

# An exhibition of one's own: the Salón Femenino de Bellas Artes (Buenos Aires, 1930s-1940s)

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### **Cover Page Footnote**

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## An exhibition of one's own: the *Salón Femenino de Bellas Artes* (Buenos Aires, 1930s-1940s)

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### Abstract

From the late 1920s on, Buenos Aires witnessed the emergence of exhibitions of a separatist character for women artists. Their vast development, the extensive coverage by the press, and their links to feminist institutions have been ignored in traditional art historical literature. Focusing on the *Salón Femenino* organized by the *Club Argentino de Mujeres*, this article aims to reconstruct the organization of these events, to examine their reception, and to analyze the careers of some of the participating women artists. These exhibitions offer a new perspective for the analysis of a period of intense feminine artistic activity in Argentina.

### Resumen

Desde finales de la década de 1920 Buenos Aires fue testigo del surgimiento de exhibiciones de carácter separatista. Su vasto desarrollo, la extensa cobertura de la prensa y sus vínculos con instituciones feministas han pasado desapercibidos para la historia tradicional del arte. Centrándonos en el *Salón Femenino* organizado por el Club Argentino de Mujeres, el propósito de este artículo es reconstruir la organización de estos eventos, examinar su recepción y analizar las carreras de algunas de las mujeres artistas participantes. Estas exposiciones ofrecen una nueva perspectiva para el análisis de un período de intensa actividad artística femenina en la Argentina.

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## Introduction

This article explores a long-forgotten episode of the history of women artists in Argentina in the 1930s and 1940s: the organization of all-female shows by a feminist association, the *Club Argentino de Mujeres* (Argentine Club of Women). Even though women's activities have been for the most part erased from art historical accounts, women were very active at that time and they engaged in the local art scene in many ways.

The purpose of this article is to reconstruct the organization of these all-female events, to examine their historical reception, and to analyze the careers of some of the participating women artists. To achieve these aims, I propose to focus on the shows organized by the *Club Argentino de Mujeres*, arguably the most important all-female exhibitions of these years, due to the number of women involved in these shows and their reception in the press. These exhibitions offer a new perspective for the analysis of a period of intense feminine artistic activity involving the creation of spaces and avenues of self-validation, which were capable of bringing together the most diverse group of women artists.

This essay is obviously informed by feminist approaches to art history, as it “proceeds from the recognition that our histories and the values that shape them have been falsified, because of the asymmetrical power positions of the sexes.”<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, it does not seek to postulate a parallel canon to the one that already exists within the Argentine art historical literature or to merely praise the aesthetic qualities of the artworks by these women, but rather to illuminate our understanding of women's artistic activities.

To better understand the rise of the all-women shows in the 1930s and 1940s we must know the situation in the decades preceding this boom. In the next section I will explore the background story. It

is important to ask why there were no all-women exhibitions in Argentina before the 1920s, while there were in many other countries, such as France and Italy. In fact, between 1890 (when female artists began to acquire visibility in the Buenos Aires' art scene) and 1920 women artists in the city of Buenos Aires did not develop all-female art exhibitions on a regular basis.

## Women Artists in Buenos Aires, 1890s-1920s

At the turn of the century, the regular exhibitions of the French *Union des femmes peintres et sculpteurs* exerted a lasting and powerful impression on early Argentine feminist circles. For instance, the Argentine feminist writer and educator Carmen Sonda de Pandolfini, writing in her weekly column at one of Buenos Aires' most widely-read magazines in 1911 on the annual exhibition of the *Union des femmes peintres et sculpteurs*,<sup>2</sup> was not trying to hide her admiration: “The press reflects in its telegrams, as well as in its articles, the impression created in Paris by the opening of an exhibition of exclusively female paintings; an exhibition that, it seems, has been a success on which nobody counted”.<sup>3</sup> The sense of achievement she felt when writing about women artists in France was perhaps only matched by the effect this kind of news must have had on Argentine women artists.

Fin-de-siècle mainstream art critics (mostly male), writing in widely-read newspapers such as *La Prensa* and *La Nación*, were often extremely skeptical about the quality of these all-female exhibitions. Unlike Carmen Sonda de Pandolfini, who was eager to demonstrate the cultural significance of the show of the French *Union des femmes peintres et sculpteurs*, most art critics expressed aversion and disapproval at exhibitions like these. For instance, in 1910 Fernando Fusoni,

<sup>1</sup> Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, “Preface,” in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminist and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), ix-x. Quotation p. x.

<sup>2</sup> For the *Union des femmes peintres et sculpteurs*, see Tamar Garb, *Sisters of the Brush: Women's Artistic Culture in Late Nineteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> “La prensa refleja en sus telegramas, así como en sus artículos, la impresión causada en París por la apertura de una exposición de pintura exclusivamente femenina; exposición que, según parece, ha sido todo un éxito con el que nadie contaba.” Carmen Sonda de Pandolfini, “Charla femenina,” *Mundo Argentino*, Buenos Aires, 10 May 1911, 4. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

writer and art critic for *La Nación*, reluctantly referred to the *Union des femmes peintres et sculpteurs* salon in his description of the Parisian art scene: “An exhibition of the ‘Union des femmes peintres et sculpteurs’ opens. What should I do? Close my eyes? I have to see it and talk about it. But this time I only want to act as a translator, leaving to others the responsibility of the judgments...”<sup>4</sup> Fusoni followed the opinion of the French writer and critic Léandre Vaillat: the fifteen hundred objects exhibited were “of an incredible insignificance.”

