

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS ST. PETE

“WHY HAVE THERE BEEN NO GREAT WOMEN ARTISTS?”*

Recent reattribution of significant work in the MFA Collection inspires public talk focused on Linda Nochlin’s groundbreaking essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists.”



ST. PETERSBURG, FL (September 15, 2023) — [The Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg](#) (MFA), is thrilled to announce the reattribution of a key work in the collection. In 1969, the MFA was gifted an exceptional pastel portrait long believed to be by noted British painter Francis Cotes. The sitter, an elegant woman in a fur-trimmed coat, was identified as the artist’s wife, whom he married in 1765. This attribution remained unchallenged for over fifty years, yet it is now determined to be incorrect. Current scholarship reveals that the work is almost certainly by Katherine Read, another equally important, though historically less well-known, artist.

Read’s *Portrait of a Woman* was recently on view as part of the exhibition *Explore the Vaults: Images Private and Public, c. 1500–1800*, and its reattribution is the inspiration for an upcoming talk focused on

Linda Nochlin's groundbreaking 1971 essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" presented by Senior Curator of Contemporary Art Katherine Pill. "The reattribution serves as a vital reminder that the art historical canon is not fixed, and the story of art continues to unfold. As an encyclopedic art museum, we are presented with a valuable opportunity to conduct research that elevates marginalized artists to prominence within the unfolding narrative of art. This is especially crucial for artists whose exclusion, as evidenced by Nochlin's work, arose from multifaceted factors that surpassed pure talents alone," states Pill. The talk, to be held on Thursday, September 21, from 6-7 p.m. at the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, will explore the institutional barriers obstructing women's progress in the arts, delving into the epic struggle they faced in achieving success.

Neil Jeffares, author of *Dictionary of Pastellists before 1800*, identifies the MFA's pastel as the work of Read, a highly sought-after professional portraitist active in London, Paris, and Rome. A comparison between the MFA's portrait and other works by her reveals strong aesthetic and compositional similarities, including the soft handling of her sitters' facial features and the incorporation of blue undertones along the hairline, eyes, and chin. Like many of her male contemporaries, she exhibited publicly with such institutions as the London Society of Artists and the Royal Academy.

Spearheading the research of this work is Associate Curator Erin Wilson, who acknowledges there is still much to discover. Wilson states, "It is not uncommon for the names of artists to become disassociated from their works over the centuries, especially when—like the MFA's portrait—they are unsigned. Now that we know this is a work by Read, we have the opportunity to better trace its history perhaps, even discover the identity of the sitter. This reattribution provides a greater understanding of Read's body of work and allows us, as an institution, to present a clearer, more balanced interpretation of eighteenth-century professional artistic practice."

Katherine Read joins the company of other notable women artists in the MFA Collection, including Berthe Morisot, Georgia O'Keeffe, Elisabeth Louise Vigée-Lebrun, Cindy Sherman, Perle Fine, Gio Swaby, and many more.

*Linda Nochlin achieved acclaim as an esteemed art critic, historian, writer, and researcher. Her impactful writings and academic contributions established her as an icon of the feminist art movement and history. One of her most renowned essays, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," delves into the societal factors that hindered women from attaining recognition within the art world.

RELATED PROGRAM

[The Story of Art | Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?](#)

This provocative discussion examines art historian Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay, an epic examination of the institutional obstacles that prevented women from succeeding in the arts.

Presented by Senior Curator of Contemporary Art, Katherine Pill

Thursday, September 21, 2023

6:00–7:00 p.m.

\$10 for MFA Members; \$20 for Not-yet Members

IMAGE CREDIT

Katherine Read, Scottish, 1723–1779

Portrait of a Woman, c. 1765

Pastel on paper

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Ross

Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg

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ABOUT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, ST. PETERSBURG

The Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg (MFA) has an encyclopedic collection of art from around the globe and across the centuries, with almost 5,000 years of civilization represented in thousands of objects extending from antiquity to the present. The collection includes works by Georgia O’Keefe, Claude Monet, Berthe Morisot, Auguste Rodin, Kehinde Wiley, Jacob Lawrence, and many others, as well as ancient Greek and Roman, Asian, African, Art of the Americas and Native American art. The Museum’s photographic collection is one of the largest and well-respected in the Southeast. The museum’s rotating exhibition galleries feature a diverse selection of temporary exhibitions from all over the world, as well as exhibitions curated from the museum’s extensive collection. In addition to its robust exhibition program, the MFA engages the community through exciting public programs and events and serves students through youth programs and a partnership with the Pinellas County School System.

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