding Discourse*, which provides an overview of the postmodernist critique of art history and its relevance to feminism. The editors acknowledge the value of poststructuralist theory in providing feminists with a more rigorous intellectual framework for their analyses. At the same time, Broude and Garrard suggest that the social constructivist approach (their term), by strenuously rejecting a biologically based female essence and an autonomous, individualized artistic personality, denied women artists acknowledgment at the very moment they were poised to enter the art-historical canon.<sup>12</sup> The editors argue for a position midway between essentialists and poststructuralists, what they call liberal feminism, which acknowledges the role of social forces in constructing identities, including gender, yet maintains a belief that there is a female subjectivity rooted in women's historical experience.<sup>13</sup> Yet, the omission of any period prior to the Renaissance in this volume demonstrates a very selective history on the part of the editors: they stand to be accused of a "presentist" bias in their opposition to a "masculinist" one.

The 2005 publication of the third volume of the Broude and Garrard anthologies, *Reclaiming Female Agency*, provides the editors the opportunity to reconsider the impact of postmodern theories after more than a decade. Their hostility toward the social constructivist approach clearly has not lessened over this period as their introduction vigorously critiques the poststructuralist rejection of essentialism in favor of a constructivist approach. Indeed, they are even more vehement in their opposition to the subsuming of feminist inquiry under the rubric of gender studies, which they feel eliminates any possibility of female agency from the study of art history.<sup>14</sup> As announced by the title of this third volume, advocating for women's agency is the priority of this publication and the contents reflect this agenda. Out of twenty-three articles, fourteen focus on the practice of a female artist, which the editors consider the most obvious example of agency in the production of art. It may be this artist-centered construction of women's agency that led the editors once again to exclude any

pre-Renaissance material, for artistic production in the ancient and medieval world is notably lacking in named artists.

It was in the wake of feminist scholarly activism energized by publications such as Broude and Garrard's that in 1990 Paula Gerson and Pamela Sheingorn founded the Medieval Feminist Art History Project in order to promote feminist scholarship on medieval visual culture.<sup>15</sup> The appearance of Broude and Garrard's second volume confirmed Gerson and Sheingorn's belief that medieval art historians needed an organization responsive to their desire to investigate objects produced by and for women. While both founders had been active in the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship and members of its advisory board, these scholars felt that the SMFS was dominated by the historical and literary disciplines and was unlikely to give art historians' interest in issues of artist, patron, and material objects enough attention. In addition, Gerson and Sheingorn believed that medieval feminist art historians were more likely to have sessions and papers approved for the Medieval Congress in Kalamazoo if they were sponsored by an organization devoted exclusively to art history.

In the years that it was active MFAHP vigorously promoted feminist art-historical inquiry in a number of venues. It organized numerous sessions at The International Congress at Western Michigan University (Kalamazoo), at the annual conference sponsored by CEMERS at Binghamton University, and at the Medieval Club of New York City. Topics included "Innovation and Commemoration: Aristocratic Women and the Arts of Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Spain," CEMERS, 1992; "Women of the Hebrew Bible," the Medieval Club of New York, 1993; "Medieval Art Historians Confront the Gaze," Kalamazoo, 1993; "Women Artists in the Middle Ages: the State of the Question," Kalamazoo, 1994; and "Small-Scale Devotional Objects in the Middle Ages: Makers and Patrons," Kalamazoo, 1998. In addition to sessions, the organization compiled a bibliography of medieval feminist scholarship that was updated three times and made available to their members. Gerson and Sheingorn also encouraged feminist medieval art historians to share syllabi and slides. The fourth and final bibliography came out in 1996 and included entries

for 135 scholars, including quite a few whose primary field was not art history. A year later the organization effectively ceased to function when Gerson and Sheingorn gave up its leadership due to the increasing burden of administrative duties required in their new academic positions at Florida State University and the CUNY Graduate Center respectively. Efforts were made to keep the organization going but came to nothing. Perhaps this was because of its informal procedures—there was not a membership fee, newsletter, or publication to consolidate and support the organization's functions. Becoming a member merely involved submitting contact information and a list of publications, projects-in-progress, and course syllabi to be included in the bibliography. Without a more formalized structure, inertia took over and MFAHP faded away.

