Unlike other forms of material culture, visual art seems always to entail high status. Because of its relationship to high status, unlike other forms of material culture, visual art also always has a relationship with elite markets, high finance, and wealth. Other forms of material culture may be commodities, but visual art is a distinctive class of asset. As a category of material culture, visual art is strongly demarcated against other forms of production and this demarcation is often produced in gendered terms. Whereas men make visual art that can be considered works of great genius, women are more often considered as creating either other forms of material culture or lesser forms of visual art. The demarcations between art and non-art, between the extraordinary and the ordinary, and between male and female work reflect differences in the monetary and social value of the various types of material culture.

The relationship between anthropology and the visual arts has been fruitful in terms of academic and sociocultural debates, but it is also problematic, in particular with regard to gender. Unlike other forms of material culture, which often attract value-neutral description and are appraised for their use or symbolism, visual art seems always to entail high status. Visual art is understood as an instance of material culture with a specific and distinctive use value as compared with other forms of material culture (Gell 1998). Because of its relationship to high status and wealth, what is excluded from or included within the category of visual art is contested. Shifting an example of material culture from or to the category of visual art entails a shift in its status and also usually its monetary value.

Historically and today, women’s visual art practices that explore contact zones with anthropology have been structurally marginalized by the art market, and many anthropologists of art examine only high-market-value visual art, which is skewed both in terms of gender and culture in favor of the work of white men based in European or North American centers.

The term “visual art” emerged as a concept in Western scholarship in the mid-eighteenth century when the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten coined the term “aesthetics” (Sansi 2015, 69). The idea of art as a distinct category of human endeavor developed with this hierarchy of aestheticization. Art historians, working in later centuries, tended to cite the origins of visual art as the Italian Renaissance, which itself referred to the material culture of ancient Greece. Despite the fact that neither the ancient Greek language nor Latin have a word for art that translates to a modern definition, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art historians, such as Heinrich Wölfflin, Erwin Panofsky, and Ernst Gombrich, explicitly conceived the value and definition of the visual arts with reference to Renaissance artists and their interpretation of ancient Greek material culture.

Not only is visual art imagined to have begun at that point stylistically but also the growing discourse around genius and individual creativity of the period, as exemplified in Giorgio Vasari’s Lives of the Artists (1550), marked a turning point in history, differentiating visual art from other forms of material culture created at other times and in other places. Both historical and philosophical texts on visual art from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries tended to emphasize exemplars of the practice. Instead of referring to the practice as a whole, as an inclusive or widely practiced form of culture, the definition of visual art became one in which only certain types of practitioners, namely some men of genius, could be truly said to be making art. Because the concept of genius was gendered and applied only to the work of
specific men in a specific location at a specific time, the concept of visual art became
gendered and culturally specific in its definition. With the concept of aesthetics, the idea of
what defines a great artist, and also what defines a great art collector or a receptive and
refined eye for art, became consistently gendered and culturally specific.

Specific and exclusive definitions of greatness, creativity, and genius were conceived
in gendered and ethnocentric terms. Until historians and theorists such as Germaine Greer,
Rosalind Krauss, and Griselda Pollock, writing in the 1970s and 1980s, critiqued some of the
various assumptions written into the histories of the visual arts, such histories maintained a
Eurocentric masculinist perspective that served to create a gendered understanding of the
visual arts. In general, women created craft, not art, and, where women artists used
undeniably artistic materials such as oil paint, their work was dismissed as merely illustrative
and lacking in genius. For example, although the paintings of Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–
1653) and Angelica Kauffmann (1741–1807) were acquired by the United Kingdom’s
National Gallery collection, their work languished in the basement until the new millennium,
when renewed interest in the paintings of women painters of the past demanded a more
central location for the work.

Assumptions about genius and creativity embedded in the discipline of art history
served to exclude the art of women, including those who were similarly educated to the men
of genius. In addition to gender exclusion, art historians of the nineteenth and twentieth
centuries tended to assume that the visual arts were created only in Europe and its colonies,
by Europeans, and to some extent, in parallel fashion, in China and Japan. The fact that most
other cultures did not reference ancient Greece for the creation of visual art but instead have
different origins rendered these practices not art for a majority of art historians at the time.
Philosophers, too, tended to define visual art by explicitly excluding the work of non-
European practitioners. Art made outside a Greco-European tradition was defined as
something other than art. For example, R. G. Collingwood’s important and influential The
Principles of Art (1938) described non-European, non-Western art as craft, magic, or mere
representation.

Anthropologists of art sought to redress the Eurocentric bias of art historians and
philosophers. Not only do people working in other traditions make visual art, anthropologists
argue, but their works can also be great, innovative works of genius. Subsequently, Robert
Layton (1991) attempted to make cross-cultural analyses of the visual arts across many
societies in order to create value for diverse cultural practices different from those of Europe.
What unites many of these anthropological writings on art is their gendered understanding of
the contributions of the various artists they write about. Like their Eurocentric counterparts
working in the discipline of art history, these male anthropologists tend to ignore the visual
art of women. When they do mention it, they dismiss it as craft, as illustrative, or as
functional, as Franz Boas (1955, 183) also did.

Most anthropologists of art simply replicate gendered assumptions about visual art by
focusing on specific visual art practices associated with masculine production, such as wood
carving. The description and investigation into the visual art of the Abelam, Māori, and
Tikopia people, among many others, suffers from this form of gendering.

