

Angelica Kauffman: Exploring the  
Female Artist through History Painting

Angela Rosenthal, a contemporary scholar of Angelica Kauffman, proposed a theory that Kauffman “deconstructs the assumed norms of the genre and, therefore, disrupt[s] the vaunted male visual discourse of early modern painting”<sup>1</sup>. In *Penelope at Her Loom*, Kauffman highlights a rare instance in this Homeric epic, as Penelope awaits the return of her husband, Odysseus. Being overwhelmed with calls from suitors, Penelope insists that she weaves a shroud for her father-in-law prior to marrying another man, but secretly unravels the shroud every night in expectance of Odysseus’ return. Just as Penelope decides her own fate in the story and essentially ‘unweaves’ the male narrative of the suitors, Kauffman reinvents history painting, dismissing the male-imposed stereotypes and creating a gender-balanced image. The Mint Museum houses a work attributed to Kauffman upstairs, the 1775 Robert and James Adam sedan chair, featuring four panels on the life of Achilles.

In addition to Rosenthal and other renowned Kauffman scholars, I am proposing that Kauffman established an androgynous or gender neutral figure in her works, which will become apparent in upcoming images, that emphasizes her personal understanding of equality. As an exceptionally successful female painter, Kauffman was allowed the privileges that most women were denied, such as membership in the Royal Academy and the utmost respect from her fellow artists as if she were a man. Therefore, Kauffman’s position enabled her to bring a new perspective to history painting, particularly rendering the human figure. In producing androgynous figures, as well as emphasizing the female in a majority of her works, Kauffman combines the male and female so that they perpetually work off of and depend on one another, creating a balance or equality that Kauffman understood in her personal life as well.

In order to truly understand Kauffman’s position within society and the realm of fine art, we must explore the politics of gender roles in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in relation to Kauffman’s personal experience as an artist. Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker survey the various stereotypes associated

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<sup>1</sup>Angelica Rosenthal. *Angelica Kauffman: Art and Sensibility*. New Haven: Yale Univ., 2006. 23.

with women in their 1981 article, *Critical Stereotypes*, stressing the perpetual comparison of women to their counterpart, the male. Several of these stereotypes include the overall ‘weakness’ of the female hand and brush stroke, the ongoing praise of the talented female artist in masculine terminology, and the biologically determined femininity of all women’s art. For Kauffman, these socially constructed attitudes showed forth through the various critical analyses of her works. Furthermore, as Linda Nochlin proposes in her once infamous, now canonical article, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists*, the male-dominated institutions kept women from becoming ‘great’ like the genius male artist<sup>2</sup>. These institutions withheld from women the privilege of participating in nude figure studies and prescribed the primary role of the female as respectful wife and mother, restricted and belonging to the domestic realm.

Kauffman, as an 18<sup>th</sup> century female artist, experienced all of these societal pressures but was able to see past her role as a woman and understand fully her role as an artist. Kauffman was one of the two women to be a founding member of the British Royal Academy, thus placing her within the institution, enhancing her career all the more. However, as is evident in Johann Zoffany’s 1771 painting, *The Academicians of the Royal Academy*, neither female member was allowed present in nude figure drawing sessions. To Zoffany’s credit, Kauffman and Mary Moser, the other female founding member, are both present in spirit as their portraits hang on the right-hand wall. For an artist to be restricted from viewing any nude figure model is, in Nochlin’s terms, like a “medical student...denied the opportunity to dissect or even examine the naked human body”<sup>3</sup>. So instead of studying the physical human body, Kauffman learned anatomy from copying drawings from her contemporary artists, antique statuary, and 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century paintings predominantly by Raphael and Titian<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Linda Nochlin. "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *Women, Art, and Power: and other essays*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Nochlin 160.

<sup>4</sup>Wendy W Roworth. "Ancient Matrons and Modern Patrons: Angelica Kauffman as a Classical History Painter." *Women, Art and the Politics of Identity in Eighteenth-Century Europe*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2003. 189.

In addition to her acceptance as a member of the Royal Academy, Kauffman was fortunate to have many influential males in her life that made her success possible. Both her father and her husband, Zucchi, assisted Kauffman in her business affairs and at home, allowing Kauffman to obtain freedom from the domestic life of the female and focus entirely on her art, possessing what Virginia Woolf would call ‘a room of one’s own’. Kauffman also secured relations with important male artists of the time including Joshua Reynolds, Benjamin West, and the important art critic Johann Wincklemann. Despite the necessary assistance from her male counterparts, Kauffman’s success allowed her to understand her feminine self amongst the masculine institution. By seeing herself as an equal to the masters of Neoclassicism, she was able to devise a gender neutral approach to her work that will soon be discussed in detail.

