

Prologue

Anyone who wanted could cite plentiful examples of exceptional women in the world today: it's simply a matter of looking for them.

Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 1405

She looks at herself, again and again. She's in London or Paris or Helsinki or Sydney. She's in a village by the sea or a hamlet in the mountains, in a room, a studio, a flat, a place, however small, she can call her own. She's a mother, she's childless, she's straight, she's queer, in a relationship or relationships, happily celibate or filled with a longing for something or someone just out of reach. She's finally found some time alone, perhaps even a moment of peace, even though there's a clamour in the streets: modernity is hurtling towards her.

She's in competition with history, which has always been dismissive of her power. Until very recently, museums wouldn't buy her work, art historians wouldn't acknowledge her and commercial galleries would only rarely represent her. She's a miracle, a marvel, a mystic, a seductress, a changeling, a visionary, a man-hater, a freak; she's never considered normal. She knows that no two women are the same. She knows that she has always been here, there and everywhere, but for reasons that baffle her, people still refuse to *see* her. Even now, decades or centuries after she has died, her magnificent achievements remain largely unsung; there are still countless museums, galleries and collectors who do not appreciate her worth, who do not rate her, who are

not interested in the many stories she has to tell. She still has so far to travel.

For centuries, she couldn't enter the academy, even though she and her sisters never stopped pounding on its doors; nor was she allowed to paint anyone naked, not even herself. She couldn't vote and had little or no governance of her own body. She was all too often defined by the men in her life even if they meant nothing to her. She constantly struggled to support herself financially. She was mocked, excluded, ignored. She was laughed at, told what to wear, what to think, how to move through the world. Her appearance was always commented upon. If she was beautiful, her morals, her intellectual depth, her innate skills, all were questioned; if, according to the conventions of the day, she was considered plain, she was pitied and patronised. If she didn't conform, she was assumed to be mad. If she didn't have children, she was frustrated, frigid, grief-stricken, cold. If she did bear children, more often than not she disappeared for a while or forever; it was a rare husband who understood her need to paint. If she juggled art and motherhood, she was super-human. Time and again she had to work early in the morning or late in the evening, as during the day she had to run a household or earn money. She worked so hard it's a wonder she didn't fall asleep on her feet. She scrutinised herself over and over again.

From the moment she was born, she was told who to *be*.

She paints a self-portrait because, as a subject, she is always available. (This is putting it mildly.) She's been barred from so many other places, so many other bodies. Sometimes, she's unclear about why and who she's painting her picture for. (Does anyone really know what a painting is *for*?) All she knows is that something compels her to look at herself for hours on end, for reasons that have nothing to do with vanity - quite the opposite. What draws her back to her reflection again and again is the raw self-scrutiny that stems from unknowing; from the confusion

she's experienced between the reality of living in her body and the lies that she's been told about it that have been drummed into her since the moment she arrived on earth. She looks at herself in order to study what she's made of, to understand herself anew and, from time to time, to rage against the very thing that confines and defines her. She paints herself to develop her skills, to converse with her contemporaries and with art history. In the act of painting herself she makes clear that she is someone worth looking at, someone worth acknowledging. Her paintings assume shapes that she does not always predict. Against all odds, she discovers what she is capable of.

The Deceits of the Past

When you're an artist, you're searching for freedom. You never find it because there ain't any freedom. But at least you search for it. In fact, art should be, could be called 'the search'.

Alice Neel

The museums of the world are filled with paintings of women - by men. Ask around and you'll find that most people struggle to name even one female artist from before the twentieth century. Yet women have always made art, even though, over the centuries, every discouragement was - and, in many ways, still is - placed in their way.