The gender imbalance resulting from a focus on male artistic practices has been
redressed through the attention given to historical colonial collections, which despite a
preponderance of male items (including those required to conduct wars) have proved fertile
ground for art historians and anthropologists interested in a history of visual art, including
that produced by women. There is also a range of recent anthropological scholarship on
explicitly female artistic practices that has gone some way to redressing the balance,
including anthropological work by Anna-Karina Hermkens (2013) and Wonu Veys (2017) on
Other ways of implicitly gendering the visual arts come in the form of the concept of “universal.” The word was supposed to capture the idea of a homogenous humanity, and the use of “he” or “man” has previously been used to include all humanity, as if “he” is not gendered but “she” is. A feminist critique of these once frequent usages by anthropologists, among others, centers on the idea that any position, idea, phenomenon, or worldview is both gendered and culturally specific, in that each of us understands our world in these terms. There is, by definition, no universal or transcendent understanding of a concept or phenomenon and the concept of man (or he) is necessarily and by definition gendered. An implicitly gendered understanding of art and craft and of how tacit, bodily, or craft knowledge is formed and transmitted from the inside is found in the work of both Tim Ingold (2013) and Trevor Marchand (2009). They connote a sense that their insights into this process of knowledge formation are ungendered and universal. Marchand’s insights into tacit, skills-based knowledge formation and dissemination are gained through the largely male and masculine-gendered fields of Djenné construction and traditional European woodwork. Ingold’s work on tacit knowledge, by contrast, is more fundamental and less specialist. His approach references Martin Heidegger’s philosophical investigation into being in space and time, and it can be observed of both Heidegger and Ingold that, while their approach and emphasis are located in time and space, there is little or no explicit awareness of how gender inflects knowledge or indeed being. These accounts are gendered in their assumption of a universality that is in fact masculine and their lack of reflection on gender as one of the various ways in which both being and knowledge are inflected.

In addition to the gender bias of art historians, philosophers, and most male anthropologists who investigate a single form of artistic production, there is also a pronounced gendering in anthropological writing on contemporary visual art practice. This comes in two forms. There are those anthropologists who write about visual art methodologies in order to further and elaborate anthropology-specific goals, and there are those who write about the type of contemporary visual art practice that has a high status and a high art-market value.

There is some overlap between the two. In the former category are anthropologists, such as Arnd Schneider, Roger Sansi, Kiven Strohm, Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov, and Christopher Wright, who explore contemporary visual art practices for an anthropological readership and also describe the common ground between art and anthropology. Anthropologists such as Schneider and Wright (2006) and Ssorin-Chaikov (2013) analyze visual art, extolling its virtues as a potential source of new methods for broader anthropological research. The latter category contains those anthropologists such as Sansi (2015) and Stuart Plattner (1996) who write about the type of contemporary visual art that is valued by the art market and surrounding national and international institutions. There is an implicit assumption that only the contemporary visual art practice seen in market-oriented biennials, galleries, and auction houses exists and that it is the only type of contemporary visual art practice worth studying. This is to be distinguished from many other forms of ethnography, in which a wider set of cultural agents are described and researched, not only those of the highest status. A less status oriented and thus less implicitly gendered account of contemporary visual art practice could be productive, rendering visible a wider variety of practices and new insight for both artists and anthropologists.

The art market is itself gender biased in favor of the specific greatness and genius of male artists, as understood and promulgated since the origins of the discipline of art history. This is especially true of the global art market, which disproportionately rewards the work of
European and North American male artists who are white. Comparing artists from similar backgrounds, the market value of men’s art far outstrips women’s. For example, Tracey Emin’s work is valued at 10 percent that of Damien Hirst, and Barbara Hepworth similarly fetches 10 percent of the value of Henry Moore.

The gender and ethnicity skew of the art market continues outside the market for North American and European art. Arguably the Australian Indigenous art market’s top 100, which has been analyzed by George Marcus and Fred Myers (1995), is an exception, but there is nevertheless a marked preponderance in favor of male artists as compared with women. While contemporary Pacific artists are immensely popular in Australia and the Pacific region, when viewing the situation more globally, and particularly from the point of view of North America or Europe, it is apparent that indigenous artists, and particularly women, face considerable barriers working in the (predominantly) Western-dominated visual arts scene. What we need are studies that reveal and critique the continuing gender bias of the art market and disciplines such as art history and anthropology.

Finally, there is also a marked gender imbalance in the numbers of visual artists who work with anthropology in interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary collaboration, both in the past and today. As in other art–science collaborations, while there are a number of women practitioners, most are overlooked by both the art market and art historians. The paintings of Marianne North, a collection of which is on permanent display at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and the ethnographic sculpture of Marguerite Milward are two such historical examples of visual art practices that remain marginal both to the art market and to art history.

Exceeding these historical examples in terms of esteem within the art world, a number of contemporary women artists working with anthropology and ethnographic subject matter have achieved renown. Artists such as Coco Fusco, Susan Hiller, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Tracey Moffatt, and Lisa Reihana work with a history of anthropology situated within colonization, oppression, and marginalization. Their work is shown internationally. These notable exceptions aside, though, most artists working with anthropology on critical transdisciplinary artwork are women and the vast majority remain marginal to the art market and other established art world institutions.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