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that women-only art exhibitions seemed not to have been an effective option for the more professional women artists active between the 1890s and the 1920s in Argentina. Perhaps, such artists believed that participating in women-only exhibitions could jeopardize their recently-achieved, moderately-recognized positions in the local art scene.

The few exceptions to this rule were the exhibitions organized by art schools and by the disciples of some artists, such as the show of works by the female students of well-known painter Eduardo Sívori in 1902, which included artists such as María Esther Echavegurren and Ida Gath, who are completely forgotten nowadays. The description of their presentation had something of the accomplished lady: “We are pleased to say that as a beginners’ work, the exhibition has been benevolently judged...”<sup>5</sup> Consequently, no works by the participating artists are known to have survived, and they are only known through archival sources: these women artists seemed not to have been professional, working artists. Only once, in 1898, an all-female exhibition attracted the attention of more successful and professional women artists. Organized as a part of the national exhibition, the large *Sección Femenina* (Feminine section) accommodated paintings, sculptures, and needle-work.

<sup>4</sup> “Se abre una exposición de la ‘Union des femmes peintres et sculpteurs’ ¿Qué debo hacer? ¿Cerrar los ojos? Tengo que verla y hablar de ella. Pero esta vez quiero solamente hacer de traductor, dejando a otros la responsabilidad de los juicios...” Fernando Fusoni, “De Paris. Feminismo artístico. Exposición de la ‘Union des femmes peintres et sculpteurs’ – Pequeños salones – Fallecimiento de un animador de rocas – Acto salvaje,” *La Nación*, Buenos Aires, 3 April 1910, 7.

There is another important point to be considered: the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art exhibitions, such as the pioneer shows of the *Ateneo* (1893-1898), were indeed open to the participation and even to the awarding of prizes to women artists. For instance, in 1894 the percentage of women artists in the *Ateneo* show was about 44%. Among the participating women artists, Sofía Posadas (1859-1938) and Eugenia Belin Sarmiento (1860-1952), two of the most important women painters of this period, received awards.

Thus, women artists who had achieved some fame and visibility chose not to engage in women-only art exhibitions, despite the many links between them and several feminist groups of the most diverse ideological approaches in fin-de-siècle Buenos Aires. Moreover, only three of the rather large group of Argentine women artists who had travelled to Paris to study between 1890 and 1920 exhibited in the *Union des femmes peintres et sculpteurs* salon. While many Argentine women artists took part in other Parisian shows, such as the salon of the *Société des Artistes Français*, only Luisa Isella in 1917, Ana Limendoux in 1909, and Ernestina Rivademar (dates unknown) in 1903 exhibited in these all-female salons.<sup>6</sup> These shows, as evidenced by Fernando Fusoni’s harsh words, were not highly regarded in Buenos Aires. This low esteem may have dissuaded women artists from taking part in them.

## The rise of all-women art shows in Buenos Aires in the late 1920s

In sheer contrast, during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s Buenos Aires witnessed the emergence of exhibition spaces of a separatist character. The all-women shows organized from the late 1920s became an important space of visibility for literally

<sup>5</sup> “Complácenos decir que como obra de principiantes, la exposición ha sido benévolamente juzgada...” “Exposición de las discípulas de Sívori,” *Caras y Caretas*, Buenos Aires, 4 October 1902, pages not numbered.

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Sanchez, *Dictionnaire de l’Union des femmes peintres et sculpteurs* (Dijon: l’Echelle de Jacob, 2010), 760, 927, 1256.

hundreds of women artists.<sup>7</sup> Some of these shows were held on a regular basis. This is the case of the exhibitions organized by the *Nordiska Kompaniet* (a company devoted to fine furniture and art objects), the society *Camuati* (an important association of artists, which included several women in its board), and the *Club Argentino de Mujeres*. Other projects were short-lived, such as the exhibition organized by the *Teatro Argentino* (Argentine Theater) in 1930.<sup>8</sup>

Two main intertwined factors seemed to have contributed to the appearance and development of these salons. Firstly, women artists, who were admitted to the most important art schools from at least 1890, entered art schools in even larger numbers from the 1920s on. Women were also admitted to the graduate school for arts, the *Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes* (Graduate School of Fine Arts), created in 1923.<sup>9</sup> However, this rather important group of women artists was not immediately visible in the *Salón Nacional* (National Salon), where the presence of women did not grow steadily: women seemed to have encountered some difficulties in being accepted to the *Salón*. The all-female shows provided an exciting venue to gain public recognition outside the established art exhibits such as the official *Salón Nacional*.

Women's presence in the local art scene was becoming increasingly relevant. However, their visibility has been erased from art historical accounts. Their modern experiences and practices (such as their contribution to the development of new female iconographies in the visual culture, their professionalization and their presence in the art market) have been ignored. The growing presence of women in the arts is connected to a larger social phenomenon: the increasing number

of women graduating from training colleges and from universities, in the most diverse areas, as historian Dora Barrancos has explained.<sup>10</sup> Women were also escalating in positions in literature, theater, and dance.

In Argentina, women's roles at the time ranged between modernization and a clear attachment to traditions. On the one hand, women were an increasingly visible presence in the job market. In 1933, for example, writer Bertha de Tabbush explained: "Woman has conquered a prominent place in all social spheres, obtaining an almost absolute independence, but she has achieved it thanks to her own effort, that is to say, through work".<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, many intellectuals and political figures criticized the double burden on women. For instance, Josefina Marpons, writer and left-wing politician, expressed in 1938 her concerns regarding women's unpaid domestic work: "Woman has started to work in our country abruptly, without time for her new orientation to determine changes in customs". She then added: "on top of her eight-hour day and the household chores, she also has to take care of her children".<sup>12</sup> Argentine women were gradually caught in the dilemma of "having it all".