In the words of the nineteenth-century writer and art critic Vernon Lee: 'There is no end to the deceits of the past.' The story told by traditional art history is that, despite the occasional complication, creativity is a relatively straightforward and progressive affair. According to this tale, since the first cave paintings, one artistic movement has segued neatly into the next and each new artist has in some ways improved upon the one who came before

him. Yes, *him*. Western art history began in sixteenth-century Italy, when the individuals who made paintings and sculptures became famous as artists, not just as craftsmen. It continued to prosper in the following centuries thanks, generally speaking, to the scholarship of privileged white men - men who, despite their often original insights and scholarship, were blinkered: they tended, with few exceptions, to write about the achievements of other white men. Until very recently, the idea that women have always made art was rarely cited as a possibility. Yet they have - and of course continue to do so - often against tremendous odds and restrictions, from laws to religion and convention, the pressures of family and public disapproval. Apart from the occasional mention of these trailblazers by male historians, it is thanks to feminist art historians - such as Renée Ater, Frances Borzello, Janine Burke, Whitney Chadwick, Sheila ffolliott, Frima Fox Hofrichter, Mary Garrard, Germaine Greer, Kellie Jones, Geeta Kapur, Lucy R. Lippard, Linda Nochlin, Rozsika Parker, Griselda Pollock, Arlene Raven, Gayatri Sinha, Eleanor Tufts and others - that the achievements of these artists have at last been given their due.

Feminism has shaken up how art history has been read and written. For the first time, artists who were previously ignored, patronised, marginalised or ostracised due to their gender, race, sexuality or class, are being recognised for their originality and resilience. The infinitely varied work of these artists embodies the fact that there is more than one way to understand our planet, more than one way to live in it and more than one way to make art about it. This new art history celebrates and champions difference - the very lifeblood of art. When I began researching self-portraits, despite being all too aware of the reality of gender exclusion, I was staggered at the sheer depth and variety of paintings made by women over the past five centuries who, it is fair to say, have, until recently, been erased from the story of art. The fact of their existence makes very clear that a segregation of the history of

creativity - or anything else, for that matter - no longer makes any sense.

Given the formidable restrictions placed in their way (more of that later), it's understandable that throughout history women have made fewer works of art than men. But if you took some accounts as gospel, you'd be forgiven for thinking that women only started making art after World War II - and not many of them, at that.

It's important though to stress that the existence of pre-modern women artists was not suddenly and miraculously discovered in the mid-to-late twentieth century. Although scarce, women's creativity has, in fact, been noted since the beginnings of written history. The Roman historian Pliny the Elder - who was to die as a result of the eruption of the volcano Vesuvius that destroyed Pompeii in AD 79 - even asserted that the art of painting *originated* with a woman. In his *Natural History* (AD 77), he recounts how the sculptor Butades of Corinth discovered portraiture around 650 BCE thanks to his daughter Kora of Sicyon, 'who, being deeply in love with a young man about to depart on a long journey, traced the profile of his face, as thrown upon the wall by the light of the lamp'. According to this tale, her father then filled in the outlines with clay and modelled the features of the young suitor - and so created the first portrait as a sculptural relief.

The story endured. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, depictions of Kora tracing the outlines of her lover's shadow - often titled *The Origin of Painting* or *The Art of Painting* - became popular. But Kora is not the only woman Pliny mentions; he cites six other women artists from antiquity: Aristarete, Calypso, Irene, Olympia, Timarete and Iaia of Cyzicus; the last was a Roman painter from the first century BCE, who according to the historian 'remained single all her life' and rendered 'a portrait of herself, executed with the aid of a mirror' - the earliest mention of a self-portrait made

with a mirror.* In the late twelfth or early thirteenth century the German illuminator Claricia depicted herself in a wide-sleeved dress swinging from the letter 'Q' like a trapeze artist. Although she's airborne, any sense of danger is undermined by her very evident sense of humour. Her name, in tiny letters, frames her face. It's a rare, exuberant image of a medieval woman thumbing her nose at decorum. You can almost hear the sound of her distant laughter echoing across nine centuries.

In the fourteenth century, some of the women mentioned by Pliny resurface in the Florentine historian Giovanni Boccaccio's collection of 104 historical and mythical biographies, *De Mulieribus Claris* (Concerning Famous Women, 1361-2), the first book in Western literature devoted to the achievements of women - and it also includes the earliest representations of a woman painting her self-portrait. A French version of the book from 1402 includes a beautiful ink-and-colour parchment illustration, *Marcia Painting her Self-Portrait*.

