HER STORY

Women Artists of the Albertina

250 ALBERTINA

Exhibition Facts

Duration	30. October 2026 to 14. February 2027
Venue	The ALBERTINA Museum
Based on an idea by	Ralph Gleis
Curator(s)	Elisabeth Dutz Katharina Hövelmann Elsy Lahner Eva Michel
Exhibits	250
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Opening Hours	Daily 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. Wednesday and Friday 10 a.m. – 9 p.m.
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Her Story
Women Artists of the ALBERTINA

30.10.2026 – 14.2.2027

To mark its 250th anniversary, the ALBERTINA is, for the first time, devoting an exhibition to the history of the women artists represented in its collection, thereby retelling the history of art. Spanning the period from the 16th century to the 1970s, the exhibition demonstrates the decisive role women have played in shaping the development of art, even though their contributions long remained invisible or were forgotten.

Women artists have always been a part of art history – but their work has seldom received the recognition it deserves. This epoch-spanning exhibition takes stock for the first time of the women artists in the Albertina's collection, presenting works from five centuries: from drawings and prints by early engravers and publishers, which were collected by Duke Albert of Saxe-Teschen and Archduchess Maria Christina of Habsburg-Lorraine themselves, to modern artists and pioneering feminist artists of the 1970s. Through their biographies, Her Story presents women artists as commited, enterprising, and self-directed protagonists. At the same time, through a series of thematic chapters, the exhibition explores the social conditions that shaped women's artistic production, offering a fresh perspective on art history through the lens of the collection.

The exhibition is based on a research project initiated by the ALBERTINA's new General Director, Ralph Gleis, focusing on women artists across all areas of the museum's collections. The result is a remarkable diversity and considerable number of outstanding works, many of which have rarely, if ever, been shown.

Featuring works by Maria Sibylla Merian, Rachel Ruysch, Rosalba Carriera, Angelika Kauffmann, Berthe Morisot, Käthe Kollwitz, Sonia Delaunay, Louise Bourgeois and Maria Lassnig.

Exhibition Texts

HER STORY. Women Artists of the Albertina

What comes to light when a collection that has grown over 250 years finally takes systematic stock of its women artists for the first time? Expect both familiar names and surprising discoveries: works almost overlooked or wrongly attributed, women artists hidden in inventories, comprehensive groups of works—and considerable gaps. On the occasion of its 250th anniversary, the Albertina Museum makes this stocktaking the point of departure for a new perspective on five centuries of art history.

Women artists have been part of this collection from the very beginning. Duke Albert of Saxe-Teschen and Archduchess Maria Christina of Habsburg-Lorraine, who together laid the foundations for this institution, owned numerous works created by women. Yet, entering a collection does not guarantee significant representation. While the Albertina Museum conserves extensive holdings for some women artists, it holds only single works by others. In some instances, the very works that define a woman artist's public image today are missing. These gaps reflect acquisition priorities and shifting collection focuses, fluid attributions, research interests, political disruptions, as well as mere chance.

In keeping with the Albertina Museum's collection history, and with only a few exceptions, *Her Story* focuses primarily on drawings and prints. The exhibition's timeline extends to the late 1970s, as most of the collection's blind spots date from earlier eras. Analyzing the holdings and biographies raises recurring questions: Under what circumstances was it possible for women to receive an artistic education and work professionally? How did women manage to make their art visible, and how did they build networks? What possibilities opened up for them, and what restrictions remained? How did departure, persecution, and exile inform their careers—and how lasting was their recognition? From these questions developed the ten chapters of our exhibition. Rather than following a chronology of epochs and styles, it offers perspectives on artistic practice and historical conditions.

Visible

The women artists themselves are at the beginning of this exhibition. Portraits and self-portraits from the sixteenth to the twentieth century demonstrate how they were perceived and what images they fashioned of themselves. Their own faces were always available to them as models and enabled them to leave their picture behind for posterity. In a male-dominated art world, the self-portrait served to legitimize their artistic practice and became a sign of self-assertion.

