Reflections of Feminism in the Art Museum

Enforcing gender parity in art museum collections may not solve larger issues of gender inequality, but completely ignoring gender in the process of art acquisition serves neither the collection nor its patrons. In “A Never-Ending Story: The Gendered Art Museum Revisited” Hans Dam Christensen says that “the quarrel of gender parity in acquisition, collection, and display is too simplistic” (Christensen 350). While this may be true, it is difficult to completely buy into Christensen’s opinion that enforcing an institutional awareness of gender during the acquisition process does more harm to the feminist manifesto than good. Undeniably, artists want their work to be acquired and valued based on quality not gender. However, the statistics that Anderson presents highlight the fact that art by women artists are simply not being added to museum collections at the same rate as art by men. One must wonder what is left unsaid when women’s voices are continually overshadowed in collections. What narratives are we potentially ignoring when we remove gender from the valuation and acquisition of art?

Gaby Porter notes that it is not enough to simply insert women into museums and collections (Porter 67). In this sense, Christensen is correct in his assertion that gender parity in collections will not resolve issues of inequality. But, Porter recognizes that stories of men and women, masculine and feminine, are inexorably tied. They are, as she says, “interdependent and relational and must be addressed together” (Porter 68). By recognizing that women and men’s stories are connected and rely on each other, and by consciously making efforts to provide opportunities for women and their stories, to be showcased and their voices heard alongside those of men, it is possible to offer a fuller representation of humanity’s story, and for those who identify as feminine to see themselves, their mothers and sisters, in that narrative.
A “viral” photo by artist Amy Sherald shows a young, awestruck African American girl looking up at Sherald’s portrait of Michelle Obama at the National Portrait Gallery. While many focused on the significance of this young person seeing a powerful woman of color in this context, we must also consider that, race aside, she is a girl, in awe of a portrait of a woman that was painted by a woman. What might that experience mean to her growing up as a person, who for many reasons will likely be classified as “other” in her life? Ignoring artists’ genders, though a noble thought in line with efforts of equality, does not necessarily serve the public, especially the feminine public, who might be looking for traces of themselves in humanity’s story to inspire and engage them.

Works Referenced:


Image Referenced: