

Reading Feminism in Modern Tapestry's Archive

K. L. H. Wells

MODERN TAPESTRY IS A RELATIVELY UNEXAMINED ARTISTIC PRACTICE, but its archive reveals two lacunae in the history of modernism that can be addressed through a feminist reading of archives and an archival reading of feminism. The first lacuna is the role of women as not only artists but also producers of art, more broadly conceived. As weavers and “publishers” of tapestry, as widows and heirs who promoted male artists’ work, as dealers and curators who placed art in collections and exhibitions, and as critics who explained art to broader audiences, women contributed substantially to the production of modern tapestries. The creation of modern tapestry thus illuminates the roles of numerous makers beyond the narrowly defined position of the authorial artist, and a feminist reading of the archive can expose these marginalized forms of agency. Evidence of modern tapestry is often obscured within archives devoted to other types of artistic practice, just as the evidence of women’s work often gets buried in the papers of male protagonists. In my research, I have repeatedly had to pinpoint the lone folder devoted to tapestry in a modern artist’s vast records or explore the uncatalogued papers of tapestry makers stored in private homes, weaving together the larger story of modern tapestry from numerous and scattered archival threads.

The second lacuna regards the role of the feminist art movement in transforming art-historical narratives, for feminists have not only recovered the marginalized practices of women artists but also worked to marginalize practices that did not fit their political agenda. I argue that modern tapestry