The Albertina Museum's oldest engraved portrait of a woman artist shows Diana Scultori. That only few portraits from the sixteenth century have been handed down cannot be taken as proof that there was a lack of women artists. Rather, this points to gaps and unequal opportunities for publicly circulating images of themselves. Whereas male artists mostly presented themselves in distinguished poses, it strikes us that women artists such as Sofonisba Anguissola and Rosa Bonheur frequently depicted themselves working, thus asserting their professional status. Gertrude van Veen had her self-portrait reproduced by Lucas Vorsterman. Disseminated as prints, such portraits served as "visual business cards." However, women were not always in control of their own visibility: Berthe Morisot was one of Impressionism's protagonists, but the portraits of her painted by Édouard Manet determined her public image more than her own work. In the twentieth century, the self-portrait increasingly turned into a medium that served to question, change, or reinvent one's identity.

Dilettantish?!

For a long time, women had to fight for access to artistic training. An exception was the Vienna Academy of Engravers headed by Jacob Matthias Schmutzer, where, between 1767 and 1836, about twenty women, most of them aristocrats, were admitted as honorary members, among them Archduchess Maria Anna.

For women of the higher nobility drawing and painting were also part of their education. Archduchess Maria Christina of Habsburg-Lorraine and her sisters received private art lessons. They practiced art not to earn a living but out of personal interest and were therefore referred to as "dilettanti." The term (from Latin *delectare*, to delight) described people who took pleasure in engaging with art. Only later did it acquire a derogatory meaning, suggesting a supposed lack of expertise. Many women scarcely entered the history of art because they worked in private settings, did not sell their works, and had little public visibility.

Enterprising

Women were barred from regular apprenticeship and from becoming members of guilds until well into the sixteenth century. Women artists were thus mostly trained in the workshops of their fathers, brothers, or husbands and subsequently entered the family business. As these women rarely signed their works, many fell into oblivion.

We are comparatively well informed when it comes to women printmakers: Latin inscriptions provide information about the persons involved. "Inv[enit] refers to the inventor of the visual idea; "fe[cit]," "sculpsit," or "incidit" credit those executing the work; and "ex[cudit]" denotes the publisher. Thanks to these annotations, a considerable number of women engravers are known to us today. As they usually worked from models provided by male artists, their art-historical achievements would nevertheless be considered marginal for a long time to come. Diana Scultori is believed to be the first woman who self-confidently signed her engravings and inscribed them with extensive dedications.

Entrepreneurial activities of women artists are worth mentioning as well. Magdalena de Passe developed innovative applications for printing on textiles; the Bouzonnet-Stella sisters took over their uncle's workshop; Volcxken Diericx successfully managed the publishing house she had founded together with her husband, Hieronymus Cock, after his death. Courage, a sense of what motifs were in demand, and effective networks were essential prerequisites for these women's professional success.

Academic

Until well into the twentieth century, women were denied access to many art academies and thus to life drawing classes. They still had to make do with private art instruction or artistic training provided by family members.
Copying antique sculptures or old masters, as exemplified by the works of Theresa Maron-Mengs and Apollonia Seydelmann from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries on view here, was another possibility of improving one's skills. The nude studies by Helene von Eschenburg and Hermine Munsch from the late nineteenth century are rare specimens of an exploration of the male body in the nude made by women artists. Hermine Munsch studied at the Ladies' Academy in Munich, where she was permitted to draw from live models; she would eventually offer life classes in her studio in Vienna. Her male nude demonstrates a confident treatment of line in red chalk and pencil. Little is known about Helene von Eschenburg's training. Her nude, which dates from 1870, displays the typical pose of an academic model; it must remain open whether she worked from a live model or copied a work by her uncle, Karl von Blaas. The (nude) female body, on the other hand, was taken for granted as an object of the male gaze over the centuries. About a hundred years later, Florentina Pakosta finally reversed traditional gender roles and focused her gaze exclusively on male genitals— without staging them as symbols of virility or power.

Committed

For a long time, commissions were by no means a matter of course for women artists. Nevertheless, some established themselves as sought-after portraitists, miniaturists, and printmakers as early as the seventeenth century.
Sofonisba Anguissola achieved an international breakthrough at an early date, which was also due to the distribution of one of her compositions in the form of prints. In Bologna, Elisabetta Sirani became a role model for many women artists who followed in her footsteps. Rosalba Carriera, Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, and Angelica Kauffman portrayed the rich and powerful all over Europe. Kauffman also devoted herself to history painting, the highest form of painting at that time. Other women artists captured the everyday life of women and children in genre scenes.
Like their male colleagues, successful women artists strategically used print reproductions to circulate their works internationally. In this way, they enhanced their reputation and promoted the sale of their works. On the other hand, the story of Fede Galizia, a painting by whom circulated under a false name, illustrates how easily

the authorship of women was ignored. The precious portrait miniatures by Nanette Rosenzweig and Agathe Jumont used to be highly coveted items—but little is known today about their authors' lives.

