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Art Review

Decorative and Functional, Artistry From a Female Viewpoint

By KAREN ROSENBERG

The [American Folk Art Museum](#) has an edge over other museums when it comes to collecting art made by women. Because many of its holdings fall outside the narrow scope of “professional” creativity, the usual biases of art history don’t always apply.

That advantage is flaunted, as it should be, in the excellent collection show “Women Only: Folk Art by Female Hands.” Here you’ll see 18th-, 19th- and 20th-century women expressing themselves in a dizzying array of mediums: tinsel paintings, marble-dust drawings, hair-work wreaths, paper cuts, quilts and embroidered samplers.

Painting and sculpture were for the men, with few exceptions, but women had their own strictly guarded disciplines. Many learned needlework long before picking up a pen or paintbrush, and when they did work on paper or panel or canvas they produced lines with a distinct stitchlike quality.

The show’s title evokes a girls’ club, a parallel and self-contained art world. To some extent that’s true, as in the powerful female-to-female transfer of religious energy that occurs in some of the Shaker gift drawings on display. But other works were meant to be seen and admired by male family members and visitors. They bestowed taste and status on the men who appreciated them as well as the women who made them.

And because it hails from a formative period in American history, the art in “Women Only” has social-documentary interest that is largely gender blind. The show’s many mourning drawings, for instance, depict men and women weeping at the tombstones of their young offspring (evidence of a high child mortality rate).

In one of her many insightful texts, Stacy C. Hollander, the museum’s senior curator, links the explosion of mourning art to the death of George Washington in 1799. She also invokes the early-19th-century concept of “Republican Motherhood,” or the belief that women ought to be educated so that they could raise moral sons.

In art, at least, early-19th-century American women maintained strong ties to Georgian England. A cut-paper collage memorializing a man named Benjamin S. Farret is reminiscent of the detailed “paper mosaics” produced by the influential Englishwoman Mary Delany in the late 18th century.

The show has a rich selection of drawings and embroideries made by schoolgirls at elite female academies. Among them is a mourning piece by Orra White, who went on to become a teacher at the Deerfield Academy and the wife of the geologist Edward Hitchcock. Her watercolor of figures beneath a giant willow tree, made when she was 14, indicates an early interest in botany and the natural sciences.

Art-making was mandatory, a part of education. Yet to judge from the show, many 19th-century women continued the practice long after their school days. They made portraits of family members and friends or applied their skills to objects both decorative and functional: crewel bedspreads, festively patterned silk quilts, and tabletops painted with still lifes of fruit and flowers.

Some of the most expressive works take the form of quilts. The unidentified creator of the “Cleveland-Hendricks Crazy Quilt” worked political ribbons and other paraphernalia into a raucous but still socially acceptable textile. And the “Crazy Trousseau Robe,” of quilted silk and lace with metallic embroidery, hints at the unconventional life of its maker — a thrice-married Western frontierswoman who was one of the earliest female railroad telegraphers.

Other quilts are just as striking in their simplicity. Among them is an Amish “Diamond in the Square” motif from the early 20th century, spiritually Anabaptist but formally Bauhaus. Maria Cadman Hubbard, meanwhile, comes across as an ancestral Jenny Holzer in her “Pieties Quilt” (1848). Its blocky red-and-white design includes snippets of religious texts and homilies like “kind words never die” and “forgive as you hope to be forgiven.”

Ms. Hollander saves most of the painting, largely portraiture, for the last section of the show. The star here is Deborah Goldsmith, one of just a few 19th-century women remembered as professional painters. Her watercolor-and-pencil portrait of fellow upstate New Yorkers, Mr. and Mrs. Lyman Day and their daughter Cornelia, is respectful yet intimate. Admirers of the contemporary artist [Elizabeth Peyton](#) will be charmed.

Contrary to its title, “Women Only” is bookended by men. Samuel A. Robb’s carved-wood figure “Sultana” opens the show; a group of portraits of women painted by men (or unidentified artists assumed to be men) closes it.

It’s a magnanimous gesture, and it underscores the point that painting and sculpture were, for a long time, men-only. That, in turn, gets you thinking about other hierarchies in art — not just patriarchy.

“Women Only: Folk Art by Female Hands” continues through Sept. 12 at the American Folk Art Museum, 45 West 53rd Street, Manhattan; (212) 265-1040, folkartmuseum.org.