As Kauffman gained success through portraiture and history paintings, the later in particular assisted her in receiving the respect that is traditionally reserved for the male artist. According to Wendy Roworth, history painting by definition “represented noble, heroic human actions that embody moralizing or instructive themes from scripture, ancient and modern history, literature, or mythology through narratives or allegorical representations.”<sup>5</sup> In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Neoclassical history painting was the highest branch of art, superior to portraiture, landscape, and still life in that it required intense education in literature, history, perspective, anatomy, and gesture. Manners and Williamson point out that the 18<sup>th</sup> century “was a period in which classical allusions, stories from the classics, and decorations derived from the Greek, were all in vogue”<sup>6</sup>. As history painting was increasing in popularity, Kauffman grasped this genre and created history paintings that critics automatically came to see as ‘feminine’ but in fact were more ambiguous in gender, appealing to both the masculine and feminine spheres. Critics understood her works as feminine in both style and subject and related this back to her gender and personal biography, saying that her male figures are feminine due to her

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<sup>5</sup> Id. 189.

<sup>6</sup> Lady Victoria Manners and Dr. G. C. Williamson. Angelica Kauffman, R.A.: Her Life and Her Works. New York: Hacker Art Books, 1976. 2.

biological lack of a masculine style of painting. Additionally, Kauffman's routine inclusion of and focus on female subjects in her work perpetuated the critic's habit of identifying her work with her gender. One must take caution when applying a female artist's biography to her work, as Nanette Salomon points out: "The details of a man's biography are conveyed as the measure of the 'universal', applicable to all mankind... In contrast, the details of a woman's biography are used to underscore the idea that she is an exception; they apply only to make her an interesting case"<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, instead of seeing Kauffman's work as female art, let us view her masterpieces as equal in gender, balancing both male and female aspects to create artistic equality within her works.

One of the reoccurring critiques that Kauffman's work receives deals with her male figures and their effeminacy. In *Paris and Helen Flee the Court of Menelaus* (1781), Paris does seem effeminate in both his gesture and his facial features. In a glance, one may possibly mistake him for a female due to his rosy lips and his drapery rather than armor. Oscar Sandner asserts that "her men are not phallic beings, exhibit neither sexual nor other prowess; they are not heroes in bed, not heroes on the battlefield – in short, not 'real' men"<sup>8</sup>. Kauffman routinely received this kind of criticism about her male figures as this was the only criticism they could find in her work. Peter Pindar even wrote a poetic phrase about Kauffman's effeminate men in his *Lyric Odes to Royal Academicians*. It goes: "Angelica my plaudits gains/ Her art so sweetly canvas stains/ Her Dames, so gracious, give me such delight/ But, were she married to such gentle Males/ As figures in her painted tales/ I fear she'd find a stupid wedding Mate"<sup>9</sup>.

From these critics, one can be sure that Kauffman's figures were particularly effeminate compared to the typical masculine figure found in traditional history painting. However, the feminine quality of her works should not be attributed to her gender but should be seen as a way of reinventing the male figure as more gender neutral, thus closing the gap between the masculine and feminine

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<sup>7</sup> Griselda Pollock. "The Female Hero and the Making of a Feminist Canon." *Differencing the canon: feminist desire and the writing of art's histories*. London: Routledge, 1999. 106.

<sup>8</sup> Oscar Sandner. "Angelica K. or the Ward Who Would Be Guardian: The Early Years 1762-75." *Angelica Kauffman: A Woman of Immense Talent*. Ed. Tobias G. Natter. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007. 40.

<sup>9</sup> Manners, Williamson 47.

counterparts and stereotypes. As a Neoclassical history painter, Kauffman adopted the classic drapery and gestures and did not effeminize her figures for the sake of societal gender roles. As is evident with the statue in the portrait of *Antonio Canova* (1795), Kauffman was definitely capable of rendering apparent male figures but instead, consciously decided to merge masculine and feminine qualities in particular figures in order to establish a balanced image. Kauffman successfully worked alongside the male artists of the time and was able to bring to art the femininity that Neoclassicism adored.

Kauffman, in addition to portraying more effeminate male figures, created many works in which the subject deals with cross-dressing or androgyny. As James Saslow emphasizes in his research on Rosa Bonheur, a 19<sup>th</sup> century French realist, cross-dressing or wearing male clothing allowed women the “freedom of movement in a male-defined space”<sup>10</sup>. Kauffman’s *Abelard Presents Hymen to Eloisa* (1778) offers one of Kauffman’s most androgynous figures. Hymen, being presented to Eloisa for marriage, is portrayed as almost entirely nude with elegant hands and feet and a crown of flowers atop his head. In creating Hymen as an androgynous figure, and by linking all of the figures hands together, Kauffman suggests equality between the genders that was reflected in her own personal experiences. In terms of cross-dressing, Kauffman’s *Athena Taking Up Arms* (1768) portrays the goddess putting on her armor and thus becoming masculine. Rosenthal brings attention to Cupid in the right corner, who poses Athena as if she “wavers between the sensual life of love and hardship promised by her marital pursuits...Athena is both virgin and virago”<sup>11</sup>. I would like to add that this combining of the male and female characteristics allows the viewer to understand Kauffman in a similar situation as Athena. Kauffman both yields the phallus or paint brush and incorporates feminine qualities into her work, playing the dual role of male and female and highlighting the importance of both.

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<sup>10</sup> James Saslow. "Disagreeably Hidden: Construction and Constriction of the Lesbian Body in Rosa Bonheur's Horse Fair." *The Expanding discourse: feminism and art history*. By Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard. New York, NY: IconEditions, 1992. 192.

