I enjoyed reading Anne Gordon Atkinson’s article “Women in Art.” However, in her admirable attempt to bring attention to those women artists who have been largely ignored and to stress the possible underlying causes for the lack of success of women artists, she has not acknowledged the recognition that many women have achieved in writing and in the visual arts. Names that immediately come to mind are Margaret Atwood, Jane Austen, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the Brontë sisters, Pearl S. Buck, Emily Carr, Daphne du Maurier, Margaret Laurence, Georgia O’Keeffe, Ayn Rand, and Mary Shelley. Feminists who criticize and deplore the social conditions that kept women oppressed through the centuries often ignore the stupendous achievements of women who have risen above those same conditions and have achieved fame and recognition during their lifetimes.

In spite of contemporary Western practices of creating images based primarily on sex appeal and charisma—a short-lived (one hopes) phenomenon that plagues both women and men—the women listed above achieved recognition on the basis of their artistic talents. Other women (such as Bette Davis, Ella Fitzgerald, Helen Hayes, Katharine Hepburn, Joni Mitchell, Nana Mouskouri, Jesse Norman, Beverly Sills, Jessica Tandy, and Kiri te Kanawa), in contrast to many of their contemporaries, have managed to avoid the pitfalls of this “Hollywoodization” and have achieved critical and commercial success on the basis of their talents and skills as artists and performers.

Atkinson writes of “the great fear of criticism and being vulnerably exposed that most women experience when engaged in creative work” (8). This perception is not necessarily shared by all artists. People in general and artists in particular fear criticism when they do not feel confident about their work. Men are not immune to this very human insecurity. In my own limited experience as a writer and more extensive background in handicrafts, I have never felt that my work was being judged on the basis of my sex. Any praise or criticism I have received has been based on the quality (or lack of it) of the work in question. This comment is not made to belittle the experiences women have endured as a result of misogynist and chauvinistic attitudes. These attitudes have been rampant throughout the centuries. Indeed, Poet Laureate of England Robert Southey admonished Charlotte Brontë for aspiring to engage in activities beyond a woman’s “proper duties.” “Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life,” he wrote, “and it ought not to be.” Fortunately, Charlotte Brontë did not

---

1. Quoted by Joan Goulianos in by a Woman Writ: Literature from Six Centuries by and about Women (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973) xv.
allow her spirit and talent to be suppressed by Southey’s opinion. Today in the West such chauvinism is for the most part waning. Women need not fear attacks on or criticism of their work in sexist terms, at least not at a societal level.

Atkinson’s choice of Germaine Greer as a spokesperson for women artists raises the issue of role models, whom we must select with careful consideration. Greer’s “Magnificent Exception” to the relative absence of celebrated women in art history is Artemisia Gentileschi, a seventeenth-century Italian painter whose most graphic and emotive works portray atrocious acts of brutality and violence by stocky, well-muscled women against naked or decapitated men. Although her technique may have been masterful and her style original and innovative, Gentileschi’s subject matter was representative of humanity at its most inhuman. Greer apparently has a limited perception of the ultimate potential of women as equal partners with men. In her concluding remarks, she states, “A woman knows that she is to be womanly and she also knows that for a drawing or a painting to be womanish is contemptible. The choices are before her: to deny her sex, and become an honorary man, . . . or to accept her sex and with it second place, as the artist’s consort, in fact or in fantasy.” Fortunately, most of this generation’s women in the West—conditions in the so-called Third World and the Middle East are considerably more deplorable—enjoy a broader range of options and have a much more fulfilling destiny than either of the above options implies.