Moreover, it must be noted that Buenos Aires had a hectic feminist movement in the 1920s, whose origins can be traced back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> The links between feminism and the arts had a long history. For instance, two international congresses were held in May 1910 in Buenos Aires.<sup>14</sup> The first of them, the *Primer Congreso Patriótico de Señoras en América del Sud* (First Patriotic Congress of South American Ladies), was organized by many rather conservative feminine associations. One of its

<sup>7</sup> So far I have been able to identify over four hundred women artists who took part in all-women shows between 1923 and 1948. These numbers are in no way definitive. Several factors complicate the data gathering: the archives of most of the involved institutions have been lost and the catalogues of the exhibitions are extremely hard to find. Press reviews were the main source of information, for few catalogues have survived.

<sup>8</sup> Cayetano Donniss, "Las artistas argentinas," *Nosotros*, Buenos Aires, October 1930, 386.

<sup>9</sup> See Georgina Gluzman, "La Cárcova después de la Cárcova," in *Ernesto de la Cárcova*, ed. Laura Malosetti Costa (Buenos Aires: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2016), 73-85.

<sup>10</sup> Dora Barrancos, "El III Congreso Femenino: reivindicaciones, protagonistas y repercusiones," in *Inclusión/Exclusión. Historia con mujeres* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002), 82.

<sup>11</sup> "La mujer ha conquistado un lugar prominente en todas las esferas sociales, obteniendo una independencia casi absoluta, pero la ha logrado gracias a su esfuerzo propio, vale decir por el trabajo." Bertha de Tabbush, "La mujer y el trabajo," *El Hogar*, Buenos Aires, 6 October 1933, 80.

<sup>12</sup> "La mujer ha empezado a trabajar en nuestro país bruscamente, sin tiempo para que su nueva orientación decida cambios de costumbres. (...) sobre su jornada de ocho horas y los cuidados del hogar, debe también ocuparse de sus niños". Josefina Marpons, *La mujer en el trabajo* (Santiago de Chile: Ercilla, 1938), 26-27.

<sup>13</sup> See Asunción Lavrin, *Women, Feminism and Social Change in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, 1890-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> See Dora Barrancos, "Reivindicaciones femeninas en los Congresos del Centenario y los ecos en la prensa periódica," in *Inclusión/Exclusión. Historia con mujeres* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002), 22-34.

events was the *Exposición del trabajo de la mujer* (Exhibition of Women's Work), which included mainly needlework.<sup>15</sup> The *Congreso Femenino* (Feminine Congress) was organized by a much more progressive association of women. Originally, its members had tried to give art an important spot in the event: a whole section of the congress would be devoted to art, including topics such as the role of women in painting and sculpture, the relation between art and pornography, and the importance of museums. The president of this section would be the well-known female sculptor Lola Mora (1866-1936).<sup>16</sup> However, the final program of the congress did not include any of these subjects. Women artists of the early twentieth century, as I have already pointed out, seemed to have decided not to engage in women-only projects.

The stronger and much more developed feminist movement of the 1920s was eager to find highly capable women in any realm and was also ready to champion the cause of women artists. Particularly, the *Club Argentino de Mujeres*, an all-female association, organized the *Salón Femenino* (Women's Salon) from 1931 on. The *Salón Femenino* was an exhibition open to women in the most diverse tendencies. The participating artists showed their works as part of an all-female group, but did not neglect the chance to exhibit elsewhere: most of them were also a regular presence in the *Salón Nacional* or in the many provincial salons of the time, such as the *Salón de Rosario* (Rosario's Salon).

In spite of their importance, these all-female exhibitions, linked by the intention to showcase art by women, have not received any attention from art historical literature. Their vast development, their links to feminist institutions, and the extensive coverage by the press have gone unnoticed. Two main reasons can explain the obliteration of these events in art historical literature. Firstly, as with other allegedly lesser shows, such as the *Salón de Acuarelistas* (Salon of Watercolorists), the all-female exhibitions were

excluded from art historical accounts, which have traditionally been centered either on the official *Salón Nacional* (National Salon) or on the more avant-garde spaces, such as the *Nuevo Salón* (New Salon).

Secondly, these shows were written out of history mainly because they were female-only shows. A careful analysis of these long-forgotten exhibitions sheds light on the extremely selective and masculinist nature of art historical narratives in Argentina, where the history of modern art has been written as a male-only tale of mastery and innovation. Only a few names of Argentine women artists of this period are well known today, notably that of the painter Raquel Forner (1902-1988). In Argentine art history of the twentieth century, only she has been the subject of detailed studies, concealing the careers of a myriad of women artists who worked during those decades which were fundamental for the establishment of the female presence in the Argentine art scene. Her case needs to be considered in detail, for her celebration and her continuous presence in Argentine art histories is closely connected to the alleged maleness of her work and career.

The noted art critic and historian José León Pagano (1875-1964) wrote about Raquel Forner in his three-volume encyclopedic survey book of Argentine art in 1940: "Manly, impetuous, she fled from the graceful, as if she was afraid to fall into softness with no vigor."<sup>17</sup> For Pagano, she was different from other women artists, who were invariably "feminine", such as the well-known French artist Marie Laurencin.<sup>18</sup> This portrayal of Forner as a masculinist artist is closely connected to her reluctance to participate in all-women shows. In that regard, Forner took part in only two all-female shows, in 1928 and 1930, that is to say, at a very early stage in the growth of that kind of exhibition.

<sup>15</sup> *Congreso y Exposición del Centenario del Consejo Nacional de Mujeres* (Buenos Aires: Alfa y Omega, 1910).

