

**To what extent was the practice of art in nineteenth century
England shaped by patriarchal ideologies?**

The practice of art was not the only area of Victorian society subjected to patriarchal ideologies: the entire contemporary social construct appeared focused on the subjugation of women. The opportunities of higher education were denied women (Girton College, Cambridge, the first all women college, was not established until 1869), politics did not involve them: the first women got the vote in 1918, but it was still only for those “over 30 who occupied premises of a yearly value of not less than £5” (BBC, 1998). Women were thus practically excluded from a wide variety of activities, as the contemporary thinking was that mental exertions would damage their bodies, and they were duly taught that any such exertions were wrong. They were expected to aspire to marriage, becoming the linchpin of family life, and to be subservient to men.

In an age dominated by religion, Christian doctrine that had been used since mediaeval times was still used to promote the inequality of women. Frequent examples from the Bible range from Eve’s creation from man’s rib (NEB, Genesis 2:21ff) and viewing her as the root of all evil (NEB, Genesis 3), to the New Testament “while every man had Christ for his Head, woman’s head is man, as Christ’s Head is God” (NEB, 1 Corinthians 11:3). Although these may seem bizarre sentiments to uphold today, at a time when the majority of people attended church at least once a week, they were readily accepted as further proof for, and in support of women’s inferiority. Walby (1990, p20) succinctly defines the patriarchal ideology as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women”.

The perceived incapability of woman can be seen to stem from a variety of sources, and all of these led to the control of, and exertion of power over, women at all levels of society from the governmental level to that of the family. This subjugation is clearly illustrated in visual art, and in the way in which female artists were treated.

During the nineteenth century, women's contribution to the world of art was ideologically limited to creating beautified works such as delicate miniatures in watercolours, and women who chose to ignore these limitations choosing grander works such as "historical compositions in oil, risked being labelled as sexual deviants" (Chadwick, 1990, p167). Despite this, during a period calling for education reforms in the 1850s, the 'Society of Female Artists' was founded and this led to a wider exposure of women's works. However, women were still excluded from the opportunities to study at recognised art schools, and their bids for inclusion open a plethora of debates outside the scope of this study as they challenge many of the Victorian concepts of femininity. Nevertheless an art school for women was eventually opened in 1862.

In a somewhat paradoxical way, the output of the female artists did not, in the main, differ greatly from the male generated works promoting and conforming to Victorian ideals. Women still painted pictures displaying "Christian virtues, and the dangers of transgression" (*ibid.*, p170). An 1857 edition of the *Englishwoman's Review* is very revealing in demonstrating how, even though female painters had gained a foothold, they were still working within the strictly defined confines of society:

"it may be that in the more heroic and epic works of art the hand of man is best fitted to excel; nevertheless there remain gentle scenes of home interest, and domestic care, delineations of refined feeling and subtle touches of tender emotion, with which the woman artist is eminently entitled to deal" (*Englishwoman's Review*, 1857)

While this acknowledges women's ability to paint, it suggests that they should not exercise themselves with large-scale works, but only those pieces of a delicate nature from the family sphere where a woman's place was seen to be by society as a whole. In *Nameless and Friendless* by Emily Mary Osborn (1857) the acceptance and position of a female painter is clearly illustrated. It shows a single woman trying to earn some money from her painting in an art dealer's – she is looked at scornfully by the men browsing in the shop, and the disdain for her work is readily visible in the facial expression of the (male) art dealer. Coming from a female painter this reinforces the androcentric view that a woman should be the subject of artwork, not the producer (Chadwick, 1990, p174ff).

As the subject of paintings, the woman is often seen in the home, embodying the family situation to which they were taught they should aspire. Her different roles in within the family are all demonstrated, but each sticking closely the contemporary ideology. There are plentiful images of the woman as a Madonna figure, such as Hicks's *New Hopes* (1870), and Smith's *Fondly Gazing* (1860). This type of painting does show an innate tenderness between mother and child, but at the same time as showing this intimate bond, it is also reinforcing the place of the mother at home with the children. The term 'Madonna figure' is also apposite as there are minimal representations of pregnant women, thereby creating another religious link with the virgin birth, and avoiding the issue of conception.

Women are frequently pictured in their roles of wife: Clarke's *The Labourer's Welcome* shows a domestic scene with the wife in the middle of sewing looking up towards the door as her husband returns from his day's work. This imagery stretches across classes, as Bowkett's *Preparing Tea* demonstrates – the room is much larger, the husband is returning from work on a train suggesting he has been working in the city, but while portraying a different social class, the sentiment of the work is identical. This is also interesting in that the artist is female, and therefore succumbing to the system of patriarchy by placing her subject in the home.

Working women are also found as the subject of paintings, but often in sterilised situations. Blunden's *The Seamstress* (1854) shows a working woman in a semi-religious pose with her hands together as if in praise or prayer at dawn. In its reverence it is glossing over the fact that she has probably been working on detailed stitching through the night in poor conditions. Women are also shown as governesses, factory workers, waitresses and teachers; none of these occupations would be regarded well, and the pictures again serve as social warnings to women as to their prospects if they do not find a husband to provide for them.

The concept of the 'fallen woman' is a common theme of Victorian paintings, be they "unfaithful wives, unmarried mothers, mistresses and prostitutes" (Wood, 1976, p135). All of these categories show a failing

in a woman, and these moral failings are often portrayed in paintings. In a male dominated age, man's failings are generously overlooked, but women, the family linchpin, are subjected to public scrutiny. Unfaithful women and single mothers are pictured being banished from stable family homes in works such as Egg's *Past and Present* (1858), and Redgrave's *The Outcast* (1851). Rossetti's *Found* (1854) shows a prostitute, clearly ashamed of her position, being recognised by her former suitor. In this picture the sheep constrained in a net is a piece of powerful imagery illustrating the stifling restrictions of society. Without a doubt this genre of paintings is blatantly intended as salutary warnings to woman to keep their place within an established family, or to run the risk of becoming a social pariah.

At the other end of the spectrum, the painter Tissot paints women with the utmost care. The details of female finery are impeccable, and the social situations that he presents are the apogee of Victorian elegance. Indeed Wood (1976) cuttingly attributes his success as a social painter to the fact that "he painted society as it saw itself" (p31). In his works the women are put on a pedestal and are admired for their beauty, making what would seem a celebration of their beauty into a work reinforcing their position as a delicate flower-like creature with the sole purpose of beautification.

In both production and consumption the artistic output of the Victorian era can clearly be seen to be heavily dominated by the patriarchal ideals governing society. Turning back to Walby's definition of patriarchy, the women were clearly "oppressed" as they had their opportunities for painting sorely limited. Although often portrayed with rare feminine beauty and great care, their representation regularly shows women in subservient roles within the family, towards husbands, and in their workplace confirming their oppression within society. Their domination is linked to their oppression, with the men in the paintings providing the moral framework and upholding the patriarchal ideology.

They are exploited by the way in which the paintings of which they are the subjects are often images promoting the male oriented Victorian ideals, and the moral failings of women are used as a warning to others considering rebelling against the patriarchy. The degree to which this occurs could surely in other

times be considered to be the production of propaganda material as the accepted subjects of paintings were determined by those with power in society who would doubtless want to protect their comfortable positions.

(1532 words)

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