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Abstract

The main goal of this communication is not to explain in detail the gender and class connotations in art forms, but to illustrate their existence and importance in the construction of a hierarchy in art and as mainstream and hiddenstream traditions, which tell us about the culture in which they were produced.

In this presentation, locating ourselves in a postmodern thinking, in which there is not really a true and unique way of looking, which would be more convenient, but different ways of looking, as in this work of Rauschenberg, we look from an "other" point of view that is not stated there.

Keywords: Art, gender, hiddenstream, mainstream.

Introduction



Fig.1: **Bed** - Robert Rauschenberg (1955)

This work that Rauschenberg names of “Bed”, belongs to the artistic mainstream of the United States. Bed is one of the firsts ‘Combines’ of Rauschenberg, a term coined by him to designate his technique of allying abandoned objects, as rubber tires or old furniture, to a traditional painting support. In this case, he framed a pillow, and an used bedspread and bed sheet, scribbled on them with graffiti and dipped them in paint, in a style based on the Abstract Expressionism. By mocking of the seriousness of this art, Rauschenberg predicted a more widespread attitude in generations of future artists - the pop artists, who also appreciated the taste of Rauschenberg for objects of everyday life (Bee, 2000).

According to the artist himself, “Painting relates to both art and life... (I try to act in that gap between the two” (idem, p.207). Although these materials come from a bed, and are positioned as in a bed, Rauschenberg, in the end, hung his work on a wall, which is the regular position given to a two-dimensional work of art. This situation led to a change of functionality of the bed, but not in its associations with sleep, dreams, disease, death, sex – the most intimate moments of life.

The lower half of the total space of “Bed’ is filled by a quilt (bedspread or blanket) made, usually by women, of patches of cloth, many times with scraps of fabrics with different patterns. Though quilts have a functional purpose as bedspreads, they also have another important purpose to their creators, which is their exhibition in bed, in the domestic space. Women that made quilts valued what they did, marking the quilts, dating them and, sometimes, giving instructions to whom shall inherit them, which undermines the notion that the quilts were exclusively a collective art and not the work of a single women (Mainardi, 1982: 333).

The women have always made art, but the most valued by the male society (mainstream) has been sealed to the majority of them. For that reason, women have put all their creativity into needlework. It is a feminine work of universal art that transcends race, class, and borders. Needlework are so important in women’s culture that, according to Rozsika Parker (1996), the women’s history could be told using needlework.

The firsts quilts made in America resulted from human needs and tradition. American women, including slaves, made quilts since the colonial times until the 100th anniversary of the independence of the United States in 1876. During the colonial times, and even after the Civil war, women were responsible for a number of heavy work: besides cooking, cleaning, and raising and educating their children, they spanned, weaved and dyed clothes, they made clothes and bed clothes, curtains and carpets for the whole family (Mainardi, 1982).

Besides those needs, making quilts was practically the only area where women could express themselves creatively, normally at the end of the day, after having all the other tasks done (Mainardi, 1982). Their quilts were the only art that most of the population saw, and certainly the only that the majority of them possessed. The importance of quilts in women lives is beautifully expressed in a declaration of a women farmer who said: “I go crazy if I don’t have my quilts to make” (Dunham, 1963: 7).

In the art history, references to quilts have been omitted. Professional historians did not write about them as art, but used them to chronicle the history of the English and American textile. For the same reason as jazz, the great American music, quilts were underestimated for a long time – because they were made by the wrong persons, and because to these persons, for racist and sexist reasons, their presence was not allowed in the American culture definition: museums, schools, and art history were under the control of a small white male class, who used its power to manipulate the very definition of art (Mainardi, 1982). The terms “primitive art”, “folk art”, and “decorative art” reveal more about the prejudices of historians than about the art itself.

Truth is that the “erudite” art has been feeding of the so-called folk art or primitive. The African sculptors needed so little of Picasso, as the Japanese artists that use to do etching needed impressionism, or the quilt producers needed the minimalists. In music it became a scandal that, while black jazz and blues musicians were ignored, the second wave of white imitators became rich and famous.