<sup>16</sup> *Congreso Femenino Internacional. Primer Boletín* (Buenos Aires: Sociedad "Universitarias Argentinas", 1908), pages not numbered. Jane Misme Collection, Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand, Paris.

<sup>17</sup> "Varonil, impetuosa, huía de lo agraciado, como si temiese incluir en blanduras desprovistas de vigor". José León Pagano, "Raquel Forner," in *El arte de los argentinos* (Buenos Aires: Edición del autor, 1940), 361-366. Quotation p. 361.

<sup>18</sup> Pagano, "Raquel Forner," 361.



The rise of these shows slowly began with an exhibition held in the *Salón Chandler* in 1923. At that time, four female artists who had graduated from the National Academy of Fine Arts (Antonia Ventura y Verazzi, Ana María Furió de Iguain (dates unknown), María Elisa Olivari (dates unknown), and Margarita Roux Bonnet (dates unknown)) presented a selection of oil paintings, pastels, etchings, drawings, miniatures, carvings, embossed leathers and works with precious metals.<sup>19</sup> It was an ambitious project, most likely designed to display the group's diversity of artistic interests, acquired at the Academy. The young women artists exhibited together as a way of introducing themselves to the public.

In his review of the show, José León Pagano pointed out the seriousness of the group's efforts: "The exhibitors are former students of the National Academy of Fine Arts, which means that the embossed leathers and pyrographic woods represent original compositions, whether they are figures, landscapes or motifs of decorative ornamentation. They are not, therefore, domestic labors, without any hint of art".<sup>20</sup> The art critic was trying to defend the exhibitors' right to be acknowledged as artists, not merely accomplished ladies. For Pagano, issues of originality and mastery were key in legitimizing the project.

The same group, with the addition of María Elena Marcó, another graduate of the Academy, would exhibit in the Convivio gallery in 1929.<sup>21</sup> On this occasion, the exhibition was limited to oil paintings. In both cases, these were art exhibitions with an explicit commercial purpose.

This particular show seems not to have received much attention from art critics, but it provided an important antecedent in the formation of the *Salón Femenino*, arguably the most relevant all-women art exhibition of the 1930s and 1940s. The *Salón*

*Femenino* was extensively covered by the press and was linked to a major feminist institution.

In this sense, the year 1928 was the true turning point regarding women's shows in Buenos Aires and the events that took place then were key to the establishment of the long-lasting *Salón Femenino*. In November, the city hosted the *Tercer Congreso Internacional Femenino* (Third International Women's Congress), after the two preceding experiences of 1910. The *Club Argentino de Mujeres* organized the high-reaching event in 1928.

The *Club Argentino de Mujeres* had offered from its origins, at the beginning of the 1920s, a wide-ranging set of activities and services for women. A few years after its opening, the *Club* already had a library and several rooms where numerous lessons were taught: "declamation, music, drawing, painting, decorative art, labors, singing, literature, dances, ballroom dancing, languages, home economics and the baccalaureate degree".<sup>22</sup> It also had a rich program of lectures, concerts, and poetry auditions. Additionally, it organized several sports activities for members and their families. The *Club* also managed a boarding house, which functioned in the upper stories of its Buenos Aires seat. This facility was open to university students from the Argentine provinces and also to single women from the city.

Dora Barrancos has explained that the *Club Argentino de Mujeres* was not openly feminist, although many of its members were active political figures in the Argentine feminist movement. However, the *Club* was a meeting point for "new women", who sometimes rejected being or feared to be labeled as "feminists". Some of the most important feminist activists of the period were relevant figures in the *Club*, including Elvira Rawson de Dellepiane (1857-1954).<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> [José León Pagano], "Bellas artes. Exposición femenina," *La Nación*, Buenos Aires, 24 May 1923, pages not numbered. José León Pagano Papers, Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires.

<sup>20</sup> "Son las expositoras ex alumnas de la Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes, con lo cual se expresa que los cueros repujados y las maderas pirograbadas reproducen composiciones originales, ya sean figuras, paisajes o motivos de ornamentación decorativa. No se trata, pues, de industria doméstica, sin ningún atisbo de arte". [José León Pagano], "Bellas artes. Exposición femenina," *La Nación*, Buenos Aires, 24 May 1923, unpagged. José León Pagano Papers, Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires.

<sup>21</sup> "Exposiciones," *La Nación*, Buenos Aires, 27 September 1929, pages not numbered.

<sup>22</sup> "declamación, música, dibujo, pinturas, arte decorativo, labores, canto, literatura, danzas, bailes de salón, idiomas, economía doméstica y bachillerato". Lita Igual, "Un club por semana. Obra del más noble esfuerzo femenino es el Club Argentino de Mujeres," *El Hogar*, Buenos Aires, 29 July 1932, 38-39. Quotation p. 38.

<sup>23</sup> Elvira Rawson de Dellepiane was Argentina's second female physician and an extremely energetic activist, particularly concerned with women's and children's healthcare and education. See Barrancos, "El III Congreso," 78-80.





Figure 1. View of the *Exposición de Artes e Industrias Femeninas* at the *Club Argentino de Mujeres*, 1928.

According to Barrancos, the middle-class women who were the core of the *Club* revealed a willingness to share ideas and efforts to alter the traditional lives of women.<sup>24</sup> The *Club* offered all-female sociability in the growing city of Buenos Aires.

The *Tercer Congreso Internacional Femenino* encompassed several sections: Sociology, Hygiene, Education, Literature, Industrial and Applied Arts, and Fine Arts. It was more ambitious than its two predecessors of 1910, and the participation of women in the arts finally received attention within the larger feminist enterprise.