Scientific

Women artists explored nature in highly detailed studies of plants, animals, and landscapes. The resulting works were not only art but also a visual memorandum of their observations.

In the seventeenth century Maria Sibylla Merian combined art and science in a pioneering manner. Contrary to the belief of her time that insects were born from mud, she carefully documented the metamorphosis from egg to caterpillar to butterfly. Rachel Ruysch also painted plants and insects with meticulous precision. Today her pictures are precious documents of the flora that had arrived in Europe through international trade.

In 1739, Irish artist Susannah Drury documented the distinctive basalt formations of the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland, which are several million years old. Her views, disseminated as etchings, played a key role in the scientific debate over the origins of these basalt columns. In the nineteenth century Rosa Bonheur studied the anatomy of animals, preparing her famous painting *Horse Fair* in numerous sketches. Similarly, decades later, Norbertine Bresslern-Roth based her watercolors on the precise observation and comparison of living animals.

Self-Directed

In the second half of the nineteenth century, several women pioneers paved the way for generations of women artists to come. Their varied careers show how women artists created new professional opportunities for themselves and sought new paths within modernism.

In Austria, Olga Wisinger-Florian, Marie Egner, and Tina Blau were among the first successful artists to work out of doors, directly from nature, with their scenic landscapes introducing Austrian Stimmungs-impressionismus (Atmospheric Impressionism). At the same time, such networks as the group of Acht Künstlerinnen (Eight Women Artists) and the Austrian Association of Women Artists (VBKÖ) offered exhibition opportunities and new professional perspectives.

Toward the end of the century, awakening modernism found its way into the arts, literature, and society. Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt belonged to the sphere of French Impressionism; Broncia Koller-Pinell developed an autonomous pictorial idiom in the context of the Vienna Secession. Paula Modersohn-Becker and Gabriele Münter were trailblazers of Expressionism in Germany, while Käthe Kollwitz, from her independent artistic perspective, dealt with poverty, war, and social misery. Alexandra Exter and Lyubov Popova held unique positions in the Russian avant-garde, working side by side and on an equal footing with their male colleagues while shaping the movement decisively. This was also due to the fact that Russia's imperial art academies admitted women as early as 1871—decades earlier than in Western Europe.

Displaced

National Socialism and World War II meant persecution, flight, and loss of their former existence for numerous women artists. Many were forced to emigrate and start a new life abroad. Only rarely could they build on past successes immediately.

In 1938, following Austrias “annexation,” Marie-Louise von Motesiczky escaped to Great Britian together with her mother. She portrayed her there over the decades, so that the pictures have also captured her aging. Lili Réthi, Trude Waehner, and Day Schnabel eventually arrived in the United States, where they were able to continue their artistic careers under new conditions. Others fell victim to Nazi persecution. Ilka Gedő survived the German occupation of Hungary and the Budapest ghetto. Ella Iranyi was forcibly deported and murdered in the Izbica ghetto in 1942.

Soshana fled from Vienna as an eleven-year-old and in 1941 emigrated to the United States, where she left again for political reasons and returned to Europe. Displacement also shaped the biographies of other women artists in this exhibition. It interrupted grown networks and artistic careers, and its consequences extended far beyond the loss of one’s homeland.

Recognized?

In the twentieth century, opportunities for women to pursue an artistic education, exhibit their works, and build networks improved. Many women artists gained recognition during their lifetimes through museum acquisitions, exhibitions, or awards. The question mark in the title thus does not call into doubt their artistic significance, but the scope and duration of the recognition they received. Was their work recognized as a matter of course, and did that recognition prove as lasting as it did for their male contemporaries?