On page 8 of “Women in Art,” Atkinson quotes Virginia Woolf: “And women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time.” I think that Riane Eisler would disagree. In her landmark book *The Chalice and the Blade*, Eisler presents what she calls “Cultural Transformation theory,” which proposes that human culture is based on two models: the dominator model and the partnership model. Eisler states that “the original direction in the mainstream of our cultural evolution was toward partnership but that, following a period of chaos and almost total cultural disruption, there occurred a fundamental social shift.” The prevailing religious ideology in prehistorical societies included feminine symbols (i.e., goddesses) and cultivation of the sustaining interdependencies and interconnectedness of all living beings. Despite the predominance of female symbols, men were not in a position of subjugation and vulnerability. These societies, which were based on partnership and cooperation, were violently suppressed by roving invaders. As a result, the “power of the blade” began its domination. “For the last time in recorded history,” Eisler relates, “a spirit of harmony between women and men as joyful and equal participants in life appears to pervade” in prehistoric societies prior to the invasions. Eisler’s statement is a reflection on past

---

mistakes rather than a prediction of the future. Indeed, that harmony is not buried deep in our past. Eisler seems to share the Bahá’í vision of a future in which recorded history will document peaceful coexistence among all of God’s creation and partnership between women and men.

Atkinson also cites Woolf to illustrate “the great difficulty women have in obtaining the necessary freedom from household details and economic cares in order to justify a calling such as writing” (7). Bahá’í women need not feel paralyzed by the conflict that many women have faced when choosing between a career and their families. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s guidance is clear: “O ye loving mothers, know ye that in God’s sight, the best of all ways to worship Him is to educate the children and train them in all the perfections of humankind; and no nobler deed than this can be imagined.”\(^5\) This explicit statement delivers supportive guidance and upholds the crucial importance of the role of the woman in the family and in society. All other endeavors follow in their proper place and time, but nothing must interfere with the divine ordinance to

suckle your children from their infancy with the milk of a universal education, and rear them so that from their earliest days, within their inmost heart, their very nature, a way of life will be firmly established that will conform to the divine Teachings in all things.

For mothers are the first educators, the first mentors; and truly it is the mothers who determine the happiness, the future greatness, the courteous ways and learning and judgement, the understanding and the faith of their little ones.\(^6\)

Clearly, a woman’s prime responsibility must be to her children until they become more independent and no longer require the special nurturing and care that a mother provides in her children’s infancy and early years. The father plays an important role throughout this period, of course, and when children reach school age and increasingly interact with the “outside” world, it can only be hoped that the strong and supportive family unit from which they have emerged will have prepared them for the challenges associated with growing up in a complex world.

The family unit is the foundation for society and, in the West, we witness with sadness the consequences of the destabilization of that foundation. When people and institutions begin to recognize the nobility that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá speaks of in describing the role of the mother, women will not feel that they need to “obtain freedom” from their household responsibilities. Indeed, more and more women will choose to pursue full-time motherhood as a noble and unique service to humanity. Rather than creating obstacles for women as they pursue motherhood, social institutions will be structured to accommodate this task, one

\(^{5}\) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, trans. Marzieh Gail et al. (Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1978) 139.

\(^{6}\) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Selections 126.
of the most important that a woman can undertake in the fulfillment of her personal ambitions. We will no longer hear full-time mothers referred to as “not working.” We will no longer hear the apologetic tone in the voice of a full-time mother when she is asked to identify her occupation.

Those women who choose to follow careers in the arts or sciences will feel free to do so in a non-competitive environment because they have made the choice which is right for them at that time in their lives. They will not need “to justify a calling such as writing.” Rather, women and men will be encouraged to pursue their chosen endeavors with vigor and to “seize the prize and excel in the field, so that it will be proven and made manifest that the penetrative influence of the Word of God in this new Dispensation hath caused women to be equal with men. . . .” The time is indeed coming when, as Atkinson states, “women and men will understand each other, will be mutually supportive, will allow creativity to flourish and to enrich our communities” (10). Human beings will discover that the essence of being human is an intricate balance of those feminine and masculine qualities that allow us to acquire knowledge of, to worship, and to serve our Creator and that provide us with the tools for forging through cooperative efforts a peaceful and harmonious society based on love and respect for all living things.

ROXANNE LALONDE

---