To give visibility to women's presence in the arts, the *Exposición de Artes e Industrias Femeninas* (Exhibition of Female Arts and Industries) was

organized as an integral part of the congress (Fig. 1). The show displayed a rather unusual exhibition of women's achievements, both in the arts and literature. Ernestina Rivademar, a painter and the director of the fine arts museum of the city of La Plata, Ana Weiss de Rossi, a noted painter, and Blanca Colt de Hume, a poet and a painter, were the organizers of this project. The assorted collection of pieces included books, paintings, sculptures, and works connected with the "feminine arts", that is, productions associated with the domestic sphere, most notably embroidery.

For many artists this exhibition was a chance not only to render their productions visible, but also to be part of a community where these works acquired a certain political sense and legitimacy, especially through the inclusion of celebrated

<sup>24</sup> Dora Barrancos, "El III Congreso Femenino", 82-83.

writers such as Emma de la Barra (1861-1947) and Mercedes Pujato Crespo (1871-1954).<sup>25</sup> These writers had achieved more fame than the visual artists of the same generation.

The access to the public sphere was still carried out under the imperative need to point out a certain link between the arts produced within and for the home, and those manifestations that had a clearer public destiny. These pieces coexisted with other kinds of works, such as paintings and sculptures.



**Figure 2.** Emilia Bertolé (1896-1946), *Retrato de mi padre* (Portrait of my father), 1925, oil on canvas, 100.5 × 81 cm, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires.

The paintings section included some works that had been praised in other, more established, exhibitions. This was Emilia Bertolé's (1896-1949) case. Her style was usually described as "feminine" and she became well known for her female portraits and self-portraits.<sup>26</sup> The artist, born in the

city of Rosario, had presented her *Retrato de mi padre* (Portrait of My Father) (Fig. 2) in the municipal *Salón de Rosario* in 1925 and decided to show it one more time in the 1928 all-female exhibition.

The work, which was exhibited in 1925 under the much less personal title of *Figura* (Figure), had been praised by art critics on that occasion:

Emilia Bertolé, the exquisite painter, exhibits a beautiful portrait of a man. Despite being more virile in its execution than her previous productions there is, in the calm stillness of the work, that spirit of feminine tenderness which characterizes her paintings; because, let us say in her praise, Emilia Bertolé puts in Argentinean art a beautiful feminine note, contrasting with the tendency of other paintings which want to go against one's own sensibility, approaching the characteristics of masculine works and producing asexual works without a defined emotion.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, Bertolé was opting to participate in the all-female exhibition with a work that departed from her more usual, stereotypically feminine, style. The work was again complimented and seen by a large audience, and in a more relevant venue: in an exhibition in the city of Buenos Aires.

In the subsequent editions of the *Salón Femenino* organized by the *Club Argentino de Mujeres* from 1931 on, the works more closely associated to the domestic sphere would be left out in a process of specialization in the realm of the so-called fine arts: the "feminine arts", as critics called those works, would not be accorded any space. The regular sections were painting, sculpture, miniature, and engraving.

The all-women salon was held from 1931 on in the *Palais de Glace*, the same venue of the *Salón Nacional*, or in the art gallery of the city hall, a rather new, but nonetheless prestigious space. Moreover, this *Salón Femenino* had juries and

<sup>25</sup> Adelia di Carlo, "Exposición de Artes Femeninas. En el Salón Nacional patrocinada por el Club Argentino de Mujeres," *Caras y Caretas*, Buenos Aires, 2 February 1932, pages not numbered.

<sup>26</sup> See Nora Avaro, Rafael Sendra and Raúl D'Amelio, *Emilia Bertolé. Obra poética y pictórica* (Rosario: Editorial Municipal de Rosario, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> "Emilia Bertolé, la exquisita pintora, expone un bello retrato de hombre. No obstante ser su factura más viril que la de sus producciones anteriores, se hace presente en la

reposada quietud de la obra, ese espíritu de femenina ternura, que caracteriza sus pinturas; porque, digamos en su elogio, Emilia Bertolé pone en el arte argentino una bella nota femenil, contrastando con la tendencia de otras pinturas que al querer ir contra la propia sensibilidad, al aproximarse a las características de las obras masculinas, producen obras asexuales y sin emoción definida." L. R. M., "VIII Salón Rosario," *La Revista de El Círculo*, Rosario, October 1925, 3-22. Quotation p. 7.

prizes, positioning itself as a clearly professional arena. In a long review of the first regular *Salón Femenino* of 1931, José León Pagano pointed out in *La Nación*, one of Buenos Aires' most popular newspapers: "This center hopes to show woman in perfect cohesion with herself, linked to the cultural activities of the country, highlighting her effective contribution or her desires to achieve it".<sup>28</sup>

In the 1930s and 1940s the annual exhibition organized by the *Club Argentino de Mujeres* would become a fixed event in the artistic calendar of Buenos Aires. The list of the exhibitors would be somewhat stable and inclusive of women of different professional status, visibility, aesthetic choices, and training. Other contemporary initiatives (like the exhibition organized by the association of artists *Camuati* and the all-women show organized by the *Nordiska Kompaniet*) also sought to bring together female artworks, although they did not have the same relevance, scope and impact.