The unknown artist has depicted Marcia - who Boccaccio possibly based on Iaia of Cyzicus - seated at a desk, a convex mirror held in her left hand; her right hand holds a brush, with which she is painting the lips of her self-portrait, as if to stress that Marcia's powers of articulation resided in paint, not spoken words. A small palette, which at first glance looks like a hand mirror, is placed to her right, next to two brushes. The image is rendered in patterns of warm ochres, reds and yellows. This tiny image is, remarkably,

* For the sake of clarity and consistency, after mentioning their full names, I refer to the women artists I focus on by their first names. In Ancient Greece and Rome and then well into the Middle Ages women were often known by one name; from the late Middle Ages until well into the 20th century, every time she married, a woman would take the name of her husband. While not all of the women I discuss married, most of them did and some of them changed their name numerous times. A woman's first name was often the one constant in her life.

a triple portrait: we see Marcia at the easel, represented in her self-portrait and reflected in her mirror. That it was created in 1404, around thirty years or so before Jan van Eyck painted what is considered to be the first self-portrait in oils, makes it even more original.

However, despite the positive focus of Boccaccio's book - he believes, to a certain extent, that women should be allowed to choose the direction of their lives - the historian was obviously unconvinced about the potential of women artists. With staggering pomposity, he opines that 'the art of painting is mostly alien to the feminine mind and cannot be attained without that great intellectual concentration which women, as a rule, are very slow to acquire'.

The City of Women

We can only imagine how this might have made a female reader feel. One told us. Christine de Pizan, who was born around 1364, was a French poet, scholar, philosopher and writer of what today we might call experimental fiction. After the death of her husband in 1390, she became the first woman in Western letters to support herself, her three children and her mother by writing. Her wildly original defence of women's talents and potential, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405),* embodies the medieval literary tradition of the 'dream vision', which was popularised by Dante Alighieri in his *Divine Comedy* (c. 1320). Because of the very nature of dreams - absurd, non-linear, fantastical - writers used them as a springboard to explore ideas free from the constraints of convention and logic. *The Book of the City of Ladies* opens with the narrator wondering 'why on earth it was that so many men, both clerks and others,

* She also wrote a sequel: *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*.

have said, and continue to say and write such damning things about women and their ways'. Pondering the question, she slumbers 'sunk in unhappy thoughts', but is startled awake by a beam of light, which reveals itself as three virtuous women, Reason, Rectitude and Justice. They have come to comfort Christine and tell her that 'those who speak ill of women do more harm to themselves than they do to the actual women they slander'. They explain that she has been chosen to construct a walled city, 'to ensure that, in future, all worthy ladies and valiant women are protected from those who attack them. The female sex has been left defenceless for a long time now, like an orchard without a wall, and bereft of a champion to take up arms in order to protect it.'

They propose that only 'ladies who are of good reputation and worthy of praise' will be allowed through the city's gates. After much discussion, they choose around 200 women from history - ironically, many of them possibly sourced from Boccaccio's *Concerning Famous Women* - who will lead by example. They include warriors, nuns, priestesses, saints, scholars, inventors - and artists: Irene, a painter from Ancient Greece whose skills surpassed all others; her compatriot Thamaris whose 'brilliance has not been forgotten', and the aforementioned Marcia the Roman, whose talent 'outstripped all men'. Christine is also vocal in her praise of her contemporary Anastasia, who she describes as 'so good at painting decorative borders and background landscapes for miniatures that there is no craftsman who can match her in the whole of Paris, even though that's where the finest in the world can be found'.

Reason responds drily to Christine that: 'I can well believe it, my dear Christine. Anyone who wanted could cite plentiful examples of exceptional women in the world today: it's simply a matter of looking for them.'

None of Anastasia's work has survived - or if it has, it is not attributed to her.

Their Little Hands, So Tender and So White

Arguably the originator of art history as we know it was the Tuscan painter, architect and biographer Giorgio Vasari. He was responsible for writing the best-known biography of artists, the *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, in 1550; it was added to and re-issued in 1568. Of the 300 or so artists he discusses, the only woman he mentions in the first edition is the Bolognese sculptor Properzia de' Rossi, who was famously so skilful that she sculpted a Crucifixion from a peach stone and carved a hundred heads onto a cherry stone. In the 1568 edition, Vasari mentions thirteen women, including the prolific self-portraitist Sofonisba Anguissola - more on her later - and her sisters, and the self-taught nun Plautilla Nelli. With an air of astonishment, he writes: 'It is an extraordinary thing that in all those arts and all those exercises wherein at any time women have thought fit to play a part in real earnest, they have always become most excellent and famous in no common way, as one might easily demonstrate by an endless number of examples . . .'

