Gender affects all people, including artists, whether they are male, female, or someone who does not fit neatly into either of those categories. Unlike sex, which indicates whether a person is biologically male or female, gender refers to a person’s inner identity. It is one of the most significant aspects of a person’s sense of self. But it is not clear whether common assumptions about gender roles are natural or imposed by society: should pink and dolls always be associated with females and blue and airplanes with males?

While gender affects everyone on some level, it often becomes an issue for discussion in relation to groups that have been disenfranchised by the mainstream and male-dominated culture, perhaps because they are female, or homosexual, or transsexual. At several points in the twentieth century, feminism encouraged us to consider the role of women as both creators and subjects of important artworks. Contemporary feminist and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) movements have inspired a great deal of debate about and exploration of the ways gender affects personality, relationships, and preferences.

The artworks in this chapter illustrate some of the ways in which artists have explored, reinforced, and challenged traditional gender distinctions. By presenting their own personal experiences of daily life, their interpretations of historical events, and their commitment to social or political agendas, artists encourage us to question common assumptions about gender and the possibilities beyond the binaries of male and female.

Gendered Roles

Our assumptions about gendered roles are often based on cultural stereotypes. For example, the ancient Egyptians and Greeks developed formal methods for representing the ideal human figure in art, with males being presented as strong and athletic, while females appear demure. Similarly, in our modern society we construct our own ideas about what men and women should look like and how they should behave. Artworks depicting men have historically referred to their powerful bodies or leadership roles. In contrast, women have tended to be shown in artworks either as passive, eroticized subjects who exist solely for the viewer’s pleasure, or, alternately, in the role of nurturers in domestic scenarios. There are, however, numerous examples of artworks that consciously counter these stereotypical representations and show images of men as vulnerable and women in positions of power.

In many cultures, heroes manifest the desirable attributes of the society in a larger-than-life way. The sculpture Chibinda Ilunga, made by the Chokwe people of Central Africa, depicts a legendary leader who was a masterful hunter, a successful king, and a descendant of a deity (4.148). The figure carries a staff, a symbol of prestige that stands for the passage of power from an ancestor to a chief or from one chief to another. His flaring nostrils and the antelope horn he carries identify him as a hunter. The horn was a trophy of his successes.
work. Shortly after World War I, the American sociologist and photographer Lewis Wickes Hine (1874–1940) made a series of *Work Portraits*. Unlike some of his earlier projects, which condemned the exploitation of children in factories and mines, this series celebrated the positive connection between the worker and the machines he used. *Power House Mechanic Working on Steam Pump* salutes the man’s muscular physique and its complementary relationship with the tools of his trade (4.149). Hine’s visual commentary records the commanding role the worker played as the driving force behind the progressive industrial era. (As a counterpoint to Hine, see Gateway Box: Lange, 4.151, p. 570.)

In capturing game, and it also served as a container for potent substances or medicines, contributing an additional element to his arsenal of impressive traits. The sculpture conveys the valued attributes of authority, potency, and restraint that made this celebrated hunter a model leader.

Manual labor relies on strength and endurance, which have traditionally been considered distinctly masculine, allowing laborers to be seen as heroic through their hard
The British photographer John Coplans (1920–2003) directly challenges traditional views of the ideal male nude. He frankly shows wrinkles, sags, and rolls of skin. *Self-portrait Sideways No. 3* is part of a series of self-portraits the artist began when he was in his sixties (4.150). These self-portraits highlight the realities of the aging body in direct and personal but also enigmatic ways. The photographs often transform actual body parts through extreme close-ups, making it hard to tell if we are looking at the crook of a finger, the crease of an elbow, or the bend of a leg. These images, which rarely include Coplans’s face, give an edge of humility, and an unexpected voice, to the artist’s self-examination, and expand the depictions of male figures and aging bodies in art.

The American photographer Cindy Sherman (b. 1954) plays the roles of all of the women children as more precious than jewels (for example, see p. 404, 3.152, Angelica Kauffmann’s *Cornelia Pointing to Her Children as Her Treasures*) and reveal the sweet interactions of ordinary moments (see, for example, p. 345, 3.152, Mary Cassatt’s *Child’s Bath*). Lange captured a slightly different view, showing the intimacy of a family that has very little but each other.

*Migrant Mother* offers poignant evidence of a mother’s strength and determination in a time of extreme need (4.151). Because the early pea crop had failed, this migrant worker and her three young children were starving. Photographer Dorothea Lange found the family surviving on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields and birds they were able to kill. Like other mother and child images, *Migrant Mother* draws attention to the nature and enduring quality of the bond. This photograph resonates because of the way the mother’s face reflects the pressures placed on the family unit.

