

Designs of the Oppressed

Week 4 (03-09/11/2022): Design History from a feminist perspective

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Despite women being involved with design in the most varied ways - as professionals in the field, theorists, historians, consumers and as objects of representation -, the literature on the history, theory and practice of design would lead us to believe that their contributions were minimal, since the interventions of the feminine sectors in the field of design, both in the past and in the present, were and still are, many times, ignored (BUCKLEY, 1986).

Women were historically segregated from social and political life, resulting in invisibility as a subject (LOURO, 2007). Women were also excluded from art academies for a long time, they did not attend classes with a live model, because it was considered inappropriate to observe naked bodies. European bourgeois society in the 19th century established classifications of what was a “feminine” art, as opposed to a “masculine” art, contributing to the creation of stereotypes about the intellectual capacities associated with the sexes (SIMIONI, 2007, p.91).

The willingness to investigate and rewrite stories from a feminist and women's perspective gained strength in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, motivating numerous studies that aim to reconstruct the contribution and participation of women in various areas of knowledge.

Patriarchy is a central category for feminist criticism, according to Cheryl Buckley, and has limited women's opportunities in different areas of society and design. Patriarchy can be defined as “the power that men use to dominate women” (HOOKS, 2020, p.145). Controversial category in feminist theories, as the notion of domination does not expand discussions about the forms of oppression and domination crossed by other categories such as class and race. Patriarchy results in stereotypes linked to femininity, which define behaviors considered appropriate for women. These stereotypes have a great influence on physical spaces, both in the public and private spheres, in relationships and types of occupations, as well as

in the areas of expertise in design. Patriarchy, according to Buckley, values areas of design in which men are active, such as industrial design, and devalues fields in which women work, such as textiles and craft productions.

Buckley argues that the terms of downgrading certain undervalued areas of design must be questioned and challenged. The ideological nature of terms such as “feminine, delicate and decorative” must be discussed in the analysis of the production of women in design. Even disguised as common sense or covered by a language considered scientific, the biological/sexual distinction fundamental in patriarchy “serves to understand — and justify — social inequality” (LOURO, 2007, p. 21).

The roles performed by men are considered more cultural than natural. In contrast, women are more associated with “natural” functions, according to their biological ability to reproduce. Thus, activities related to the care and feeding of the family are associated with women as an extension of their biological abilities.

In design, women are considered skilled decorators and meticulous professionals, with a natural preference for decorative arts such as embroidery, illustration, fabrics, tapestry, sewing and ceramics. Men can work in the same areas, but activities must be redefined in terms acceptable to masculinities. An example used by Buckley is fashion, an area associated with femininity. When men work in this area, they redefine their performance through genius, creativity, originality and aggressive business-focused marketing.

Buckley argues that the design definition is also decisive in the exclusion or inclusion of women, as is design defined in terms of large-scale industrial production. Feminist theorists have argued that design that emphasizes only one form of production makes women's work invisible because it excludes artisanal and small-scale production. The place of production also interferes with visibility: the domestic sphere does not receive the same appreciation as the industry, because the sphere of work/company is part of a more explicit capitalist logic, which considers the factory or office as the space for paid professional work, specialized, while the domestic sphere is considered as a space for reproduction, care, unpaid, amateur or low-skilled work.

Some factors can reinforce or decrease the invisibility of women in design. Partnerships, whether through family relationships or marriage, can either decrease or increase the erasure of female designers. May Morris, for example, came to command her father's workshop, was responsible for fabrics and tapestries, for the artisanal rigor of the embroidery that she mastered, however, her contributions ended up overshadowed by the production of William Morris in official records. Social class is also a fundamental factor, as women who have had access to formal education have different possibilities of action. Race is another category that can increase or decrease invisibility. White women have a very different experience and life trajectory than black women. Ann Cole Lowe, a black American designer, responsible for several successful costumes in Hollywood, faced numerous difficulties to study and act as a designer, in a period marked by racial segregation.

By understanding categories that underpinned the erasure of women from the Design History, we can transform our ways of perceiving and being in the world, modifying not only our performance in the field of design, but our most diverse daily practices (CRESTO and FRANÇA, 2021).

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