Despite acknowledging that 'in no other age, for certain, has it been possible to see this better than in our own, wherein women have won the highest fame', Vasari observes that:

Nor have they been too proud to set themselves with their little hands, so tender and so white, as if to wrest from us the palm of supremacy, to manual labours, braving the roughness of marble and the unkindly chisels, in order to attain to their desire and thereby win fame; as did, in our own day, Properzia de' Rossi of Bologna, a young woman excellent not only in household matters, like the rest of them, but also in sciences without number, so that all the men, to say nothing of the women, were envious of her.

Vasari also, however, unwittingly pre-empts twentieth-century feminist theories in his understanding of the structural exclusion of women from art. Writing about Sister Plautilla, he declares that she could have created something even more wonderful if she 'had enjoyed, as men do, advantages for studying, devoting herself to drawing, and copying living and natural objects'.

In the following years, other writers followed Vasari's example by attempting to catalogue the best artists of the day. In northern Europe, Karel van Mander's *Schilder-boeck* (Book of Painters) was published in 1604; he mentions no women artists. However, in 1718 a three-volume sequel of sorts by the artist and historian Arnold Houbraken, titled *Groote Schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (The Great Theatre of Netherlandish Painters and Paintresses), mentions twenty-three women artists, a reflection of this small country's influence on the global stage: it was a leading economic power that had the highest literacy rate in the world, unequalled religious tolerance and certain freedoms for women.

Women artists were mentioned by art historians well into the nineteenth century, though not nearly as often, of course, as male artists. Many of these books and articles were by women: this did not mean, despite their sisterly intentions, that they were automatically much wiser than their male colleagues. In 1859, Elizabeth Ellet's ambitious, yet very misleadingly titled *Women Artists in All Ages and Countries* was published: her idea of 'all countries' only includes those found in the northern hemisphere and she repeatedly falls into the kind of platitudes that reinforce the fallacy that all women have 'tender natures'.

In their ground-breaking book of 1981, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, the art historians Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock observe that something strange happened in the twentieth century: that a focus on the achievements of women artists dwindled just when women were beginning to practise art in far greater

numbers than they ever had before. Their theory is backed up by two of the most popular art-history textbooks of the twentieth century: E.H. Gombrich's *Story of Art* (1961) and H.W. Janson's *History of Art* (1962). In their first editions neither of them mentions a single woman artist. How to explain this? It's hard not to see it as a sign of how threatened men, even unconsciously, have been - and in many cases continue to be - by women finding their voices and expressing something about their place in the world.

Cabinet of Curiosities

Over the past 500 years or so, there are seemingly countless stories of women struggling to be accepted as serious artists in the face of mass exclusion. When, in 1747, the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna acquired the earliest known self-portrait from 1554 by the great Italian artist Sofonisba Anguissola, it was considered so astonishing that a woman should be an artist, that her painting was hung not in the art galleries but in the *Schatzkammer* or *Kunstkammer* - the Cabinet of Curiosities - and this despite the fact that, alongside her role as a lady-in-waiting, she had worked as a painter in the court of Philip II of Spain. According to *Thieme-Becker*, in the sixteenth century alone there were thirty female artists practising in Italy and in the fifteenth century about ninety. Tragically, much, if not most, of their work is now lost. An extreme example of a woman disappearing from the history books is that of the Venetian writer and artist Irene di Spilimbergo, whose gifts, when she died in 1559 at the age of nineteen, were such that she was praised not only by Vasari but by no fewer than 140 poets in around 300 Italian and Latin poems. None of her work has survived, or if it has, it must be hanging in a gallery or a home, assumed to be by someone else - most likely a man. Likewise, no works by Irene's contemporary Lucrezia Quistelli (1541-94) have survived with watertight

attributions. In Holland, the paintings of Judith Leyster, one of the most prolific portrait artists in seventeenth-century Holland, were, soon after her death and until the late nineteenth-century, mostly attributed to her rival Frans Hals. Also in Holland, where the guilds kept organised records of their members, Sara van Baalbargen is listed in 1631 as an oil painter, but no works survive, or at least none are attributed to her, today. In recent years, New York's Metropolitan Museum discovered that a portrait of a young woman drawing, which had long assumed to be by the eighteenth-century painter Jacques-Louis David, was in fact by Marie-Denise Villers (1774-1821). The list goes on.