Rozsika Parker (1996) decided to call art to the embroidery as a challenge to this hierarchical dichotomy. According to this author, this is a cultural practice that involves iconography, style, and a social function. In the line of Parker, the feminists should reinforce a similar art awareness, so that one of the revolutionary goals of the women cultural movement becomes rewriting art history, in order to recognize the fact that art has been made by all races and classes of women, and that art is indeed an human impulse, and not the attribute of a particular gender, race or class.

The twentieth century art has become fundamentally abstract. Artists and critics fought to create the clear distinction between the abstract and the purely decorative. In a way to keep an erudite art (with a higher connotation), they had to fight the association of erudite art with the so-called minor arts (with a lower connotation), defined as decorative, often handcrafted by rural women in the domestic sphere (Broude, 1982).

Despite of the efforts to cut or surround the connection, the art historians of that time were, according to Broude (1982), aware of the crucial role that decorative art and decorative impulses had in development of some of the most striking styles at the beginning of the twentieth century, by artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Henri Matisse.

Although Kandinsky keeps a clear distinction between this two poles of his activity, he relegated the decorative arts clearly to a lower stand, through a series of sophisticated theoretical manipulations. Such as Kadinsky, Matisse was also an artist who used decorative arts. He did that without ever elevating their lower status, and without allowing that his own status, as a great painter, was reduced because of his association with them. Many other male artists of the twentieth century gravitated around the decorative such as Kandinsky and Matisse. Matisse tried to justify his tastes creating around him a dialectic that supports artificially the distinction between “erudite art” and “minor art”.

By looking to the painting, called “Bed”, by Rauschenberg, we know immediately, besides the context of its creation, something about the painter and his world. As for the quilt, in the bottom, we only know that it is an artistic work, usually with feminine authorship. We all know that a painting like this was meant to be displayed at exhibitions and, possibly, for sale. On the other hand, the quilt was designed to be in the domestic space and its higher value placed on the family, friends and neighbours appreciation.

The concept of folk art defines those so-called handcraft pieces that have not, or had and loosed the utilitarian character. According to Angélica Cruz (2009; see Glassie, 1972), an artefact is considered art if it emphasises the function of pleasure. On the other hand it is considered craft if the utilitarian function is dominant. In this painting of Rauschenberg, we can see two abstract expressions:

- The top part, as a result of emotional gestures made with inks, is signed and made by a man and included on the mainstream;
- The bottom part, resulted of a geometric creation, from fabrics patches, united by a needle, not signed, made probably by a woman, and included on the hiddenstream.

The hierarchy between art and craft suggests that art made with lines and art made with ink are different: the first one has, from an artistic point of view, less value. But the true differences are related with the place where they were made, and by whom were they made. According to Becker (1984:257) “the quilts weren’t folk art because nobody treated them as art”.

In a visit to Riksmuseum, Amsterdam, in 1973, we were surprised when we found that the privileged place of the *foyer* was reserved to the American quilts presentation. Invoking the previously mentioned statement of Becker, someone said that they were art and put them there. That someone was part of an homogenous group that had the power to decide what was and was not art – such decision was normally accompanied by a dominant elite’s theoretical speech.

The art produced by men and the art produced by women, as well as the value of the female and male artistic production, are socially conditioned by parameters associated to the sexual hierarchy (Magalhães and Cruz, 2014).

In this sense, an artistic education that ignores the problem of sexual education is an amputated artistic education. Discovering that women history and the art produced by them is a crucial step to understand their place in the artistic history.

The question is not to abolish the sexual differences, but to transform those relationships in the society, in order to make worthwhile those differences in all domains. The modern feminism must leave both the male model and the unilateral female one, and, simultaneously have in consideration the presence and opinion of the women of society and work in the sense of a mix philosophy.

Regarding the dichotomy between erudite and folk art or craft and decorative arts, one of the main conclusions that results from this reflection is the importance of not erasing the differences between them, nor to hierarchize them.

In art, as in life, the most important thing is to value the differences.

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