Mickalene Thomas

Women in the History of Crafts

The distinction between fine art and craft has been contentious throughout the history of Western art. Scholars have constructed "art" and "craft" as having no function beyond aesthetics, production, and ownership. However, the art world has typically thought of the paintings and sculpture—whose main purpose is associated with their usefulness—"as craft," while considering textiles and pottery, which serve a useful role in everyday life, "as art."

Western Europe and the United States, craft historically prevailed in the family sphere. Women practiced various crafts, from weaving and tailoring to cabinetmaking and woodworking. Women had a strong influence on the development and implementation of craft. They were the primary producers of their own goods and the goods of their communities.

Women in the History of Crafts have contributed significantly to the history of Western art. Scholars have constructed "art" and "craft" as having no function beyond aesthetics, production, and ownership. However, the art world has typically thought of the paintings and sculpture—whose main purpose is associated with their usefulness—"as craft," while considering textiles and pottery, which serve a useful role in everyday life, "as art."

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Mickalene Thomas acknowledges and embeds herself into the history through her paintings, to borrow this teaching poster. Her approach is grounded in the work of nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists, including Henri Matisse (1868–1954), Edward Manet (1832–1883), and Man Ray (1890–1976). Mickalene Thomas is born on January 6, 1971 in New York, New York. She is the daughter of her mother's cousin and her father's mother. Her mother is a businesswoman and her father is a musician. Thomas grew up in a middle-class family with three siblings.

After completing her master's degree in 2000, she moved to New York City and immersed herself in the art world. She attended the School of Visual Arts and later received her master's degree in visual art from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her work is inspired by her personal experiences, her family, and the history of art. She is known for her large-scale portraits of women of color, which are often referred to as "portrait paintings." These paintings are characterized by their vibrancy, color, and attention to detail. Thomas's portraits often depict women in confident and powerful poses, often with bright colors and intricate backgrounds. She has been recognized for her ability to challenge traditional representations of women and people of color in art history.

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Discussion Questions

How would you describe the sitter's attitudes in Mickalene Thomas' portraits?

How does Thomas draw on the history of portraiture in Western art? How does she challenge it?

How and why does Thomas use real materials in her paintings?

Thomas draws on the history of portraiture in Western art. Her work is characterized by her ability to challenge traditional representations of women and people of color in art history. She is known for her large-scale portraits of women of color, which are often referred to as "portrait paintings." These paintings are characterized by their vibrancy, color, and attention to detail. Thomas's portraits often depict women in confident and powerful poses, often with bright colors and intricate backgrounds. She has been recognized for her ability to challenge traditional representations of women and people of color in art history.
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