

# The Fault in Our Heritage

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*By Anastasia Somerville-Wong*

## **Dynasties Lost and Found**

Like many others of my generation, I grew up frequenting museums, libraries and galleries and saw my fair share of films and television, with the occasional opera, ballet or musical thrown into the mix. I had, or so it appeared, a cultural heritage. I could appreciate the skill and ingenuity of what I saw and heard, and would sometimes stumble upon a treasure that had succeeded in capturing that which is subtle and elusive but essentially and universally human.

However, for the most part I felt alienated from these works and their admirers because my sex was everywhere the object of design but rarely the designer. Moreover 'she' was an object in forms and guises that I did not recognise in myself or the women and girls I knew. The images and characters were the portrayal, not of real women, but of male fantasies of woman as an object of sexual desire; either a virgin or a prostitute, woman as confined to the domestic sphere as mother, housekeeper or maid, or woman as victim; a device with which to offset the violence or courage of men.

I valued the women I knew, not for their purity, their maternal instincts, their physical allure or lack of any of the above, but for their intellect, their humour and their originality. However, I could only find them (and myself) within this cultural heritage, as vicariously exploited, suppressed and utterly misunderstood. Half of our ancestors were missing from the accompanying inscriptions and their silence was

overwhelming. There I was a young person with ambition and creative spirit, unable to find the inspiration I deserved.

I quickly became disenchanted with acclaimed exhibitions and performances that everyone went to see because some critic or celebrated person, invariably white and male, had been reported as having praised. Instead I became much more discerning about what I paid with either money or time to see, researching the content in advance.

It was then that I started coming across the hidden works of women, in particular the works of local women such as Phoebe Anna Traquair, who painted what is known as "Edinburgh's Sistene Chapel", the exceptionally beautiful former Catholic Apostolic Church in which I was later married. Traquair's vigorous and commanding women are in stark contrast with the sexualised, hapless and helpless females that are typically found in Pre-Raphaelite works of art. Thus I began to find threads of a heritage; a human story rather than 'his'-story to which I could belong, and one in which a more inclusive culture might be encouraged to grow.

As one neglected female genius led to another, the richness and breadth of our fore-mothers' legacy, in spite of the odds that were stacked against them, revealed itself as far greater than I had dared to hope.

(Opposite are images of two of my favourite works by Phoebe Anna Traquair. They are also examples of the different media in which the works of women can be hidden.)



“St George in Armour being kissed”, (illustration for Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets of the Portuguese*) by Phoebe Anna Traquair - Traquair’s male characters often appear pale and vulnerable beside their powerful female counterparts.



“Angels Carrying a Dead Child” (embroidery detail) by Phoebe Anna Traquair - Female angels are here the agents of the divine. The precious child being conveyed to heaven is also notably female.

## New Mythologies of Origin and Identity

If we are to flood our children's tablets, smart phones and apps, with text, images and sounds that are supposed to be those things that give them a past, a back story, a sense of who they are and from whom they have come; those things that will shape and colour their formative years and impact upon their future perspectives and attitudes, then we should think very carefully about what kind of inheritance we want to pass down.

It is an often forgotten truth in modern times that persons, though attached to corporeal bodies, nonetheless go back much further than the day they were born. We each build for ourselves a story through our childhoods based on fragments of information we learn about our parent's experiences, our ancestors and our community's past. Upon these we construct our world views and our psychological and emotional moorings.

It would be a great pity if we were inadvertently to perpetuate the injustices wrought by the harmful myths of our past; a past that after all is littered with error, misogyny and violence. We could choose instead to use content in our new technologies which challenges ignorance and prejudice, and confounds gender (and other) stereotypes. Scanning our cultural

heritage to separate the gold from the dross would uncover much that is still edifying according to the egalitarian values of today.