History is a story told in words: if women aren't mentioned in books, they may as well have never existed. Although there is far more awareness today about history's blind spots, the erasure persists. Only 27 women out of 318 artists are included in the re-issue of H.W. Janson's textbook, *History of Art* - a book that has sold more than four million copies in fifteen languages - which, as mentioned earlier, is up from zero. However, Janson himself, who died in 1982, was fully aware that art history is a story ripe for re-writing. In his introduction to the 1962 edition - the one that included no mention of women - he wrote:

There are no 'plain facts' in the history of art - or in the history of anything else, for that matter, only degrees of plausibility. Every statement, no matter how fully documented, is subject to doubt and remains a 'fact' only so long as nobody questions it. To doubt what has been taken for granted and to find a more plausible interpretation of the evidence, is every scholar's task [. . .] The history of art is too vast a field for anyone to encompass all of it with equal competence.

Despite Janson's admission of fallibility, it rarely seemed to occur

to the art historians of the past that their views might reflect the conventions of their gender, race, class, country and sexuality or that there might be ways of creatively responding to the world that didn't fit into their narrow remit - by women, for example, who hadn't been taught at an academy or who had worked in isolation or for their own pleasure, or who were mothers who made art while their children were sleeping or who were uninterested in modernity. The way art is made is not neat because the human mind isn't; it's limitless in its variations. Art can reflect religious, spiritual and political beliefs, private mythologies, secret obsessions, a fascination with a body or the bodies of others, sexuality, the past or the future. It can be a site of reverie or rebellion; a form of propaganda or an idiosyncratic way of responding to the world: its openness to what it can be is one of its - if not its greatest - sources of power. It can be a response to anything and made anywhere by anyone: it can give permission to the silenced to speak or create a lexicon for the illiterate; it can lend the world shape and make it graspable to those who feel that it is out of reach.

The Fault in Our Stars?

In 1971 the late art historian Linda Nochlin's ground-breaking essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' was published in the American magazine *ARTnews*. In an interview with Maura Reilly she explained that the essay came about after a conversation she had in 1970 with a famous gallerist, Richard Feigen. He told Nochlin that he would love to show women artists but 'couldn't find any good ones'. He then famously asked her: 'Why are there no great women artists?' Her answer analysing the structural exclusion of women artists from the mainstream is worth quoting at length:

. . . things as they are and as they have been, in the arts as in a hundred other areas, are stultifying, oppressive, and discouraging to all those, women among them, who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class and, above all, male. The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education - education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs, and signals. The miracle is, in fact, that given the overwhelming odds against women, or blacks, that so many of both have managed to achieve so much sheer excellence, in those bailiwicks of white masculine prerogative like science, politics, or the arts.

Linda Nochlin's words are all the more powerful because her argument is grounded in fact. Women's absence from art history is not a theory and it has nothing to do with innate or gendered talent. If a woman - a person - isn't encouraged or allowed to study, if she has no political or financial independence or day-to-day freedoms, how can she possibly compete with a man, who - if he is talented, white and has enough money - has access to pretty much anything he wants?