**4.150 John Coplans, Self-portrait Sideways No. 3, 2001. Gelatin silver print, 4’2” x 6’8”.

**Gateway to Art: Lange, Migrant Mother**

**The Image of Motherhood**

Byzantine, medieval, and Renaissance depictions of mothers and children generally focus on the ideal mother. Later artists show
portrayed in her acclaimed *Untitled Film Stills* series, creating an intriguing visual puzzle as we try to uncover the “real” Cindy Sherman. The images she makes are not, however, intended to be self-portraits in the way that Coplan’s photographs are. Sherman has explained that the images are not about her, but are about the representations of the women being shown and the ways that each viewer interprets them (see Perspectives on Art Box: Cindy Sherman: The Artist and her Identity).

For the *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman fabricated backdrops and costumes for imagined characters from nonexistent 1950s B-movies. At that time, the film roles for women were limited to such stereotyped characters as housewife, starlet, country girl come to the city, and so on. In *Untitled Film Still #35* we see a woman—perhaps a housewife or a maid—with a distinctly bad attitude (4.152). The circumstances of the scene are far from clear, though. Is she sulking about


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**Perspectives on Art: Cindy Sherman**

**The Artist and Her Identity**

*The American photographer and film director Cindy Sherman is best known for her photographs in which she is dressed in costumes as if she were another person (see above, 4.152). Here she explains her general working process and one specific image, *Untitled Film Still #35*, inspired by the Italian film actress Sophia Loren.*

There is a stereotype of a girl who dreams all her life of being a movie star. She tries to make it on the stage, in films, and either succeeds or fails. I was more interested in the types of characters that fail. Maybe I related to that. But why should I try to do it myself? I’d rather look at the reality of these kinds of fantasies, the fantasy of going away and becoming a star...

The black-and-white photographs were... fun to do. I think they were easy partly because throughout my childhood I had stored up so many images of role models. It was real easy to think of a different one in every scene. But they were so clichéd that after three years I couldn’t do them anymore. I was really thinking about the movies, the characters are almost typecast from movies.

For the woman standing in front of my studio door, I was thinking of a film with Sophia Loren called *Two Women*. She plays this Italian peasant. Her husband is killed and she and her daughter are both raped. She is this tough strong woman, but all beaten-up and dirty. I liked that combination of Sophia Loren looking very dirty and very strong. So that’s what I was thinking of...

I realized I had to become more specific in details, because that’s what makes a person different from other people.
something, planning to leave, or about to pull a wallet from the jacket hanging on the hook? Why are there so many scuff marks on the door? More questions are raised than answered in the scenarios Sherman invents. Her Untitled Film Stills, which were created between 1977 and 1980, revisit these 1950s-inspired women in order to make it clear how narrow the representations of and expectations for women had been only a few short years before. At the time Sherman made Untitled Film Still #35, feminism was beginning to have a significant impact on artistic representations of women as well as on the possibilities for women in society. Sherman made sixty-nine photographs in the series and the women in them always seem as if they are being watched, the object of an unseen voyeur’s gaze. These scenarios call attention to and question the way we look at these and all women.

**Feminist Critique**

In Western countries, for many centuries women had far fewer opportunities than men to become artists, and were rarely given the recognition granted to their male counterparts. For example, women were not allowed to draw from the nude in their art classes until the nineteenth century. It was also believed that “genius” was a trait exclusively available to men, and language with a gender bias—such as the word “masterpiece” to describe a great artwork—reinforced that belief. Before the 1970s few people even noticed that women had largely been excluded from the institutions and systems that produced serious artists.

In many cases, successful women had simply been written out of the history of art. The Italian artist Artemisia Gentileschi, for example, enjoyed an impressive reputation in the seventeenth century, but her efforts were eventually forgotten, only to be rediscovered in the early twentieth century (see Gateway Box: Gentileschi). The feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s made a significant impact on the production and understanding of artworks made by women. It acknowledged that women artists had been left out of much of the history of art, and it introduced the possibility that this situation could be rectified. As a result, feminist artists expanded the subject matter of art, making it more relevant to women’s issues, and many more works made by women were included in museums and galleries.

The American artist Judy Chicago (b. 1939) appreciated the achievement of such women as Gentileschi. She realized that many women had been forgotten over time and, likewise, that women who seem prominent today might in the future also be omitted from history. From 1974 to 1979, Chicago worked on an epic sculpture called *The Dinner Party* (4.153), which honors women from the past and present. Her huge triangular dinner table has thirteen place settings on each side. Every setting features a placemat, on which is embroidered the name of a famous historical or mythical woman, and an elaborate plate designed intentionally to resemble the shape of a butterfly or a vagina. The appearance of all the elements on each setting was inspired by the woman whose place it is. Layers of lace designate the place of the nineteenth-century poet Emily Dickinson, while the plate for the artist Georgia O’Keeffe (4.153) resembles a sculpted version of one of her abstract flower paintings. Artemisia Gentileschi’s place setting has a brightly colored plate surrounded by lush fabric similar to the kind shown in her paintings.
At a time when there were very few women professional artists, the Italian Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–c. 1656) earned a reputation as a talented and accomplished Baroque painter. While women were accepted as portrait artists in the seventeenth century, Gentileschi also worked in the more highly esteemed genres of historical, mythological, and religious paintings. Women were not allowed to follow the traditional avenues of apprenticeship to complete their training as painters and sculptors, but Gentileschi was the daughter of an artist, and her talent was recognized and fostered by her father. Unlike her male contemporaries, Gentileschi often depicted strong female figures with emotion, intensity, and power.

One of the subjects she painted was the story of Judith Decapitating Holofernes, from the Bible (4.154). Judith became a heroine of the Israelite people when she murdered Holofernes, an Assyrian general sent by King Nebuchadnezzar II to punish the western nations of his empire—including the Israelites—for not supporting his reign. After Holofernes became intoxicated, Judith used his sword to cut off his head. The Hebrews were then able to defeat the Assyrian army and avoid surrender. Scholars generally agree that such scenes of powerful women taking vengeance on immoral men are connected to events in Gentileschi’s own life. At the age of eighteen Gentileschi was sexually assaulted by her painting teacher and had to endure a humiliating public rape trial in her attempts to bring her attacker to justice.

Chicago made the table an equilateral triangle not only because the shape was an ancient sign for both woman and goddess, but also because it could be used here to symbolize the world of fairness and equality that feminists sought. She chose to have thirteen guests to a side both because there were thirteen witches in a coven and because it was an important number for those ancient religions that worshiped a mother goddess. The number is also a reference to the biblical Last Supper, here reconfigured with women as the guests instead of Jesus and his twelve disciples. The idea of a dinner party—as well as the media, such as needlework and ceramics, which are included in her piece—evokes the role of woman as homemaker, which Chicago and other feminists believed should be admired and praised.

In 1985, a group of women artists in New York City formed a collective organization called the Guerrilla Girls to protest at the unequal treatment
of female artists in the art world. Their name indicates their willingness to engage in unconventional tactics in their fight for equality. The Guerrilla Girls, who are still active, are known for the gorilla masks the members wear to avoid being recognized by the art world establishment and institutions they might criticize. Their productions take the form of public protests and lectures as well as flyers and posters. One of their best-known posters, *Do Women Have to be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?* (4.155), includes statistics to highlight the disproportionate representation of women artists (5 percent) compared to female nudes (85 percent) in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. As this poster shows, one of their principal goals is to oppose the lack of representation of women artists in major museum collections.

The American artist Lorna Simpson (b. 1960) has confronted similar issues about the treatment of women, as well as assumptions regarding race, in art and society. Her combinations of text and imagery raise questions about gendered and racial identity, both verbal and visual. *You’re Fine* shows a woman lying on an examination table (4.156). She wears a nondescript white slip and has her back to us, so we are not able to identify her by the usual means of looking at her face. The text accompanying the image indicates multiple levels of meaning. This woman, whose pose recalls a reclining nude from Classical art, is lying down here for the purposes of a medical inspection. The plaques on the left list procedures and tests, probably ones she is undergoing. Those on the right, however, suggest that she is being subjected to this scrutiny in order to gain a secretarial position. Finally, the lettering above and below the picture reveals that her body has passed inspection: “You’re Fine. You’re Hired.” Unlike all those images that the Guerrilla Girls noted, Simpson’s model is not nude and her identity has not been exposed.
Blurring the Lines: Ambiguous Genders

We frequently assign roles to men and women according to our ideas of “normal” gender. Of course, traditional roles are frequently reversed: women have been primary breadwinners, worked in mines or gone to war, and men have been nurturers and raised children. But in recent years it has become more acceptable to address other ways of transcending the conventional gender boundaries. Public awareness of such issues as transvestism and transgender surgery has been raised by more open discussion. The investigation of the ways that bodies and identities can assume various levels of masculinity and femininity, however, is not entirely new to art. It is a question that artists from many cultures and eras of history have sought to address.

Almost 3,500 years ago, ancient Egypt was governed by a woman called Hatshepsut. She was arguably the most powerful of the handful of female rulers in Egyptian history. Hatshepsut controlled the kingdom for about twenty years in the fifteenth century BCE, first as regent for her stepson and nephew Thutmose III, and then as pharaoh in her own right. To legitimize her reign, Hatshepsut emphasized that she was her father’s choice as successor, ahead of her two brothers and half-brother. She also claimed direct lineage from Amun, the sun god who was worshiped at that time.

Like all Egyptian rulers, Hatshepsut commissioned many sculptures and relief carvings to replicate and immortalize her image. A few show her as a woman, but she is most often depicted in the conventional poses and clothing of a male king. The image in 4.157 is one of a group of sphinxes that possess Hatshepsut’s face. It was not uncommon for pharaohs to be represented in the form of a sphinx, a creature with the body of a lion and the head of a human. The artist has clearly followed the customary guidelines for depicting male pharaohs, including the traditional headcloth and royal beard. But, although the portrait is idealized, the sculptor has not attempted to disguise the delicate lines of Hatshepsut’s features.

The American photographer Diane Arbus (1923–71) was fascinated by subjects that crossed established boundaries, including conventional gender distinctions. She made direct, even confrontational pictures of people outside the mainstream, such as the midgets, giants, twins, and sword swallowers that she met at sideshows, carnivals, and circuses. Her photograph *Hermaphrodite with a Dog* conveys a fascination with, and a kind of reverence for, extreme difference (4.158). Her subject’s experience of being both male and female and, at the same time, not conforming to either gender, adds up to a shocking reality. The spectacle of the hermaphrodite’s dual nature is highlighted in the visible juxtaposition between the feminine costume, make-up, and clean-shaven right side and the masculine tattoo, wrist watch, and hairy body on the left.
Unlike Arbus, the American artist Robert Mapplethorpe (1946–89) photographed a lifestyle of which he was himself a part. The issue of gender affects his photographic work because he chose subjects that were highly sexualized and often related to his own interests as a gay man. His photographs are carefully composed, elegantly lit, and technically perfect, making subjects that might previously have been seen as deviant appear normal, even beautiful.

A national controversy was sparked by the exhibition of Mapplethorpe’s work that traveled to several museums across the U.S. shortly after the artist died of AIDS-related illness. Some museum officials and politicians considered the graphic sexual nature of Mapplethorpe’s Portfolio to be problematic because the artist had been awarded a grant from public funds.

Mapplethorpe, however, did not see a significant difference between a flower, a Classical sculpture, or a nude male figure.

In Mapplethorpe’s 1980 Self-portrait (#385), his hair is curled and he wears eye shadow, blush, and lipstick (4.159). If one looks solely at his face, he seems to be a woman. His bare chest, however, tells us that he is a man. Mapplethorpe’s appearance raises many questions about the assumptions we make based on the way people look. It also reveals the degree to which gender is a construction and suggests that not all people fit the conventional distinctions between the sexes. Mapplethorpe photographed what he wanted to see, the things that he considered visually interesting but did not find elsewhere in the art world. Through his carefully crafted compositions and technically masterful prints,

4.159 Robert Mapplethorpe, Self-portrait (#385), 1980. Gelatin silver print, 20 x 16”
he ensured his models (including himself) looked their absolute best.

The American artist Catherine Opie (b. 1961) uses photography to investigate the nuances of gender and identity. Her pictures include studio portraits of her lesbian friends dressed in leather or wearing false facial hair, staged depictions of radical performance artists, high school football games, and landscapes. Opie created her Domestic series while traveling across the U.S. in order to photograph lesbian couples, such as Melissa and Lake, in their everyday settings (4.160). This photograph accentuates some of the similarities in the couple’s appearance, such as their short haircuts with bangs. The point of the picture, however, is their bond, not their gender or sexual identity. Opie’s portraits, by highlighting the lesbian community, introduce some viewers to new ways of life. They remind others that the familiar people, places, and things we see each day can be thought of in new ways. Such pictures are not about difference, they are celebrations of individuality.

Discussion Questions

1. What kind of words can you think of that are specifically gendered? Come up with a list of five “male” and five “female” adjectives. Are they based on facts or opinions? Find an artwork to illustrate each of your terms. Find an artwork that contradicts each of your terms. Make sure that at least half the artworks you choose are not from this chapter.

2. What obstacles have women faced in being taken seriously as professional artists? What has been done to counteract that inequity? What artworks, either in this chapter or elsewhere, effectively express either these challenges or the changes in institutional practices toward women in the arts?

3. Consider the artworks you have studied and then describe an artwork that expresses your personal experience as a man or woman. What roles have you played in your life that conform to or deviate from established norms? How can you communicate that experience to your audience in an artwork?