

## Larson on Zarmanian (2015)

Zarmanian, Charlotte Foucher. *Créatrices en 1900: femmes artistes en France dans les milieux symbolistes*. Éditions Mare & Martin, 2015, pp. 358, ISBN 979-10-92054-47-7

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In her aptly titled introduction “Un symbolisme enfoui,” Charlotte Zarmanian contemplates the inherent paradox central to her study: given the prominent place of gender transgression and figures of androgyny in the fin-de-siècle imagination, why are women markedly absent from discussions of Symbolist artistic production? Zarmanian’s project, which considers sixty women artists in France from 1880 to 1914, seeks to provide a remedy to this lacuna. Indeed, the breadth of her research and bibliographical references is impressive and convincingly demonstrates the insufficient representation of women Symbolists in both academic scholarship and modern artistic exhibitions. Multidisciplinary in scope, it draws from artistic, literary, and medical fields, and is punctuated with 183 color or black-and-white images. However, while she justly argues that historic and aesthetic contexts are fundamental to identifying moments of feminist resistance in artistic spheres, Zarmanian neglects to expand upon these ideas, thus appearing to rely on the same one-dimensional portrait of the woman artist that she bemoans.

In the first section, “La Fabrique de la femme artiste,” Zarmanian sets out the epistemological context of the period and considers the topos of female intellect that preoccupied medical figures in the second half of the nineteenth century. Through a survey of scientific texts and contemporary caricatures she examines the popular belief that women were void of original intellectual creativity and were thus antithetical to Symbolist artistic production. She demonstrates that because essentialist discourses of sexual difference reduced women to their sole reproductive functions, their intellectual activity was considered injurious to their procreative capacity. As a result, female artists, who purportedly expended cerebral and imaginative energies, were delegated to the category of intermediary or “third sex” cases of pathology. Not unlike the archetypal figures of the lesbian or menopausal woman, the female artist was targeted by doctors and caricaturists as defeminized for abandoning her reproductive responsibilities.

One of Zarmanian’s main objectives is to bring to light moments of transgression and resistance by female artists and intellectuals that tend to get eclipsed by reductive narratives of victimization. As she argues, the image of the emancipated, subversive woman artist that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century is symptomatic of a nascent “contre-offensive féministe” that legitimized female creativity. Near the end of the century, feminist journals such as *La Vie heureuse*, *Femina*, and *La Fronde* played a role in promoting a modern image of the female artist that privileged her creative talent and the aesthetic quality of her works. Zarmanian’s second section, “Les Créatrices contre-attaquent,” continues in this vein and explores the strategies that women used to penetrate and contest otherwise male-dominated artistic circles. She contends that the expansion of the decorative arts movement in France, associated with the domestic interior and a “feminine” aesthetic, allowed for increased activity of female artists in salons and exhibitions. Many women benefited from these opportunities to engage with the Art Nouveau or Symbolist aesthetics. In so doing, they reworked clichéd iconographies of legends, myths, and motifs of nymphs, Salomé, or Eve in “domestic” media such as embroidery, vases, tapestries, and book covers. Women were also active in poster design, and though their role was often relegated to that of copyist, Zarmanian maintains that this function nonetheless allowed them to imprint their own creative marks on various works.

Next, the author turns to the world of Spirits and Mediums at the turn of the century and the central place that women occupied within these circles. Because essentialist discourses on sexual difference claimed that women were the more passive, sensitive, and intuitive of the two sexes, societies of the occult embraced women as especially susceptible to encounters with the supernatural. Zarmanian argues that female mediums, whose presence was detrimental to paranormal séances, disrupted normative gender codes and were instrumental in the emergence of a spiritualist feminist movement at the time. At this point, Zarmanian strays a bit from the larger focus of her book, and though she offers examples of artists who worked under the influence of unconscious “forces,” these pages regrettably read as though part of a separate and removed study.

In a continued emphasis on strategies of resistance employed by women artists, Zarmanian devotes the next section of her book to Sarah Bernhardt and Judith Gautier, whose artistic pursuits in sculpture and painting challenged the professional restrictions in their respective theatrical and literary domains. She argues that their “pluridisciplinarité,” though condemned by contemporary male critics, provided these women with increased visibility that extended to artistic salons, exhibits, and critical reviews.

The last pages of the study examine the crucial influence that male mentors and networks of male artists played in the growing

presence of women in salons and eminent artistic circles. Zarmanian contends that the relationships between female students and male tutors was symbiotic: while aspiring women artists were at times reduced by their male superiors to the traditional gendered role of model or muse, they also benefited from opportunities for professional development and the exposure that this tutelage afforded them. The author also maintains that through a strategy of “chameleonism,” the woman artist minimized the turbulence that her mere presence at exhibits generated. In emulating the style and themes of her mentor, she used the cliché of the unoriginal female copyist to her advantage to infiltrate spheres generally hostile to women.

This study, with its many moving parts, could have benefited from a more definitive conclusion reinforcing the introduction’s stated objective to redress the one-sided representation of women in Symbolism. A feminist methodology that relied less on male perspectives and representations might have given more visibility to the sixty neglected women artists discussed. As it stands, some are mentioned briefly, leaving the reader frustrated by the anticipation that their voices be finally heard.

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