The restrictions faced by women meant that, generally speaking, they *did* make less art than men - but who could blame them?*

Until well into the twentieth century, unless they joined a convent, women were expected to be wives and mothers, not artists or writers; they had no political agency and, unless their father was a painter, they had very little to no access to any kind of artistic training. As it was in men's financial, cultural and, we can assume,

* It is important to clarify here that I'm focusing on women artists in the European tradition: in many Indigenous cultures around the world, women's creativity has been, and continues to be, central to individual and community self-expression.

emotional interests to discourage women to pursue a career - she's no use in the bedroom, kitchen or nursery if she's busy in the studio - for centuries, women were denied access to materials, to study and to the essential space and time every artist needs to nurture their talent. Although women were active in the Middle Ages in crafts and illumination, apart from superstars such as the polymath Hildegard of Bingen, they tend to be anonymous. In the Renaissance, women were forbidden to work on scaffolds, which meant they couldn't be commissioned to make frescoes; public art schools for female students didn't come into existence until the nineteenth century and even if they studied with a private tutor, in the main they were forbidden to work from life models. The fear abounded that once they were allowed into the art schools, who knew where it would end: their demands for equality were understood to be akin to anarchism, socialism, vegetarianism and atheism. But a lack of access wasn't the only thing stopping women from pursuing a career as a painter or a sculptor. No artist works in a vacuum: they push against what has come before, re-inventing their language time and again. Without the financial and critical support of collectors, curators and art historians, and the encouragement that being part of a group of like-minded artists affords, the work of even a great painter or sculptor can disappear into obscurity. More often than not, this has been the case with the work of female artists. Even today, despite the fact that many more women than men graduate from art schools, commercial galleries, on the whole, represent significantly more male than female artists, and museum collections and displays are heavily weighted towards the achievements of men.

Yet, somehow, over the last five centuries countless women rose, often magnificently, to the challenges they faced and many of them became trailblazers. Their exclusion from certain genres meant that they excelled in the ones that welcomed them: botanical and scientific studies, still life and self-portraiture. They might not

be allowed to study a naked man, but a flower, a table arrangement or their own face was another matter. If she had access to a mirror, a palette, an easel and paint, a woman could endlessly reflect on her face, and, by extension, her place in the world.

A Self-Portrait Is Never One Thing

With very few exceptions, and until relatively recently, historians have focused on masculine achievement - not just in art, but in pretty much everything: from politics, exploration, empire-building and warmongering, to literature, music and philosophy. Women, relegated to the hearth, the nursery or the convent, have long been considered inconsequential. Even now, education tends to highlight the stories of white men who excelled in their fields. Given their invisibility, the act of female self-portraiture - a woman declaring that her existence is something worth recording - is one of radical defiance: 'Look at me,' she is saying, 'I exist. I have something to say.'

As psychoanalysis has made so clear, human beings move through life dictated to by a mess of conscious and unconscious memories, acts and feelings. The language of art is a reflection of this: it's one of slippages, ambiguities and contradictions that are communicated via images, which are, by their very nature, indeterminate. (A rose or a dog, for example, might have very specific meanings for a seventeenth-century artist, and very different ones for the person looking at it 200 years later.) Artists are rarely good at explaining precisely what they are trying to communicate - and why should they be, as they've decided to say what they want to say in images? In the midst of creating a painting, shapes, colours and composition can mutate and regroup as the artist moves between intention, intuition and imagination, the filter of memory and the physical world. As such, the meaning of a picture is rarely

singular: often, it's as multi-layered and as mysterious to the artist as it is to the person looking at it. Despite portraiture's relationship to physical reality - how someone looks - this element of mystery is as applicable to a self-portrait as it is to an abstract painting.

A self-portrait can be both idiosyncratic and yet also say something more generally about the human condition - a reflection not only of what someone looks like but who they are and what they think and feel about the world. It can be used to signify the artist's religiosity or irreverence or it can function as a calling card to show off a painter's skills - someone who can accurately render flowers, cloth, skin, eyes, personality and a landscape in one picture is someone worth hiring - or it can be a coded protest, a riddle or an allegory, a form of propaganda or an intensely private form of self-expression that was never meant to be sold or even to be seen by anyone other than the artist. In our contemporary moment, of course, 'selfies' are ubiquitous, but they take but a moment to make - in the past, a single image of yourself could take months to create.

Unless an artist penned a clear statement about what they intended to do in a painting, it's impossible to know exactly what prompted them - all we have to go on are the richly coded visual messages they have sent to us across the centuries. Pictures are made to be looked at but they can never, ultimately, be fully deciphered; this, to my mind, is why we keep returning to them again and again - their riches are infinite.