Throughout the decade of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, MFAHP served a crucial function for those art historians engaged in investigating the role of women in the production of medieval art. Prior to its founding these scholars had no effective method for sharing information or presenting their work to others. During the 1980s, architectural historians tended to dominate the offerings at Kalamazoo, a group that included few women and had little interest in feminist issues. The MFAHP-sponsored sessions opened up new fields of inquiry and, in the process, shifted the direction medieval art history was to take in the future. MFAHP encouraged an increased production of feminist scholarship, much of which was to appear in print in the years during and after its activities, to the point that current studies of art produced by, about, and for women are taken for granted. Perhaps this is the reason for the decline of interest in the MFAHP.

Assessing the current status of feminist approaches to medieval art requires a historiographical survey of medieval art-historical scholarship up to this point. I have chosen to examine four leading journals devoted either to medieval art or to medieval studies: *Art Bulletin*, *Gesta*, *Speculum*, and *Studies in Iconography*. In focusing on these publications, I realize that I am excluding major venues of medieval study; however, publishing delays often result in material coming out several years after a manuscript's completion

by its author. This is especially true of scholarly monographs and anthologies. Consequently, I believe that within the limited time and space I have to produce this essay, a survey of journal literature offers the most timely picture of medieval scholarship. In addition, these publications represent the major mainstream venues subscribed to by most medieval art historians and, therefore, can be argued to have the greatest impact on future scholarship in the field.

My survey covers the years between 1990 and 2006. The beginning date marks the founding of the MFAHP, but by 1990, the impact of Broude and Garrard's first volume would have already been widely felt. I also employed very general criteria in considering what constituted "feminist" scholarship. For purposes of this essay, I include any article examining objects produced by and for women, featuring representations of women, or focusing on issues of gender. Within these parameters, I found altogether forty essays that fit my criteria: eight in *Art Bulletin*, nineteen in *Gesta*, one in *Speculum*, and twelve in *Studies in Iconography*. *Gesta*'s dominance is not surprising as it is devoted exclusively to medieval art and published quarterly, while the other journals cover a broader chronological or disciplinary range or, in the case of *Studies in Iconography*, are published less frequently. Consequently, *Gesta* provides greater opportunity for feminist scholarship in medieval visual culture. On the other hand, it is indicative of the progressive nature of *Studies in Iconography* under the co-editorship of Richard Emmerson and Pamela Sheingorn that this journal featured so many relevant articles even though it only came out annually. *Art Bulletin*'s record is surprisingly good considering that its mission is to publish in all areas of Art History, and that it has a reputation for neglecting medieval scholarship, a reputation that it may not deserve. That *Speculum* is the least represented in my survey is not surprising as it covers the broadest disciplinary range. As might be expected, there are fewer art-historical essays in this journal than in any of the others and consequently fewer opportunities for feminist-oriented investigations of visual culture.

Two broad categories of inquiry emerged from my survey of scholarship: women's studies and gender studies. These are the same general approaches identified by Broude and Garrard. Of



course, all the articles address gender formation in some way, for to discuss images as responsive to a female patron or a female audience is to say something about cultural gender expectations—medieval and modern. But there are clear differences in how scholars have employed gender in their work. Some have considered women as a viable starting point from which to interpret images or structures while others, a smaller group, have analyzed the construction of gender itself.