## Femininity, art, and cultural expectations

In the opening of the 1931 *Salón*, the president of the *Club Argentino de Mujeres*, writer Mercedes Dantas Lacombe, reflected on the very notion of feminine art:

The Club Argentino de Mujeres hopes its annual exhibition represents a reaction in favor of a healthy, balanced and vigorous art. It hopes Argentine women, inspired annually by the exhibition of their works to the free judgment of the public, will be inspired by truth and beauty. We hope our artists understand that there are many techniques, but only one way to achieve true art, because the artist of talent and sensitivity will always act inspired by a

deep love of nature, a love that will prevent her from deforming it at her whim.<sup>29</sup>

It has already been pointed out that this period was defined by the conflictive coexistence of traditional and more modern artworks in Buenos Aires.<sup>30</sup> Mercedes Dantas Lacombe's words could suggest a clearly defined aesthetical direction: conventional languages and themes would be expected to dominate the *Salón Femenino*.

The *Club Argentino de Mujeres* exhibitions indeed included artists who were rather conservative and who had been successful for decades, such as Ana Weiss de Rossi (1892-1953). This celebrated painter, trained at the National Academy of Fine Arts, had received a government-funded grant to study in Europe in 1914, but the outbreak of the First World War prevented her from traveling. She exhibited regularly in the *Salón Nacional*, and in 1935 she earned the first prize in painting. Four years later, she would receive the highest award from the *Salón Nacional*: her painting *La abuelita* (*The granny*) was acquired for the National Museum of Fine Arts (Fig. 3). Ana Weiss was the first woman to receive this award.

Although her great commercial and critical success was rather unusual in the local context for a woman artist, in many ways Ana Weiss was indeed the typical artist of the *Salón Femenino*, since her works followed many time-honored conventions, both in terms of style and iconography. In his long review of this exhibition José León Pagano focused on Ana Weiss's preferred topic: her own family. Pagano wrote: "She paints as a mother feels and as an artist sees, a conjunction of a double love in a unique beauty."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> "Aspira este centro a mostrar a la mujer en perfecta cohesión consigo misma, unida a las actividades culturales del país, destacando su aporte efectivo o sus anhelos para lograrlo". [José León Pagano], "Presenta un conjunto homogéneo la primera exposición femenina," *La Nación*, Buenos Aires, 30 November 1931, pages not numbered.

<sup>29</sup> "El Club Argentino de Mujeres aspira a que su salón represente una reacción en pro del arte sano, equilibrado y vigoroso. Aspira a que las mujeres argentinas, estimuladas anualmente por la exposición de sus obras expuestas al libre juicio del público, se inspiren en la verdad y en la belleza. Aspiramos a que nuestras artistas comprendan que hay muchas técnicas, pero una sola manera de lograr el arte verdadero, pues el artista de talento y sensibilidad se moverá siempre inspirado por un profundo amor a la naturaleza, amor que le impedirá deformarla a su capricho". [José León Pagano],

"Presenta un conjunto homogéneo la primera exposición femenina," *La Nación*, Buenos Aires, 30 November 1931, pages not numbered.

<sup>30</sup> Diana Beatriz Wechsler, "Impacto y matices de una modernidad en los márgenes. Las artes plásticas entre 1920 y 1945," in *Nueva historia argentina. Arte, política y sociedad*, ed. José Emilio Burucúa (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1999), 269-314. Quotation p. 275.

<sup>31</sup> "Pinta como siente la madre y como ve la artista, conjunción de doble amor en una sola belleza." [José León Pagano], "El VI Salón Femenino de Bellas Artes, inaugurado ayer, presenta mayor cantidad y mejor calidad de obras que los anteriores," *La Nación*, Buenos Aires, 25 November 1936, unpagged. José León Pagano Papers, Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires.





Figure 3. Ana Weiss de Rossi (1892-1953), *La abuelita* (*The granny*), 1939, oil on canvas, 137 × 121.5 cm, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires.

Judging by Ana Weiss's inclusion in the *Salón Femenino* and by Mercedes Dantas Lacombe's remarks, it could be argued that the *Club Argentino de Mujeres* was a rather traditional exhibition outlet. Another important fact needs to be considered: the *Salón Femenino* always included miniature portrait painting, which was recognized by the *Club Argentino de Mujeres* as a legitimate artistic option. This underrated medium became an important field for women artists, who engaged in this technique with great success, particularly as portraitists.

Miniature portrait painting had been always relevant for women artists in Argentina. As a matter of fact, since the early nineteenth century women had been engaged steadily in this technique. Around the same time, the *Salón Nacional* decided not to exhibit miniature portraits any longer: in 1927 Kattie van Oppen (1891-?) was the last artist to exhibit miniature portraits at the *Salón Nacional*, which she left to start exhibiting in the *Salón Femenino*.

Hence, women who practiced miniature portrait painting were virtually excluded from the nation's most important art exhibition. Nonetheless, the *Salón Femenino* continued to exhibit miniature portraits. There was an important market for these works and many women practiced with success this meticulous technique, finding in the *Salón Femenino* their most important chance to exhibit at a major venue.

Luna Alston de Gallegos (1881-1978) was one of these artists (Fig. 4). The artist had exhibited in some group shows as a young woman, such as the *Salón Nacional* in 1912 and the *Exposición Artística de Aficionados* (Amateur's Artistic Exhibition) between 1906 and 1908. In 1929 she had her first solo show, becoming a highly demanded artist.<sup>32</sup> In 1930 the popular magazine *Aconagua* devoted an article with many reproductions to the already celebrated artist: "The miniature requires very

special conditions, evidence of this is that those who have excelled in it are few. It is a very difficult art, in which Mrs. Gallegos has made works of great merit..."<sup>33</sup>



Figure 4. Luna Alston de Gallegos (1881-1978), *Retrato de la artista Hortensia Berdier* (Portrait of the artist Hortensia Berdier), private collection. Photograph by author.

