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Firebrands and Female Artists: 'Nasty Women of the Met'

by Winnie McCroy
EDGE Editor
Monday Mar 27, 2017



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A painting by Charlotte du Val d'Ognes.

If you've ever strolled through the Metropolitan Museum of Art and wondered about the stories behind the images, then Professor Andrew Lear's new tour, "[Nasty Women of the Met](#)," will give you all the dirt on the firebrands who toppled stereotypes and shattered glass ceilings, and the female artists who made their mark in a male-dominated industry.

"For a long time, I thought a slightly more feminist tour would find an audience at the Met, but I always wondered if there was enough material for it," said Lear, who conducts the Shady Ladies Tours. "I knew a few things I wanted to include, like the statues of the pharaoh Hatshepsut. But when our dear President called Hillary a 'nasty woman' and it trended quickly

on Twitter, I thought it was time to try again."

On this fun and informative two-hour tour, Lear takes you through New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art, pointing out examples of "nasty women" from ancient Egypt to today. Among the highlights is the tomb of the most powerful female pharaoh of Egypt, as well as a large collection of paintings by Mary Cassatt.



Pharaoh Hatshepsut

"There were not very many powerful women in ancient Greece, but there were many different powerful female figures in Egypt," said Lear. He spoke of the Pharaoh Hatshepsut, who reigned from 1479-58 B.C., established the wealth of the New Dynasty, and started the Valley of the Kings.

Lear said images of her were ambivalent regarding her gender, sometimes portraying her sporting a fake beard. While Hatshepsut was extraordinarily powerful, another female ruler, Cleopatra, was neither Egyptian, nor powerful. But that didn't stop her from making her mark on Roman history.

You'll learn about the mythical women who frightened ancient Greek men, including powerful goddesses like Athena with her helmet and shield; the Medusa; the Gorgons; and the Amazons. Lear said there actually were females who fought on horseback with bows and arrows on the plains of Eastern Europe. The Greeks' fascination with this prompted them to invent this mythical tribe of female fighters.

You'll be shocked to discover why all memories of the first official Roman Empress were struck from history! Julia Mamaea was one of the most powerful women in Roman history; her son, Alexander Severus, was named Emperor in 222 A.D., at the age of 14. As Imperial Consort, she was the first woman officially named Empress of Rome. But when they were assassinated together in 228 A.D., they were subjected to *damnatio memoriae*.

"By Senate vote, their memory is erased, and all images of them are destroyed," Lear explained. "Now, I can't swear the statue in the Met was damaged because of that, (although does look that way), because the stuff in the Met is all smashed, as it's very old. But during that whole Severan dynasty, women were extraordinarily powerful."

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Adelaide Labille-Guiard, with her two female students standing behind her.

Lear showcases other historical influencers like the founder of modern chemistry, David Lavoisier and his wife/lab partner Marie-Anne Paulze Lavoisier, of whom he said, "If you look at the portrait, you can see she's standing over him, and he's looking up, questioning. Theirs was very much a scientific partnership."

Countering the old adage, "to get into The Met, a woman has to take her clothes off," Lear devotes a portion of the tour to the woman artists from the Renaissance on.

"Not all women in portraits are someone's highbrow wife," said Lear with a laugh, noting that in several cultures, women had power in certain spheres. The Met is strong in examples of both American and French women, especially pre-Revolutionary 18th Century France, where a number of prominent female artists are represented.

These include Marie-Denise Villers, a post-Revolutionary artist who painted a portrait of fellow painter Charlotte du Val D'ognes. And the most famous is Adelaide Labille-Guiard, with her two female students standing behind her.

"At the time, only four women could be permitted to attend the Royal Academy, and she was one of the four," said Lear. "But there were a lot of other women artists. In 1777, they had 130 female artists in the Académie de Saint-Luc, an alternate salon. After the Revolution, Labille-Guiard stayed in France, and campaigned to get more women into the Academy."



A portrait by Mary Cassatt.

Looking at American art, you'll see John Singer Sargent's painting of Edith Minturn Stokes, portrayed in bicycling costume with her husband in the shadows behind her. An active philanthropist, Stokes was the President of the New York Kindergarten Association (very controversial at the time), and founder of a sewing school for immigrant women.

"Stokes was so clearly a powerful member of this couple, as seen by her husband shadowing her in the background," said Lear. "She is so frank, looking at you straight out of the painting, dressed in clothing made for activity. Her hat is jauntily balanced on her hip, like she could stride out of the painting and shake your hand."

Similarly controversial was Mary Cassatt, whose portraits of everyday women were revolutionary during a time when women and their work were not considered to hold very much value. Her upper crust Philadelphia family so disapproved that Cassatt changed her will to spite them, auctioning 15 paintings to raise money for female suffrage.

Cassatt's close friend, Louise Havemeyer, was one of The Met's main donors, bringing to their walls Degas, Manets, Courbets, and more. She was also a major suffragette who was once arrested protesting in front of the White House.

"The point has always been to be historical, because women having power is not new -- they have had a certain amount of power for a long time, and have been fighting for power for a long time," said Lear. "A lot of these works show the consciousness of the fact that women couldn't get power in traditional ways, but they were fighting for themselves and for other women."

Lear plans to give this tour every Saturday, along with his [Shady Ladies](#) and [Gay Secrets of the Met](#) tours, noting that it is selling incredibly well in the Trump era. He is currently putting tours together at the Boston Museum, and is thinking of taking his "Nasty Women" tour national, creating renditions of it at the National Portrait Gallery and other major museums.

Tickets for this tour are \$59 adults, \$49 seniors, \$35 for students with valid ID and Met members.

For more information or to schedule a tour, visit www.shadyladiestours.com.

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Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York.



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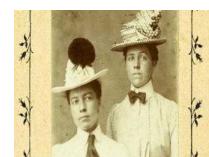
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