Within the rubric of women's studies are those essays that focus on women's experience, whether as patrons, audiences, or artists. These articles can be thought of as participating in the recuperative operations of early art-historical feminism, which aimed to recover the role of women in history/history of art. Works in all three publications feature this approach by focusing on either female production or female audience as a motivating force behind particular works of art or architecture. In *Gesta*, Brendan Cassidy's 1991 study of the iconography of the *Madonna del Parto* and its connection to the role of the Virgin as protector of women in childbirth is the earliest of this category of inquiry.<sup>16</sup> In 1992, the editor of *Gesta* devoted the second issue entirely to studies of female monastic architecture, featuring talks delivered at the College Art Association annual conference in a session entitled, "Medieval Women and Their Patrons: Architectural Space and Problems of Design."<sup>17</sup> Another example is Pamela Sheingorn's study of the image of St. Anne teaching the Virgin, which she associates with increasing female literacy and the role of mothers in instructing their daughters how to read.<sup>18</sup> Women's devotion and spirituality constituted a major interest for many scholars and informs studies such as Judith Oliver's analysis of late thirteenth-century Brabantine psalter-hours and Magdalena Carrasco's examination of the *St. Alban's Psalter*, both of which investigate how female saints provided spiritual models for women religious through the vehicle of manuscript images.<sup>19</sup> *Gesta* has also featured essays examining the production of female artists such as Loretta Vandi's study of the thirteenth-century self-portrait by Donella and Richard Emmerson's analysis of Hildegard of Bingen's tri-level interpretation of her Vision of the Last Days in *Scivias*.<sup>20</sup>

*Studies in Iconography* and *Art Bulletin* also presented a number of articles focused on medieval women's experience, patronage and spirituality. There are altogether four essays in the former publication that analyze imagery in this way. Kathleen Nolan studies the construction of motherhood in the *Massacre of the Innocents* on Chartres Royal Portal capital frieze, while Joan Holladay's work on the Ursula bust reliquaries of Cologne investigates their prescriptive address to the young women of that city.<sup>21</sup> Beth Williamson also investigates the construction of motherhood in her interpretation of Carlo da Camerino's *Madonna of Humility and Temptation of Eve*.<sup>22</sup> Virginia Blanton demonstrates the impact of diverse audiences, including aristocratic women and female religious on a selection of images of St. Æthelthryth.<sup>23</sup> In *Art Bulletin*, Magdalena Carrasco's essay on an illustrated life of St. Rade Gund links this illustrated manuscript to the spiritual concerns and practices of a group of cloistered nuns, while Elizabeth del Alamo's analysis of the sarcophagus of Doña Blanca argues that its imagery employs a number of inventive devices to relate the queen's salvation in sexually specific terms.<sup>24</sup> Alexa Sand's study of the Hours of Yolande of Soissons interprets this manuscript as an example of the inventiveness of late-medieval female devotion; and Cecily Hillsdale's analysis of a twelfth-century Greek manuscript considers its role in helping its French royal patron make the transition from her homeland into the Byzantine imperial household as a new bride.<sup>25</sup>

Somewhat rarer than the scholarship that accepts a certain degree of shared female experience and identity is that which incorporates the insights of poststructuralist theory to examine the ideological work performed by the visual construction of gender. As stated earlier, all the articles imply some consideration of gender formation, but in this category I am including those essays that discuss how gender was constituted in the Middle Ages and how visual culture figured into this operation. *Studies in Iconography* has gone furthest in publishing work that foregrounds the medieval visual construction of femininity or masculinity rather than women's production, patronage, or use. So, for example, Martha Easton's iconographic analysis of Saint Agatha images poses the

