

Art by Women Sells for 47.6% Less Than Works by Men, Study Finds

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In a study that included analysis of auction data and experiments with thousands of respondents, researchers found that perception of artists' gender consistently affects how their work is valued.

Image: Laure Garcin, "L'Atelier" ("The Studio," 1930), Musée Calvet, Avignon, France (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Art by women continues to be undervalued, according to the findings of a new study spearheaded by researchers at the University of Luxembourg. In a pair of experiments and through analysis of some 1.5 million auction sales records, the researchers found that respondents consistently ranked works they believed to have

been made by male artists higher than those believed to be by female artists — even when the works had in fact been generated by an artificial intelligence — and that works by women typically sell for 47.6% of the prices male artists fetch at auction.

“The results of this study deliver proof for the disadvantages women face in the art world solely based on their gender,” Professor Roman Kräussl of the Luxembourg School of Finance, one of the study’s authors, said in a statement. “Male buyers are a driving force of the auction market and yet we see that they are also more likely to think that women’s art is inferior. Our research adds to the mounting evidence of discrimination towards women that is systemic to so many industries.”

Crunching numbers from 1.5 million auction results between 1970 and 2013, representing works by 62,665 artists, the researchers arrived at a mean auction price of \$48,212 for works by male artists and \$25,262 for works by female artists. This 47.6% “gender discount” is softened slightly when removing blockbuster lots (almost all of them for works by male artists) from the statistics, to a still appalling 28.8% disparity between the mean value of works by men and women at auction. The researchers also found that, while women made up 16.9% of the 62,665 artists for whom they had auction data, only 6.9% of the transactions involved works by women, suggesting that the secondary market for male artists is generally much stronger than it is for female artists.

In two experiments led by Kräussl, thousands of participants were asked to rank works of art, and the results show a consistent bias against artworks believed to be by female artists — especially among affluent men, whom the study says are “most likely to represent the typical bidder in an art auction.” In the first experiment, 1,000 respondents were asked to guess the genders of the artists responsible for unlabelled artworks and then rank how much they liked the work. The participants predominantly guessed that the works were by men, and consistently ranked works

they believed to be by women lower than those they thought were by men — especially respondents who are men, affluent, and frequently visit galleries.

The second experiment involved 2,000 participants ranking artworks generated by the DeepArt algorithm that had been arbitrarily attributed fictional creators, half male and half female. Here, although overall the perceived gender of an artist had no effect on how their work was ranked, affluent male respondents who frequently visited galleries again tended to rank works they believed to be by male artists higher. The researchers conclude that both experiments provide “suggestive evidence that participants who are more likely to represent typical art auction participants may value art by women less.”

The researchers optimistically note, in cross-referencing their findings with the United Nation Gender Inequality Index and the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index, that the prospects for women artists seem to be generally better in countries with less gender inequality. However, the findings are unfortunately consistent with other studies of gender inequality in different sectors of the art world and art market.