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Topic 11. Special women: queens, writers, artists
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## THE MEDIEVAL FEMINIST ART HISTORY PROJECT

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An important new initiative is the Medieval Feminist Art History Project, organized by Paula Gerson and Pamela Sheingorn, who are collecting syllabi and other resources for teaching. They regularly publish a list of feminist scholars with addresses and current research interests and projects. For more information, write to Paula Gerson, International Center for Medieval Art, The Cloisters, Fort Tryon Park, New York, NY 10040; or, to Pamela Sheingorn, Art Department, PO Box 281, Baruch College-CUNY, 17 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

## MFAHP: A PROGRESS REPORT

*Pamela Sheingorn, Baruch College*

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The Medieval Feminist Art History Project, originally developed under the wing of the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship, has now become an independent, sister organization. What follows is a report on our progress to date.

*Brief history*

We began with a session sponsored by *MFN* at the 1991 Kalamazoo congress. Entitled "The Medieval Feminist Art History Project," the session's standing-room-only audience responded with intense interest and gratifying enthusiasm to papers delivered by Madeline Caviness and Ann Roberts. With our title, Paula Gerson and I had hoped to

suggest both necessary work and common goals. What we found were many individual scholars so eager to work toward those goals that they turned our title into reality. From that session, from the publication of my introductory remarks in *MFN*, and from an announcement in the *Newsletter* of the International Center for Medieval Art, we collected a list of people to whom we subsequently distributed a form to gather information about publication as well as work-in-progress. We compiled this information and distributed our first list of scholars interested in medieval feminist art history in May 1992. More recently, forms have gone out to about seventy people for a second list that should be twice as long as the first. Feedback indicates that the list has been helpful not only in information exchange but also in creating a sense of community. And since we distributed a subscription form for *MFN* along with our own form, a considerable number of art historians have become part of the larger community of medieval feminists as well.

*The present*

In addition to serving as a clearing house for information, the Project intends to sponsor sessions at appropriate conferences. At the 1992 Kalamazoo congress we again offered a session under the sponsorship of the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship, this time with a focus on art of the convent. Deciding subsequently that it was time to stand on our own feet and free the Society's sessions for other subjects, we sought and gained from the Medieval Institute the status of an allied organization; this enables us to offer our own sessions at Kalamazoo congresses, which we did for the first time this year. In addition, we have branched out to two other conferences: the CEMERS conference at Binghamton University, and the annual conference sponsored by the Medieval Club of New York, held at the CUNY Graduate Center.

Our intention is that our sessions should address both neglected subjects and new methods of studying our subjects. Art associated with the convent has been little known in comparison with the attention given to art for male monastics; yet, as Kathleen Nolan, Elizabeth Dunn, and Jeffrey Hamburger demonstrated to us at our 1992 Kalamazoo session, visual materials exist to suggest active roles for nuns as patrons in the twelfth century, to understand "the ambivalence with which ecclesiastical authority responded to the female recluse during the late Middle Ages," and to explore the roles of art objects in the *cura monialium*. Our sessions on women and patronage at the Twenty-sixth annual CEMERS conference in October at Binghamton University showed how history has suppressed or neglected to document women's patronage, significantly underestimating women's contributions to the shaping of the medieval visual world. Papers in the two sessions, one of which was organized by Elizabeth Valdez del Alamo, were not only well-attended and received with great interest, but also so coherent among themselves that a publisher is considering our proposal to bring them out as a group.

At the spring 1993 Medieval Club of New York conference devoted to "True Stories: Narrative, Image, History in the Later Middle Ages," we sponsored a session on "Women of the Hebrew Bible," designed to explore ways in which these women's "true stories" were visually and verbally reinterpreted by medieval recipients, both Jewish and Christian. Papers by Evelyn Cohen, Helen Zakin, and Leslie Abend Callahan

investigated, respectively, the appearance of women in Hebrew manuscript paintings, the stories of Tamar and Susanna, and varying appropriations of the biblical Judith, respectively.

Our session at Kalamazoo 1993, "Medieval Art Historians Look at 'The Gaze'," was our first to focus on methodology. A problem for many of us who would like to employ feminist theory in research on medieval art history is that the theory has been sharply focused on the post-medieval world. Acutely aware of the alterity of the Middle Ages, we have been hesitant to use feminist theory in our work, and without it have lacked the theoretical underpinnings necessary to effect fundamental change in medieval art history. The theory of the gaze, developed in feminist film studies and now widely used in post-medieval art history, seemed to offer great potential. Through four briefly presented case studies and responses from four discussants who had read and pondered basic literature on the gaze, the session offered a range of views about the usefulness of this strategy for medieval feminist art history. A lively discussion followed; it was especially gratifying that the audience included many people in literature and history, since art history has so often found itself on the receiving end when it comes to theory.

Our future plans include proposed sessions at Kalamazoo on "Women as Creators of Medieval Art" and, co-sponsored with the Early Book Society, "The New Book History." We also hope to return to Binghamton in the fall of 1993 with a session entitled "No Name of her Own: Marginalized Women in Medieval Art."

A further aim of the Project is to make available to teachers the tools necessary to include feminist approaches to medieval art history in their courses, thus changing the way they are taught. Toward that end we have recently circulated forms asking for syllabi to be shared and slide resources to be made available. Some of the results of our call for syllabi are included in this issue of *MFN*; we hope to compile a data bank of syllabi and teaching materials and to provide an update for *MFN* in the future.

The need to initiate and pursue all these activities was underscored recently by the failure of *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* , a newly-published collection of 29 essays, to include even one paper devoted to the Middle Ages. As their rationale for restricting the volume to the period from the Renaissance to the present, its editors state that "much of the work done by feminist art historians in the last decade has focused on this time span." The unifying goal of the Project is to redress that situation, so that conference papers become publications available for use in teaching.