possibility of a gendered identification with the saint's suffering allowing both men and women to identify with Agatha's violated body, but in different ways.<sup>26</sup> Anne Stanton's essay on the Tree of Jesse and the Holy Kinship in the Queen Mary Psalter argues for the manuscript's presentation of a gendered genealogy in which Christianity's origin is constructed as female.<sup>27</sup> Nell Gifford Martin traces the gendering of violence and sacrifice in a group of luxury psalters and books of hours of the thirteenth- through fifteenth-centuries which construct both Christ and the beholder as passive and female and assigns agency and masculinity to God the Father and the officiant at the Mass.<sup>28</sup> James Paxson identifies the motif of the nether-faced devil as an allegory of childbirth, constructing the creature as a conflation of the demonic and feminine.<sup>29</sup> My own contribution on thirteenth and fourteenth century English cross-legged knights' effigies articulates the role of pose and attributes in constructing a hyper-masculinity among the elite warrior class.<sup>30</sup> Cristelle Baskins also examines the construction of masculinity, focusing on early modern Tuscan representations of Scipio as exemplars of proper male roles that obscure the economic motivations behind marriage.<sup>31</sup> Marian Blecke critiques the traditional interpretations of Sheela-na-gig sculptures as exemplars of sexual sin and argues for a reading of the Kilpeck Sheela as participating in a discourse on the sexually active female body as reproductive rather than sinful.<sup>32</sup> Finally, Mati Meyer analyzes Byzantine renderings of the Levite's concubine as markedly sexual, implying her responsibility for her own suffering, in contrast to more sympathetic western images of the same subject.<sup>33</sup>

Neither *Gesta* nor *Art Bulletin* feature as many essays considering gender formation as *Studies in Iconography* but still include a sizeable number. Between 1991 and 2007, *Gesta* published six out of thirteen articles that fit this description, while in roughly the same period *Art Bulletin* published two out of a total of seven. In *Gesta*, Jaroslav Folda's examination of images of Queen Melisende in manuscripts of William of Tyre's *History of Outremer* argues for a reading of her image as a model for strength and continuity in a contested Latin Kingdom, rather than as a female exemplar, while Laura Spitzer suggests that

the prominence of the Virgin on Chartres' Royal Portal is not indicative of the rise of her cult, as suggested by Henry Kraus, but as sign and surrogate for the cathedral's canons and an attempt to draw attention away from a much older, and localized, Marian cult located in the north side of the cathedral crypt.<sup>34</sup> Susan Smith associates the scene of the disrobing of Christ, found in a small group of fifteenth-century *Biblia Pauperum*, with the Old Testament episode of the Stripping and Scourging of the *Sponsa* in the Song of Songs, resulting in a cross-gendered Christ available as an object of identification and compassion for the beholder.<sup>35</sup> Adam Cohen and Ann Derbes' reading of the iconography on the bronze doors at Hildesheim, which constructs the female as seductive, insolent, and dangerous, relates it to a power struggle between Sophia, abbess of Gandersheim, and Bishop Bernward, while Diliانا Angelova identifies the female figure on two sixth-century ivories as articulating a status for the Byzantine *augusta*, in which she is constructed as a full sharer in imperial power.<sup>36</sup> Finally Andrea Pearson's interpretation of the frontispiece of *Le dialogue de la duchesse de Bourgogne à Jésus*, which depicts the owner, Margaret, Duchess of Burgundy, in the guise of Mary Magdalen, considers the results of a male-created gendering of a secular and sacred persona.<sup>37</sup>

The construction of gender informs two *Art Bulletin* essays from 1990 through 2007: Diane Wolfthal's study of medieval rape imagery and Amy Neff's interpretation of the motif of the Virgin's swoon at the foot of the cross.<sup>38</sup> Wolfthal demonstrates the process by which the imaging of rape is transformed from the medieval sympathetic identification with the victim's suffering to the early modern eroticized representation that constructs the victim as the cause of her own attack. Neff argues that the Virgin swooning at the foot of the cross is a birthing image designed to gender the beholder as female and to allow the viewer to "give birth" to Christ in her or his soul.