Luna Alston became a regular participant of the *Salón Femenino*, where she received the award for the best miniature portrait in 1933.<sup>34</sup> The noted artist did not exhibit at any other group show, for her stereotypically feminine aesthetic and her technique simply had no other place in the official art scene. Some galleries, including the prestigious Witcomb gallery, offered the chance to women artists to exhibit their miniatures, but these women artists had been left out of the official sphere of the *Salón Nacional*.<sup>35</sup>

But the *Salón Femenino* also had room for other artistic paths, of a bolder nature, for it had no clear stylistic tendency. One example of this inclusive-

<sup>32</sup> "Artes y letras," *El Hogar*, Buenos Aires, 20 September 1929, 54.

<sup>33</sup> "La miniatura exige condiciones muy especiales, prueba es que son contados los que se han destacado en ella. Es un arte muy difícil en el que la señora de Gallegos ha realizado obras de gran mérito..." "El arte de la miniatura," *Aconagua*, Buenos Aires, February 1930, 108.

<sup>34</sup> Lily Sosa de Newton, *Diccionario biográfico de mujeres argentinas* (Buenos Aires: Plus Ultra, 1986), 23.

<sup>35</sup> "Exposición de miniaturas," *La Nación*, Buenos Aires, 7 October 1932, pages not numbered.

ness is the case of Laura Mulhall Gironde (1912-1975), who exhibited at least twice in the annual exhibitions organized by the *Club*, in 1936 and 1937. Trained in Paris with celebrated artist André Lhote, Mulhall Gironde is one of the many women artists whose careers have been almost completely forgotten. She began exhibiting her oil paintings and her ink drawings in 1933.

She was severely criticized by conservative art critics, such as Pilar de Lusarreta, on that occasion: "It is a pity that in our art academies and in the private studies of teachers students are not taught, together with the rules of drawing and perspective, with the harmonization of color, anatomy and other trades of the technique, the moral responsibility which, if he is sincere and honest, the painter has to carry".<sup>36</sup>

Few works from these early years of development have been preserved. Most of them are known only through the high quality photographs preserved in the papers of the art critic José León Pagano (Fig. 5). One of them shows the innovative approaches of her work in the much-contested field of the nude, before she ventured in to abstract and religious art in the 1950s and 1960s. Even though by the late 1930s Laura Mulhall Gironde was a progressive artist within the local scene, her work was admitted to the *Salón Femenino* and she received an honorable mention in 1936.<sup>37</sup> She then exhibited in the *Salón Nacional* on several occasions.

The careers of Ana Weiss de Rossi, Luna Alston de Gallegos, and Laura Mulhall Gironde are representative of the openness and the inclusiveness of the *Salón Femenino*. The variety of female activities in the arts, including more innovative approaches such as Laura Mulhall Gironde's, was welcome. Furthermore, this open-mindedness was demonstrated in another trait of this all-female show: the coexistence of very established and emerging artists.

Art critics often questioned this characteristic and used it to devaluate the efforts of the *Club Argentino de Mujeres*. Many commented on the excessive number of admitted artworks. Others, like Pilar de Lusarreta, chose to emphasize the positive dimension of the inclusion of women in different stages of their careers: "In this year's *Salón Femenino*, all the exhibitors are artists; among them, some [are] excellent, others [are] mediocre and others [are] inferior; but they are not spiritually amateurs; they see art, not a pastime, but as a work; and they charge at it with awareness of their obligations and duties as artists..."<sup>38</sup>

Thus, some voices spoke against the patriarchal clichés of the "accomplished lady" model. The show, its organization and the works exhibited were clear evidence of a new and powerful female presence in the art scene.

### Honoring women and judging women

When Ana Weiss de Rossi began exhibiting in the *Club Argentino de Mujeres*, she was already recognized as a major figure in the local art scene. As such, she was invited in 1936 as a guest of honor of the *Salón Femenino*. This regular practice was at the heart of the *Salón Femenino*, for one of its main goals was to strengthen the presence of women in the arts and to turn the achievements of women visible.

The guests of honor had a rather large retrospective staged within the *Salón*. For example, Antonia Ventura y Verazzi (dates unknown), invited in 1935, exhibited a selection of over fifty works, including paintings, drawings, and examples of graphic art.<sup>39</sup> Portraits, nudes, and still lifes were shown, thus giving a complete sample of the artist's skills. In 1937 the *Salón Femenino* included a guest of honor from a foreign country: the Galician painter Elena Olmos (1899-1983).

<sup>36</sup> "Es lástima que en nuestras academias de arte y en los estudios particulares de actuación docente no se enseñe a los alumnos, junto con las reglas del dibujo y de la perspectiva, con la armonización del color, la anatomía y demás gajes de la técnica, la responsabilidad moral con que, si es sincero y honesto, ha de cargar el pintor." Pilar de Lusarreta, "Laura Mulhall Gironde," *El Hogar*, Buenos Aires, 24 November 1933, 76.

<sup>37</sup> [José León Pagano], "El VI Salón Femenino de Bellas Artes," pages not numbered.

<sup>38</sup> "En el *Salón Femenino* de este año, todas las expositoras son artistas; de entre ellas, unas excelentes, otras mediocres y otras inferiores; pero no son espiritualmente aficionadas; ven en el arte, no un pasatiempo, sino una labor; y arremeten a ella con conciencia de sus obligaciones y deberes de artistas..." Pilar de Lusarreta, "El V Salón Femenino de Bellas Artes," *El Hogar*, Buenos Aires, 13 December 1935, 12.

<sup>39</sup> "Exposiciones de arte," *El Hogar*, Buenos Aires, 13 December 1935, pages not numbered.





