2017 WSG Workshop ‘The Fruitful Body’

WSG is pleased to announce that its next annual workshop will be held at the Foundling Museum on 6th May 2017. Our keynote speaker will be art historian Dr Karen Hearn, whose paper will reflect her work on seventeenth-century portraits of women.

Karen is Honorary Professor at University College London, and was previously Curator of 16th & 17th Century British Art at Tate Britain, 1992-2012. She is a long-standing member of WSG.

At the Tate Karen curated the landmark 1995 exhibition Dynasties: Painting in Tudor & Jacobean England 1530-1630, for which she received a European Woman of Achievement Award. She also curated the major exhibition Van Dyck & Britain (2009), and another on Rubens & Britain (2011-12). Her 2002 exhibition and volume Marcus Gheeraerts II: Elizabethan Artist established the theme of the ‘pregnancy portrait’ (which is the subject of her next book).

6 May 2017 at The Foundling Museum, Cost (inc lunch & refreshments): £18 (WSG members), £15 (students/unwaged), £22 (non-WSG members) We invite all those attending to give a five minute presentation which is inspired by the topic. It may consist of thoughts or associations, current work or research questions which relate to women and representation, and may be drawn from within the broad historical period which our group covers. We hope to see many of you there, for a day of discussion and conviviality.
The Women’s Studies Group 1558-1837 annual workshop took place at the Foundling Museum on 6 May, with the theme this year of “The fruitful body: gender and image”, keynote speaker Karen Hearn speaking in the morning on ‘Women, agency and fertility in early modern British portraits’, and presentations relating to the theme from participants and discussion in the afternoon.

The following report contains references to pregnancy, miscarriage, infertility and bereavement, which some readers may find distressing.

After tea and coffee conference organizer Miriam al Jamil introduced the keynote. Karen is a former Curator of 16th and 17th C British Art at Tate and is currently Honorary Professor at UCL. At Tate she curated several major exhibitions and is now planning a project on early modern representations of pregnancy for early 2019. Karen gave a wide-ranging and fascinating talk focusing on painted portraits of elite British women. She suggested the difficulties of researching these images, as few sources such as diaries or account books that might explain the intention behind and reception of these portraits survive, and the portraits themselves are constructs, the product of decisions as to what to include as well as what to leave out, and thus can be misleading. Nevertheless, we can learn a lot by looking closely and critically at these images.

Early modern elite men and women commissioned portraits for a variety of reasons and life events, and genres such as the marital portrait and maternity portrait are well known, argued Karen, but the pregnancy portrait is less studied. It was popular during the Elizabethan and Jacobean period and Karen showed workshop participants a number of images by artists such as Marcus Gheeraerts II and Hans Eworth. Eworth painted a portrait of Mildred Cooke Cecil, Lady Burghley pregnant with what would turn out to be her son Robert in 1563, which is now in Hatfield House. Cecil had miscarried several times prior to this successful pregnancy, by contemporary standards she was an older mother and the portrait represented the continued hopes of the family that she would produce a male heir.

Themes of loss and gain ran throughout Karen’s talk. Pregnancy was a risky time for early modern women and its representation would be freighted with fears of miscarriage or death, but also hope for or in celebration of a successful birth. These portraits therefore suggest interesting questions and interpretive challenges as to time – when were such portraits began, late in pregnancy when it was likely a woman would carry to
term, or earlier? When were they ended, before or after the birth? Did some paintings end up as memento mori, if the mother died? And since women were pregnant so often, were pregnancies actually routinely erased in the process of representation?

Lunch was followed in the afternoon by participants’ 5-minute presentations and discussion (for images and comments from the day, see the twitter hashtag #wsg2017).

The chair Felicity Roberts had organized speakers into broadly chronological and thematic groups of three, and in the first Jennifer Evans discussed early modern aphrodisiacs, followed by Sara Read on diagnosing early modern pregnancy and Carolyn Williams on seventeenth-century pregnancy cravings or ‘Pica’. Carolyn described how women who claimed cravings for exotic fruit were suspected of exaggerating this desire, exploiting the special status that being pregnant brought in what might be termed an early modern “power play”.

In the second group of presentations, Helen Draper described the 17thC professional portrait painter Mary Beale’s art practices, and detailed how a portrait of her cousin-in-law Alice Beale by the artist Peter Lely, was finished after her death by having other female family members sit as model instead. Sara Ayres discussed the gendered portrayal of elbows in early modern royal portraits, while Rosemary Keep looked at the prevalence of maternity, where the mother is shown with her children, over paternity portraits. These presentations provoked questions concerning the ir/replaceability of women subjects.

Following this, Rebecca Whiteley looked at early modern anatomical images of the gravid uterus, which functioned “analogically”, depicting the uterus as ripe fruit. Helen Hackett described early modern male poets’ use of pregnancy metaphors to describe the labour of literary invention, while Helen Hopkins discussed some uses of maternity in Shakespeare’s plays. Clearly there were rich resonances between visual and literary metaphors of early modern pregnancy.

Just before the break, Jasmine Losasso discussed the representation of female homicides in 1630s broadsides, noting the way their bodies were still described as maternal, thus making their crimes seem more monstrous.
Gillian Williamson looked at images of landladies in the mid-18th C, including a lurid print of a real life case in which a landlady was murdered by her lodger, an artist, after a disagreement about... her portrait, which he had undertaken. Yvonne Noble described the 1730s actress Anne Oldfield’s directions for her burial clothes, arguably her last great performance.

After a break for tea and coffee, Annette Rubery discussed a print of the actress Peg Woffington closely modelled on earlier images of Nell Gwyn. Charlotte Keighron considered the eighteenth-century gentlewoman Sarah Hurst, her diaries and emotional relationships to clothes she wore and made, while Louise Duckling looked at the choices the late eighteenth-century poets Charlotte Smith and Helen Maria Williams made concerning their public images. This group of presentations suggested how the comparative availability of resources for studying 18thC portraiture and material culture gives the researcher greater scope for determining the relative agency of women in shaping their own reputations, representations and identity.

Next Carol Stewart discussed Henry Fielding’s Amelia and the presence of men during childbirth in the eighteenth century, while Angela Escott described the actress Sarah Siddons’ maternal roles and her use of her own son as her fictional child on the stage. Hannah Hutchings-Georgiou looked at William Blake’s representation of the soul as a female figure.

In the last group of presentations, Georgina White discussed the establishment of the Society for Lying In Women in the early nineteenth century, while Moira Taylor looked at women’s efforts to provide inheritances for female relatives during the same period. Finally, Joanna Crosby brought the workshop to a close with a storming presentation on Victorian paintings and the role of apples in gendering images of women as fallen, including this one by the artist Augustus Egg, where the woman seems to reach out of the frame towards the viewer. It had been a whistle-stop tour of women, gender, portraiture and identity from the early modern through to the mid-Victorian period, but many fruitful connections were made.