I found only one article in *Speculum* that employs gender construction in its analysis. Ann Dunlop's study of a Trecento fresco in the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Magione, explores how this image constructs Francesco Casali's (its donor) masculinity as a display of knightly virtues and Christian piety.<sup>39</sup>

As I stated earlier, I have identified forty feminist-oriented, art-historical essays published in four of the leading journals in medieval studies over the past sixteen years. My survey makes it clear that *Studies in Iconography* played a leading role in promoting this theoretical framework for the analysis of medieval visual culture. This is not surprising considering the progressive interests of Richard Emmerson and especially Pamela Sheingorn, the journal's former editors. If one takes into account *Gesta's* exclusive disciplinary focus, it is clear it was much less active in this regard, an observation I will return to later. My survey also confirmed a division of medieval feminist scholarship into the categories of women-centered and gender construction, a pattern paralleling that within feminist art history and throughout the humanities. More than twenty years ago, Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews had already noted this split among feminist art historians and identified nationality as one significant factor in shaping a scholar's methodology.<sup>40</sup> The authors observe that most American art historians are not trained in theory and methodology as are European scholars and tend to remain with the traditional empirical approach to visual culture. In addition, those feminist art historians who have produced more theoretically radical work have done so within the parameters of social history and have apparently considered this radical enough.<sup>41</sup> What was the case twenty years ago seems still to be true today: the majority of the articles I surveyed adopt the social history approach and identify a female patron or audience as the motivating force behind a work of art but do not attend to that same work's ability to construct its audience's class, vocation, gender, or subjectivity. While recovering women's history is a worthy endeavor, as is educating readers about the production of female artists and patrons and the reception by a female audience, such inquiry should also lead to critiquing the structure of the discipline and of society itself. To quote Gouma-Peterson and Mathews, "[. . .] this is a viable and valuable goal, but many would claim that education, even 'encouraging institutional change in art education,' is useless until the ideological underpinnings that support female repression are understood and exposed."<sup>42</sup>

My survey also reveals two interesting trends concerning the possible impact of the MFAHP on feminist art-historical publishing. If all four journals are considered together, the number of feminist articles published overall increased *after* the demise of this organization. Between 1990 and 1996, there were a total of seventeen essays published, while between 1996 and 2006 there were twenty-three for a total of forty. At the same time, a study of each individual journal reveals a somewhat different pattern for one out of the four. Thus, *Art Bulletin*, *Speculum*, and *Studies in Iconography* all showed increases in the number of articles devoted to feminist topics after 1996, the year that MFAHP came to an end, going from two to five, none to one, and none to twelve respectively. Only *Gesta* featured fewer such essays, with the number falling from twelve to seven. I should note, however, that in 1992, the second issue was devoted entirely to female monastic architecture, which obviously skews the results. Nevertheless, I consider it significant and indicative of her acknowledgment of feminism's impact that the editor, Lucy Freeman Sandler, made the decision to publish this particular themed issue.

In explanation of the patterns I noted above, I would offer the following suggestions. Because of the sessions sponsored by the MFAHP, especially those at the Medieval Congress, feminist analysis of medieval visual culture gained greater visibility than it had ever had before. The scholars who participated in these meetings went on to publish this work. In addition, the MFAHP's activities, and articles published in the early nineties, may have encouraged other scholars who had not thought of themselves as feminists to look at their material from this new perspective. Several years may have passed before the resulting projects could come to fruition, thus the upturn in production after the mid-nineties. *Gesta's* deviation from this pattern, however, is perplexing. Of all the journals, this publication has the greatest visibility among medieval art historians and exerts an enormous influence on present and future scholarly trends. On the one hand, I could interpret the decrease of articles in this journal as evidence of the constituents' lessening interest in a feminist perspective. On the other hand, the fact that the other three publications showed the opposite trend

suggests that *Gesta's* retreat from feminist oriented material is due in part to editorial policy. Since journals construct readers, as well as reflect their constituents' interest, it is likely that fewer medieval art historians will produce overtly feminist scholarship.