Despite the very real social and political restrictions the women in the following pages faced, the paintings they have left behind are proof that the imagination can roam across vast distances in space and time - and that, in many ways, they are as profoundly interesting, and often as moving, today as they were in the very different places and times in which they were made.

The title of this book is a blunt summation of some of the objects a woman needed to make a self-portrait. Whatever the constraints

of her private life, if she was able to find some time alone and had access to paint, something to paint on and a mirror to observe herself in, she was at liberty to examine - and to represent - herself. Interestingly, though, women rarely included mirrors in their self-portraits, perhaps because for centuries the sin of vanity was embodied, again and again, by a woman holding one. It's possibly why so many women chose to portray themselves looking out at us: while the artist may have been looking at a mirror to make the painting, once it's completed, we become the mirror's substitute.

I have selected a smallish group of self-portraits as a sampler, in a sense, of the great diversity - across time and geography - of artists whose stories deserve to be told and whose stories, in particular, fascinate me personally. This book is clearly not encyclopaedic: in many ways, it's meandering and personal and the biographical details of many of the women are sketchy. For every artist I discuss, there are countless more hovering in the wings (and occasionally centre stage) whose lives and works also deserve attention. Of course, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, women created and continue to create self-portraits with a variety of media, in particular photography, but for the purposes of this book, I'm focusing on paintings before the twenty-first century, as the role of the self-portrait in the age of the selfie requires a book of its own.

The artists I have chosen hailed from Australia, England, Finland, France, Germany, India, Italy, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Switzerland, Ukraine and the United States; they lived from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries and their artistic language evolved from European traditions. How did they become artists and what does their self-representation reveal about the times in which those images were produced? Who were their families and how supportive were they? How, when so many of them weren't allowed to enrol in art schools and were either barred or discouraged from joining academies, did they receive training?

What were the different opportunities available to them? How did marriage and motherhood affect their creativity and ambitions or, conversely, how were they treated if they chose not to marry or bear children? Who bought their work and where is it now? Is it on view? This book is not simply intended as a study of a selection of paintings and artists but the story of the societies that produced them.

These women exemplify the bravery, skill and innovation that was required to become a professional artist when the odds were very much stacked against them. It's hard enough to be an artist - but it's infinitely more difficult if you're a woman. Why then, when it was - and is - so difficult to make a living as an artist, did so many women persist? (We can only imagine their mental robustness.) The words that H  l  ne Bertaux, the founder of the Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs (Union of Women Painters and Sculptors), uttered in Paris in 1881 are still, in many ways, as relevant today as they were almost 150 years ago: 'The woman artist is an ignored, little understood force, delayed in its rise! A social prejudice of sorts weighs upon her; and yet, every year, the number of women who dedicate themselves to art is swelling with fearsome speed.'

While most of the artists I discuss are known to readers with a specialist interest in art history, only a few of them - such as Frida Kahlo and, more recently, Artemisia Gentileschi - are familiar to the wider public. But one thing unites all of them: their life force. It is hard to resist their tales of rebellion, adventure, revolution, travel and tragedy. These are stories about women who were born either into enormous wealth or terrible poverty; who started out as circus performers, lace-makers or artist's models before picking up a brush; women who, in their journey to become artists, didn't care for the conventional roles that society ascribed to them. They were employed by kings and queens as propagandists or created their masterpieces as acts of political rebellion in order to stimulate

social change; some were central to artistic movements whereas others worked in isolation, indifferent to modernity. They were communists and socialists, monarchists and conservatives; some were uninterested in politics but for others, it was their lifeblood. Some led lives of monogamous, heterosexual virtue, whereas others had numerous sexual partners, irrespective of gender. As to the sexuality of pre-twentieth-century artists, we can only speculate. Many of them had to deal with illness and injury and died tragically young, while others lived to a great age. Despite the fact that they're all women, the differences between these artists - joyfully, to my mind - renders the idea of a singular feminine sensibility obsolete. The one thing that absolutely links them is their shared desire to try to make sense of the world with a paintbrush.

But for now, our story begins in the early sixteenth century with the tale of an apparently demure young woman who, in the quiet of her studio, was to make a very radical statement.