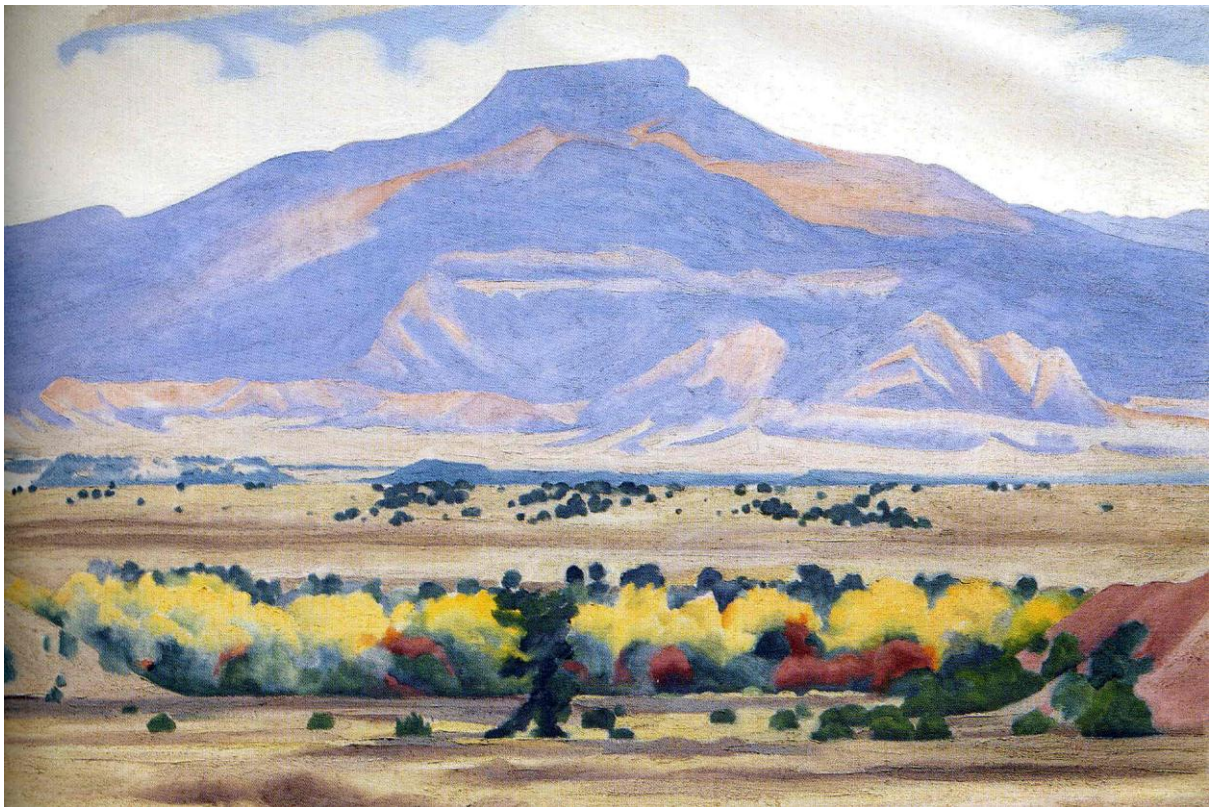
By building new canons of important works, as the elites of the past did before us with far fewer scruples, we would allow the evolution of new mythologies of origin and identity. By new mythologies I mean narratives of human history and culture based on the more egalitarian perceptions of reality which have evolved since the dawn of historical criticism and the scientific revolution.

To sow seeds of these new mythologies of origin and identity is simple enough, though we might have to look beyond Europe if we want a complete, global perspective on women as originators and pioneers. As a case in point, in the world of fine art, we could replace a painting such as Michelangelo's 'The Creation of Adam', which epitomises the purveyance of myths created by men, for men, about men, with paintings such as Georgia O'Keeffe's flowers, which show in abstraction the life giving harmony of male and female parts, with a brilliance of shape and colour. In addition, one of her vivid landscapes brings to life some of the environments and ecosystems that nurtured human life, and thus an origin myth may be born that includes all of humanity, and indeed the rest of life on earth.





From left: Abstraction in Bloom (1919), Blue Flower (1918) and Pink Tulip (1926), by Georgia O'Keeffe



Pedernal (1942), a landscape by Georgia O'Keeffe



We could then replace the omnipresent depictions of woman as object, with portraits of woman as author and artist, especially those produced by the women themselves.



From left: Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun, *Self-Portrait at an Easel* (1790), and Phoebe Anna Traquair, *Self-Portrait* (1911). These are contrasting images of how women artists perceive themselves.

To highlight the need for a revisionary approach to our cultural heritage, there could be collections for comparison and contrast; online exhibitions of images inspiring the new myths, displayed beside those that typify the old and discredited ways of seeing the world.