A further issue needs explanation. My survey of publications confirms that even medieval art historians who have employed a feminist perspective have favored women's studies over gender construction in their approach. This preference is a consequence of the art-historical discipline's governing Vasarian paradigm. As I noted earlier, since the publication of *Lives of the Most Excellent Architects*, art historians have organized the field by individual artist. This has presented a problem for those areas—non-western, ancient, medieval—in which artists are frequently unknown. Medievalists have struggled to accommodate their material to traditional art-historical methodology in what might be termed a substitution strategy. In this model either the work itself, the patron, or the audience, assumes the role of artist. Those scholars interested in the recovery of women's art history have turned most frequently to the patron and audience in analyzing works. Thus, it is partly the foundational disciplinary paradigm, which has discouraged medieval art historians, including those working on women and gender, from pursuing more post-structurally informed directions in scholarship.

The disciplinary roots of medieval art history in particular also suggest reasons for a lack of a more theorized feminism by scholars in the field. The origins of medieval art history lie in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antiquarianism and archaeology. At the time, both practices were devoted to describing and documenting material remains of the past, while avoiding extensive interpretation. As I noted earlier, prior to the MFAHP's formation, the art history sessions at the Medieval Congress were dominated by architectural historians, whose antiquarian and archaeological roots were clear. It is my surmise that the foundational principles of my subdiscipline are still strong enough to discourage much overtly ideological and theoretical methodology. Medieval art historians are uncomfortable with labels, including feminist.

I have encountered this reluctance to identify as feminist in my on-going attempt to revive the MFAHP. My first step was to perform an informal canvas of my art-historical colleagues at the 2005 Kalamazoo conference in order to determine the level of interest in resurrecting this organization. I received a great deal of verbal support for this enterprise, on the basis of which I, along with Martha Easton, proposed two sessions on feminism and medieval art history for the 2007 conference. Unfortunately, we received few submissions and were forced to eliminate one of the sessions. In addition, the number of attendees at the single session was very small, no more than ten, only one of whom was an art historian. I suspect that many of my colleagues feel that feminist inquiry has become so visible and mainstream that there is no real need for a special society devoted to its promotion. Furthermore, the larger field of art history seems to be heavily female populated, although this is based purely upon my personal observation and not upon statistical evidence, so that on the surface, gender-based career obstacles no longer seem a problem. Of course, none of us have considered issues such as salary and rates of tenure and promotion, a survey of which might reveal that serious problems still exist.

Based upon my experience, I have concluded that those of us working within a feminist and/or gender studies framework might be best served by looking to the SMFS for support. Contact with scholars in other disciplines can enrich our own work by enlarging our knowledge of the broader context for medieval visual production. We can also benefit by the insights into images produced by those scholars not encumbered by art-historical tradition. A fresh viewpoint from beyond one's own frame of reference can be very valuable. I would also encourage the SMFS to try reaching out to art historians again by including representatives of this discipline on the advisory board, giving serious consideration to publishing images in the newsletter, and making contact with the International Center for Medieval Art (ICMA) to solicit interest. I believe we can all benefit from these kinds of interactions.

A new venture of mine offers an opportunity for such disciplinary interaction as I have advocated above. My new journal



*Different Visions: A Journal of New Perspectives on Medieval Art* <[www.differentvisions.org](http://www.differentvisions.org)> is an exclusively electronic, open-access, and peer-reviewed forum available to those interested in employing a theoretical framework, including feminism, to analyze medieval visual culture. This publication offers one example of a closer collaboration between art historians and other medievalists, for SMFS's own Virginia Blanton is on the Editorial Board. I hope to provide more opportunities for this kind of interaction in the future.

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#### END NOTES

1. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), and Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).
2. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art after Postmodernism* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2005).
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40. Gouma-Peterson and Mathews, "The Feminist Critique of Art History," p. 350.
41. Gouma-Peterson and Mathews, "The Feminist Critique of Art History," p. 351.
42. Gouma-Peterson and Mathews, "The Feminist Critique of Art History," p. 351. The passage occurs within a larger critique of Broude's call for educating men and women concerning the myths, values, and cultural assumptions that have excluded women from the domain of art.