Barbara Hepworth and Germaine Richier influenced modern sculpture, while Joan Mitchell contributed to the development of Abstract Expressionism. Frequently, however, they received less attention than their male colleagues. Others were reduced to individual works or techniques: Meret Oppenheim was identified with her fur-lined tea cup, Louise Nevelson associated with her monumental assemblages, and Anni Albers, with her textile art. Louise Bourgeois did not receive wider recognition until late in her career; Eva Hesse’s standing as a pioneer of Postminimalism solidified only after her premature death. Lily Greenham, Greta Freist, and Grete Yppen largely faded from view despite their earlier presence in the art world. Madge Gill, Aloïse Corbaz, and Anna Zemánková were kept at a distance from established art history because they were primarily assigned to Art Brut or Outsider Art. Such patterns are also reflected in the Albertina Museum's collection. Significant works stand side by side with historical acquisition decisions, collection focuses, and existing gaps. Several canonized women artists are not represented at the Albertina Museum by the bodies of works shaping their public image today.

Feminist

Women artists of previous epochs already depicted women's lifeworlds, showing them at work, in domestic settings, or in roles assigned to them by society. However, in the 1960s the perspective changed. In the context of the new feminist movement, the personal was regarded as political. Women artists questioned social roles, body norms, and power structures.

Auguste Kronheim addressed care work and societal constraints, Ingeborg Pluhar dealt with images of women transmitted by the media, and Birgit Jürgenssen looked into traditional gender roles. VALIE EXPORT made her own body the scene of social control and resistance.

The self-organization of women artists had a long tradition in Vienna; now, however, the feminist commitment was increasingly directed at the art industry's mechanisms. Protests against a selection committee consisting exclusively of men resulted in the foundation of the International Action Group of Visual Women Artists (IntAkt) in 1977. Among its founders were Christa Hauer-Fruhmann and Angelika Kaufmann. The group demanded to have a voice when it came to exhibitions, juries, acquisitions, and decisions on cultural policies. Networking thus became a feminist practice and provided room for exchange, visibility, and shared agency. Since then, the discourse on representation, exclusion, and participation has broadened – and continues to pose new questions for museums and collections about how they engage with their holdings and histories.

Press Images

The following images are available in the press section at www.albertina.at. The images may be reproduced only in connection with reporting on the exhibition.



Marie-Louise von Motesiczky
Hunting, 1936
Pastel, charcoal
47.1 × 57.8 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – Gift from the Marie-Louise von Motesiczky Charitable Trust



Maria Sibylla Merian
Stinging Nettle with the Metamorphosis of the Small Tortoiseshell Butterfly and Two Species of Flies, 1679–1683
Body colors on transfer print, on vellum
16.7 × 12.5 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna



Maria Christina of Habsburg-Lorraine, after Jean Siméon Chardin
Lady with Book, 1760s/1770s
Watercolor, body colors on vellum
20.9 × 25.5 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna



Angelica Kauffman
Julia, Wife of Pompey, Faints at the Sight of His Bloodstained Garment, ca. 1785
Pen and brush in black, traces of black chalk
28.3 × 36.3 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna



Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun
Drawing the Portrait of a Girl, ca. 1790–1795
Black and white chalk
36.9 × 26.6 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna



Berthe Morisot
Self-Portrait Drawing, with Julie, 1889 (2nd edition 1905)
Drypoint
35.3 × 28.2 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna



Emilie Mediz-Pelikan
Female Centaur, 1895
Colored chalk
29 × 54.6 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna



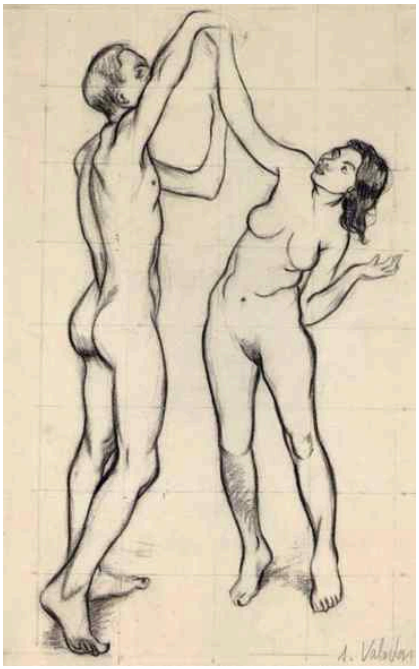
Joseph Bishop Pratt, after Consuelo Fould
Rosa Bonheur, 1896
Steel engraving, aquatint
101.2 × 68.2 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna



Käthe Kollwitz
Self-Portrait, 1908
Chalk, charcoal, white highlights
40.5 × 31.1 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna



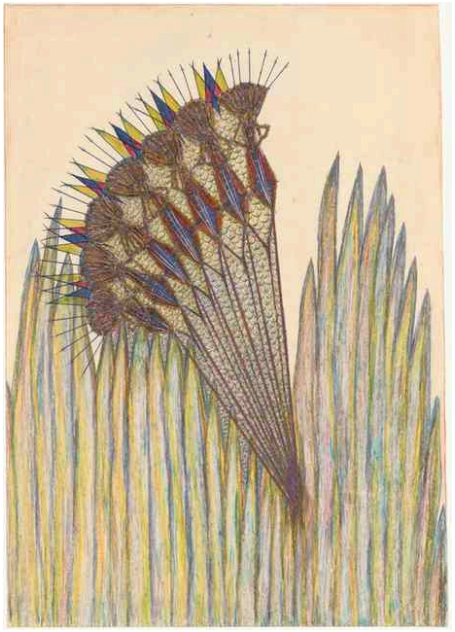
Lilith Lang
Woman with Bowl of Fruit and Porcupine, ca. 1909
Watercolor, opaque white, Indian ink, pen, pencil
20 × 15.1 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna



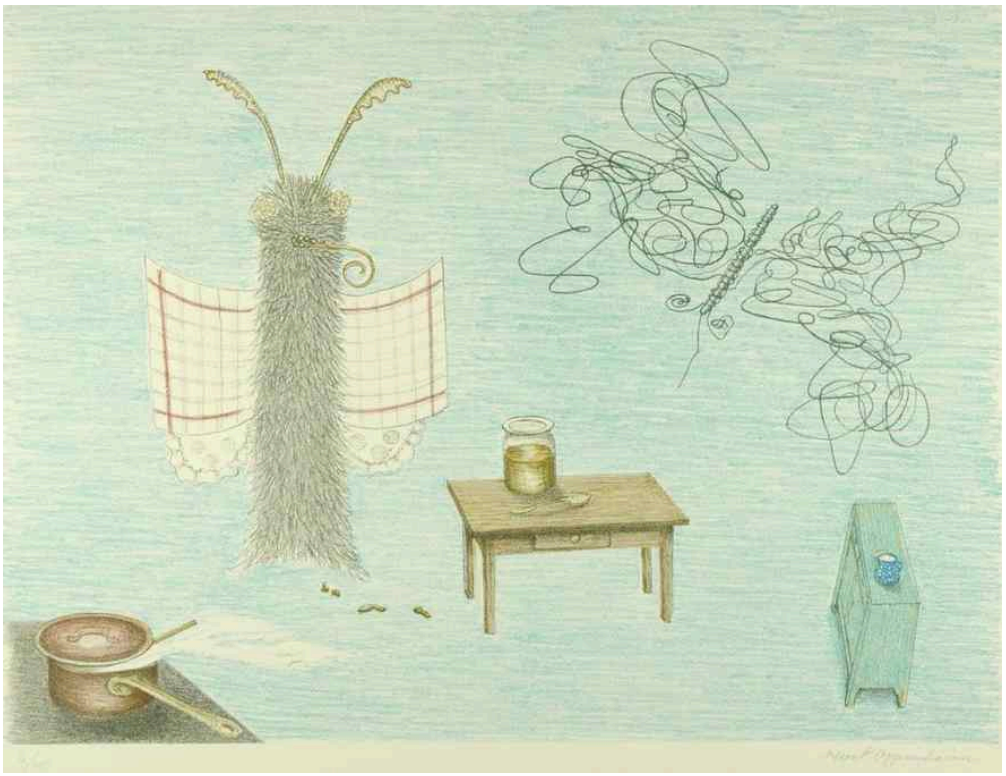
Suzanne Valadon
Adam and Eve, 1910
Black chalk
34.7 × 22.5 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna



Alexandra Exter
Design for the Play *Salomé*, 1917
Gouache
52.2 × 34.5 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna



Anna Zemánková
Untitled (F/I–7), first half of the 1970s
Colored pencil, ballpoint pen, embroidery
62 × 44 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna



Meret Oppenheim
Psyche, Friend of Men, from the portfolio *Parapapillonneries*, 1976
Color lithograph
46 × 58 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna © Bildrecht, Vienna 2026