Figure 5. Laura Mulhall Gironde (1912-1975), *Desnudo (Nude)*, present whereabouts unknown. José León Pagano Papers, Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires.

Olmos was the daughter of the former Argentine consul in the city of A Coruña, where she grew up. Olmos arrived in Buenos Aires in 1937, fleeing from the fascist *Falange*. By inviting her, the organizers of the exhibition were not only honoring her career, but also taking sides and supporting the many Spanish émigrés living in Buenos Aires at the time, many of them women artists and intellectuals.

By honoring these women, the *Salón Femenino* engaged in the construction of a more diverse and gender-inclusive history. Ironically, the vast majority of the distinguished artists celebrated in these events are nowadays almost completely forgotten.

The *Salón Femenino* did not only honor women by inviting them to show a representative ensemble of their work. The jury played a key role in the legitimization of women artists as professionals. The members of the *Salón Nacional* jury were traditionally male artists and critics. In 1934 the acclaimed female painter Lía Correa Morales (1893-1975)

became the first woman to be part of the jury in the category of painting (Fig. 6). In clear contrast, the shows organized by the *Club Argentino de Mujeres* had both men and women serving in the jury. The inclusion of men could have been perceived as some sort of guarantee of the quality of the artworks that received awards.

More importantly, the female presence in the jury served to present male and female artists as equally capable of judging artworks. The women who participated in the jury came from different backgrounds, had various degrees of visibility, and artistic interests. Women such as painter Ana Weiss de Rossi, miniature portraitist Luna Alston de Gallegos, and sculptor Josefa “Pepa” Dantas Lacombe were members of the jury next to established male artists and art critics such as sculptors Alfredo Bigatti and Ernesto Soto Avendaño, and art critic José León Pagano.



Figure 6. The painter Lía Correa Morales participates in the jury of the *Sal3n Nacional* in 1934, becoming the first woman to do so. Biblioteca Nacional, Buenos Aires.

The economic importance of the *Sal3n Femenino* is still unclear. The fact that the archives of the *Club Argentino de Mujeres* have not been preserved makes it extremely difficult to understand this aspect of the show. The catalogues of the exhibitions do not include the prices of the works, so it is possible to assume that the works were not for sale and that the exhibitions simply helped to establish the status of the artists. Thus, the *Sal3n Femenino* could have acted as a key event in the professionalization of women's careers, leading to commercial recognition at some point. Women artists at the time were indeed part of the art market, selling works both to official institutions and to private collectors.

### Final thoughts

Much work needs to be done in this new field, the study of the all-women shows, not only in Argentina but also in the rest of Latin America.

If the topic of female artists in Argentina is insufficiently studied, then all-female shows are almost unknown. Researching the all-women shows between the 1920s and the 1940s allows us to shed light on the activities of a rather large group of women artists who were erased from the traditional narratives. In Argentina, the history of the art scene of the period was built upon male figures, true modern art heroes. The works of the many female artists that worked in Argentina were simply discarded as either too traditional to make it to the headlines of art history or as too singular to even be considered in historical terms. The memory of these events, though widely reviewed and clearly attractive for women artists from different backgrounds and with diverse intentions, has simply faded.

It is difficult to establish a precise ideological or political position for these exhibitions, for the organizers and participating artists did not confront social expectations openly. However,

there was a clear challenge towards the established mechanisms of visibility and recognition in the art world, which kept women in subordinate places. In this sense, these events questioned the power relations in the culture and were political, as they challenged the underestimation of women as artists and as cultural agents, for the entire organization was in the hands of women.

The marginalization of these exhibitions in the traditional narratives of Argentine art history is due, at least in part, to the assumption that the women who exhibited in these spaces had only a very sporadic dedication to artistic practice. However, many of these women exhibited regularly at the *Salón Nacional*, even if their works rarely received the medals and recognition their creators hoped for in that male-dominated arena.

The all-women shows organized in Buenos Aires by the *Club Argentino de Mujeres* between the 1920s and the 1940s were clear manifestations of the intersection of feminism, in the widest sense of the word, and the art world. The organizers and artists walked a thin line between the struggle of women as an oppressed group and the celebration of an essential feminine difference. The conflict between feminist ideals and the celebration of femininity remained unsolved.

However, the *Salón Femenino* cannot simply be isolated from a larger questioning of male authority. The celebrated writer Victoria Ocampo (1890-1979) expressed this feeling in a radio talk in 1936, broadcasted in Spain and Argentina:

Last year I heard, by chance, the telephone conversation, between Buenos Aires and Berlin, of a businessman. He spoke to his wife to place some orders. He started like this: "Do not interrupt me". She obeyed so well and he took his monologue so seriously, that the three minutes went by without the poor woman having a chance to make a sound. And since my businessman was stingy, that was the conversation.<sup>40</sup>

Ocampo's words highlight the changing role of women in Argentine society in the 1930s, a process of which the *Salón Femenino* is strong evidence. There are many untold stories regarding the role of Argentine women in art; this is just one of them. Recovering these lost traces may contribute to the writing of a more complex and more equitable history of art.

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<sup>40</sup> "El año pasado asistí, por casualidad, a la conversación telefónica, entre Buenos Aires y Berlín, de un hombre de negocios. Hablaba a su mujer para hacerle unos encargos. Empezó así: 'No me interrumpas'. Ella obedeció tan bien, y él tomó tan en serio su monólogo, que los tres minutos reglamentarios transcurrieron sin que la

pobre mujer tuviera ocasión de emitir un sonido. Y como mi hombre de negocios era tacaño, en eso paró la conversación." Victoria Ocampo, *La mujer y su expresión* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1936), 11-12.