Who Decides What's "Important" Art? Spoiler: It's Not You.

For centuries, Western art history has upheld a canon of "masters" and "classics" almost exclusively dominated by white male artists (Michelangelo, Picasso, Pollock…). This canon is not a neutral record of creativity but a selective narrative that reflects entrenched systems of power, colonial legacies, and market interests. To ask who decides what counts as "important art" is to expose these hierarchies—and to call for a more inclusive, democratic cultural narrative.

The Myth of the "Genius Artist"

This canon romanticizes the image of the "genius artist," while obscuring the social conditions that made such genius possible: who had access to education, who could enter galleries, and who was seen by critics. Why did so many women artists remain invisible during their lifetimes, only to be "rediscovered" decades or even centuries later? As art historian Linda Nochlin argued in her landmark 1971 essay Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?, the problem was never that women lacked talent but that they were systematically excluded (Nochlin, 1971). It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that feminist art historians began excavating these forgotten women from the archives.

The Ongoing Marginalization of Women Artists

Even today, women remain dramatically underrepresented in museum collections. One study found: "In the past decade, 260,470 works were acquired by 26 of the major museums in the United States. From that, 11 percent were from women artists" (National Gallery of Art report, 2019). Nearly ninety percent of acquisitions still belong to men. When women do enter the market, they are often framed through comparative narratives. In 2020, Artemisia Gentileschi's Triumph of Galatea sold for $2.1 million at Christie's. ARTnews noted: "The sale was a signal that Gentileschi's market is now rivaling that of brand-name male artists who have long dominated the Old Masters category" (ARTnews, 2020). Praise like this may sound progressive, but it still places her achievement against a male benchmark rather than evaluating her on her own terms.

Value Gaps and Structural Filters in the Market

On the auction block, women's work has historically lagged behind in price. As one dealer bluntly put it: "unfortunately women are often better value for money compared to the extreme prices of trophy works by old white male artists" (Anna Brady, Are women artists finally getting their due?). Yet market researcher Clare McAndrew points out that the reasons go beyond simple bias: "despite being equally represented at many art schools, because of 'more rigorous quality filters and other issues faced by female artists throughout their careers, fewer [of their] works reach the market'" (McAndrew, 2022). In other words, women's work often faces stricter barriers to entry. Fewer pieces make it to market, but those that do often sell at a premium. The issue lies not just in the market itself but in the entire ecosystem, from schools and museums to collectors and dealers, that systematically slows women's commercial success.Seeing how the system works this way makes it clear that we can't just observe it, we have to start thinking about how to change it.

Who Defines "Greatness"?

Art history as a discipline emerged in 19th to 20th century Germany and France, later expanding in the US, already shaped by a colonial gaze. Who gets called "great"? Whose work gets canonized in museums? The answers have largely rested with male elites and colonizers. As a result, art from Asia, Africa, and Latin America was long downgraded as "folk art" or "craft" rather than "modern art." Even during the golden age of modernism, East Asian modernist movements were rarely included in the global narrative. This selective storytelling shows that art history is not just about preservation, it is also about exclusion. If women have been filtered out by gender, non-Western artists have long been filtered out by colonial frameworks. The exclusion is parallel: one rooted in patriarchy, the other in empire. Both reveal how the writing of art history has historically narrowed our understanding of who gets to participate in "modernity."

Shifts and Their Limits

In recent years, women and non-Western artists have gained more visibility. The 2022 Venice Biennale, The Milk of Dreams, radically flipped the balance: "just 10% of the 213 featured artists identified as male" (Dozier, The Late Women Artists Garnering Art Market Attention). For once, the stage was filled with women and nonbinary artists who had long been overlooked. That same year, the market saw breakthroughs as well: Louise Bourgeois's spider sculpture became the top sale at Art Basel, fetching $40 million (Dozier, 2022). These examples suggest progress in both institutional and commercial recognition.

Yet such progress comes with caveats. Often, these rediscoveries are framed as novelty or "special interest," rather than systemic change. In my view, while these headline moments signal a shift in visibility, they don't necessarily mean the underlying structures have transformed. They show what is possible, but not yet what is typical. As one critic observed, these shows risk "ghettoizing their career and keeping them separate" (Mahler, Sotheby's Institute, Why Be a Great Woman Artist When You Could Be Spectacular). Even in celebration, women are often cast as exceptions instead of being integrated into the core of art history.

Who Gets to Decide What Matters?

Today, high-end collectors are buying women artists in unprecedented numbers. "female artists accounted for 52% of the collections of those spending more than USD 1 million in 2023 and 53% in the first half of 2024" (McAndrew, 2024). But the same report shows this is not because women collectors are more likely to buy women: "We didn't find any major differences at all in female versus male spending on artists by gender" (McAndrew, 2024). The point is clear: art-world bias is not a single-point problem but a structural one. The question has never been whether women or non-Western artists are "good enough." It has always been about who has the power to define greatness, and whose work is deemed worthy of exhibit in the marketplace.

Conclusion

So, who decides what is “important art”? The answer should not rest with a narrow elite but with a broader, more diverse community. Art should no longer be split into a male canon and a female “other,” or into Western “modern” and non-Western “craft.” As one critic put it: “There are no two lenses to study art history. There is not the feminine lens and the male lens. Unfortunately, there is. But there shouldn’t be” (Mahler, Sotheby’s Institute). To dismantle these entrenched hierarchies, we need more than temporary rediscoveries or token shows. We must integrate women and non-Western artists into the core of scholarly, curricular change and the art market, not as exceptions but as equals. Importance should not be dictated by the few who hold power, but shaped collectively by all who create.

And honestly, yes- these hierarchies are still held up by a market shaped by patriarchal habits and profit-driven decisions. The people with money and influence still have a huge say in what gets visibility. That’s why real systemic change can’t rely on a few big shows or sudden auction spikes. It has to come from shifting who makes the decisions in the first place: who sits on museum boards, who chooses what gets taught, who decides what gets collected. When the decision-makers change, the system actually has a chance to change too.