<sup>11</sup> Rosenthal 197.

Kauffman also created works that display men in female dress, showing her willingness to treat both genders with equal importance. In *Odysseus Discovers Achilles Amongst the Daughters of Lycomedes* (1789), Achilles (in center) is sent to the court of King Lycomedes by his mother, who, knowing that he will be killed if sent into battle, disguises him for his safety. As Ulysses (on the far left) searches for Achilles so that he may join the army and fulfill the prophecy, he acts as a tradesman offering jewels and weapons to the court of women. Achilles immediately chooses the sword over the jewels, revealing his gender to Ulysses and the entire court of Lycomedes, and is recruited into battle. Achilles exemplifies both feminine and masculine qualities, dressing like and caring for the women of the court while yielding the sword over his head. As Rosenthal points out, the two columns behind Achilles echo the duality of his gender, thus emphasizing Kauffman's intention of combining the male and female (202). Also, in viewing Ulysses, Kauffman refused to portray him as severely masculine, thus balancing the male and female characteristic even further.

Similarly, let us analyze Kauffman's 1780 painting, *A Nymph and a Young Man*. Little theory has been applied to this work even though it offers an additional example of Kauffman's merging of genders roles. In this image, the beautiful nymph aims cupid's arrow towards the young man, who gracefully cowers away. As the nymph yields the phallus or the bow and arrow, she possesses the power that would enable her to make the young man fall in love with her. As cupid sits within the tree, he points to the nymph as if emphasizing her importance and power. By providing this charming nymph with the masculine power and transforming the young man into a subordinate but important figure, Kauffman creates an unlikely image for this time. She also emphasizes how dependent this image is on both sexes by prompting the viewer to understand the gender role reversals in terms of the powerful woman who desires the vulnerable young man. While some may see this image to be Kauffman's way of showing the woman's power, we could also understand it as a way of reinventing and making volatile the gender roles of art.

So as Kauffman was reinventing the figure in her works, thus narrowing the gap between the gender roles, she was also recreating the genre of history painting by introducing the female as the hero among the male-dominated genre. In particular, she was emphasizing the role of the mother in these history scenes. One could argue that this emphasis was a result of Kauffman not having children nor a domestic scene like the majority of women at the time did. Kauffman may have longed for a child and seen honor in the epic mothers. One could also say that Kauffman introduced more females because of the growing trend in Neoclassicism to focus on the mourning female. However, in line with Kauffman's revolutionary talent, she reconstructed history painting to encompass the mother as a variant on the familiar heroic male. In emphasizing the mother, Kauffman shed light on the importance of the female and the mother's contribution to the narrative. Although she did not completely eliminate the male hero from her oeuvre, she simply added more heroic females to again balance the gender dichotomies within her paintings.

On returning to the previously mentioned Penelope, the viewer takes a look at this figure as a mother and an integral character in the outcome of Homer's *Odysseus*. In *Penelope Invoking Minerva's Aid for the Safe Return of Telemachus* (1774), Kauffman calls attention to Penelope's role in her son's life. Penelope prays for her son's safety to Minerva, who is accompanying Telemachus on his journeys disguised as his mentor. As soon as Penelope learned of the suitor's intent to kill her son, Telemachus, she took the initiative to call upon Minerva and request that she send Telemachus home. Dressed as an elegant beauty with arms outstretched towards Minerva's statue, Penelope represents the hero in this image as she attempts to save her own son's life. Penelope also represents the character with the metaphorical phallus as she has the power to intervene in the male suitor's plans.

Kauffman also stresses the maternal figure in her image of Cornelia as a gracious and strong mother. In one of the most well-known Kauffman images that often appears in surveys, *Cornelia, the Mother of the Gracchi, Pointing to her Children as her Treasures* (1785), Cornelia explains that her children, instead of material jewelry, were her personal 'treasures'. This shows Cornelia's dedication

to her children and not worldly distractions, making her a sort of 'hero' for her family. Not only the subject, but the setting as well offers this particular reading of the image. As the seated woman who favors her jewels is positioned in front of a single standing column, Cornelia is supported by the sturdy pier that suggests her clout and thus masculinity. Again, Kauffman urges the mixing of gender roles as she emphasizes the mother for her power and valor.

In conclusion, Angelica Kauffman explored the idea of neutrality between genders in her history paintings as she emphasized effeminacy, cross-dressing, androgyny, and the mother as hero. We should take caution in reading her works based on her personal, female experiences and biography and should, instead, see Kauffman as vital to 18<sup>th</sup> century history painting. In creating more effeminate male figures in her works, Kauffman suggests a kind of equality between genders that she found in her own life as a successful female artist. By incorporating images of cross-dressing and androgynous figures, Kauffman again reinvents the figure in history painting to encompass both genders equally. Finally, Kauffman introduces the mother as a equal counterpart to the male hero, further emphasizing this balance between the male and female. Due to the fact that Kauffman was highly privileged to be a talented artist and accepted in the masculine realm, she was emphasizing her understanding of equality by combining the male and female spheres of art into this gender-neutral, all-encompassing image of the figure.

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