Digitalising and supplying content which includes as much as possible from female creators would ensure that future generations of men are able to see beyond the received stereotypes, and do not grow up with a sense of superiority that leads to abuse. Equally it will make certain that future generations of women are provided with the role models they deserve for inspiration, for developing the self-respect and strength that resists exploitation, and for building the confidence to nurture their talents and follow through with their ideas. It is important to note that this would not be act of positive

discrimination, since many works by women would have been in the canon of great art, literature and so on anyway, if it was not for their censorship and neglect. However some positive discrimination may prove necessary in addition, to fully redress the balance where creations by women are missing or were never made possible in the first place. It is also important to note that some works by women show immense promise but are less developed because women were denied access to equipment and training. Others are exquisite but have not been given the attention they deserve because they are products of traditionally female crafts such as cookery and needle work. There needs to be prominent explanation of the context and reasons why women's works are fewer, less developed or missing altogether, to accompany bodies of material to be used in education and apps for children.

## Explaining the Past...

The reasons for the dominance of men in the creative realm are obvious, yet still under-appreciated. Given centuries of discrimination, censorship, poverty of opportunity, the full burden of childbearing and childrearing, domestic servitude, physical intimidation and violence, stifling conventions and indoctrination in female inferiority and stereotypes, it is a wonder and a miracle that so many women succeeded in producing their masterpieces. Indeed, they have supplied us with works in almost every genre to equal or surpass their male counterparts. They are the crowning glory of women who have triumphed in the face of unthinkable adversity.

Such works are rarely given the significance and publicity they deserve, because men have long established the dominant hierarchies and canons of excellence within exclusive clubs and societies. They have promoted the works of other men they have admired (and even their own works), as great, epic, majestic, the product of genius, prophetic, seminal and so the list goes on, while describing women's creations, at best, in the condescending terms one might apply to children's work, such as pretty, decorative, or charming. While a man is said to have been inspired by previous works but to have produced something entirely original from an intangible idea or vision arising from a supernatural act of creative genius, a woman who does the same thing is said to have merely copied them.

All too often the belief in female inferiority has persisted even among women because they have been raised without awareness of the many examples of female genius that would have refuted such notions. Recent generations are privileged to have received an education that encourages critical thinking, the questioning of the powers that be and the dominant culture they purvey. However, we are still plagued by media bias and stereotyping which keeps the old discredited myths alive.

## ...to Envision a Different Future

In recent times there have been admirable efforts to salvage works of female invention, to look at them afresh, having discarded the lens of the patriarchy and the categories they used to define 'greatness'. However, there is a lot of work still to be done in reclaiming the half of our heritage that we have been denied.

Men too have been disinherited, though they may be less aware of it; after all, half of everything they are and have ever been has come from their mothers and the female line. Their heritage too is much impoverished by the silence of their female kin. By denying women the freedom of self-expression for so long, many men also have been denied the parental inspiration they might have had. Initially there will be a degree of damage limitation about any project which aims to change future perspectives as the gender gap still yawns widely across the globe. Even in the developed world, women still face many more barriers than men in honing their creative skills and talent. This will not change until wealth is more fairly distributed, until we can bring to a halt and then reverse the trend towards increasing female poverty, and until our workplaces both enable and encourage men to play an equal role in child rearing. Getting beyond gender stereotypes is also a long way off, even in the dominant cultures of today's Europe. However, we can make headway by fostering and inspiring female inventiveness with learning and recreational content they can relate to.

As increasing numbers of girls grow up with freedom of personality and expression, and the confidence to force open the channels of opportunity, we will soon have a far richer and broader canon of excellence in every field. Providing our daughters with a full heritage, rather than a meagre, prejudiced half-heritage, we will empower them with a story; a context in which to see themselves and imagine a future. Our cultural heritage gives us the scope within

which we can dream, and the broader that heritage the closer our dreams can come to the infinite, to whatever we want to make of

ourselves. We will no longer be defined by someone else's idea of femininity but rather define it ourselves.



Portrait of the Artist's Sisters Playing Chess (1555) by Sofonisba Anguissola - There is an emphasis on the individual expressions, unique characters, thoughtfulness and intelligence of the three young sisters and their mother which contrasts greatly with other female images of the time.