This is the year the ladies celebrate the centenary of the feminist movement, organized in this country at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. Though the principal objects of that movement were to secure political equality for women and full legal and educational rights, it also had its effect on the art world. And women artists made their contribution to women’s freedom just as the pioneering women doctors, lawyers, and scholars did. They forced open the doors of the art schools, and their often willful Bohemian independence frequently placed them in the vanguard which broke down the confining Victorian conventions. In the early years of the century the “female” artist was generally one of two things; she was either a pale tubercular creature laboring over a tiny slab of ivory tickling out a miniature portrait for small pay, or she was a genteel amateur politely and decoratively wasting time with water colors. By the end of the century the rights of women artists at least were an established fact.

Curiously enough the organized feminists were then so busy diffusing their enormous powers in moral reforms and exercising censorships in the arts through their purity leagues, temperance unions, and societies for the suppression of vice that they had no time to count the liberties won for them by pioneering women artists. In fact artists of all kinds were lumped together by the righteous with gamblers, actors, dancers as a scandalous lot of unprincipled riff-raff. In only one or two cases did the puritan feminists select women artists as models of the new emancipated woman. The women artists themselves seemed content to leave reform and censorship to their less dreamy (or more inhibited) sisters. The artists’ contribution to women’s freedom and equality was so little appreciated that when Women’s Work in America was published in 1891 no mention of feminine artists was to be found in it.

This interesting chapter in the history of American art has, impolitely, it seems, received but little attention. The remarkable change in regard to women artists that took place amounted in fact to a social revolution, and the drastic nature of the modification stands especially clear when one contrasts the few lady amateurs of the early years of the century with the hundreds of serious women painters, sculptresses, and craftswomen—the students and professional practitioners of the nineties. The history of this change is one possessing many curious and almost unexplored ramifications which touch here and there on the widely divergent or parallel currents that molded and colored American life in the last century.

There have always been women who earned their living as artists, of course, and the names of some who worked in the United States in the first half of the century readily come to mind: Jane Stuart, Jane Sully, Sarah Cole, Ann Leslie, and the painting ladies of the Peale family. It

is to be noted that these women were all daughters or sisters of artists and they all had special opportunities to live in the atmosphere of the studio at home. They were exceptional cases and they were accepted without too much ado as the women artists of the eighteenth century had been.

As the century progressed changes began to appear. Some women who exhibited their work at the early annual exhibitions in this country disguised themselves in decorous anonymity—it was not considered ladylike to have one's name displayed in vulgar print in a public place. Curiously enough, at about the same time that some ladies became so retiring, new forces were at work that were to bring the lady artists out of their domestic seclusion. First of these was the movement for “improving the educational opportunities of females.” The female seminaries and institutes organized in the 1820's and 30's all gave courses in “correct drawing” and water-color sketching. The arts received the ultimate stamp of respectability as a leisurely and ladylike pastime when it became known that the young Queen Victoria herself, under the gentle guidance of the Prince Consort and the tutelage of Sir Edwin Landseer, had been sketching out of doors in the Scottish Highlands.

Other forces too were at work, social forces as powerful as the British queen, which brought women into the field of the arts. Royal precedent and educational opportunity were assisted by the sudden expansion of the so-called art industries, where rapid mass production by machine called for cheap skilled hand labor—designers, pattern-makers, china-painters, rug and textile designers, and “hand-finishers.” One of the first indications that women artisans were in demand was the foundation in 1844 of the Philadelphia School of Design for Women, a bold project organized by Mrs. Sarah Peter. It is significant that for a number of years this school was carried on by the Franklin Institute, a body concerned more with science and industry than with art. (The Academy of Fine Arts was dozing, as academies will.) A similar school was started in New York about 1854 by a Miss Hamilton—this was later supplanted by Cooper Union in their Free Art School for Women in 1859. At this time a number of women artists were earning their living as designers for the carpet factory at Lowell and in the Merrimack Print Works. Some even rose above the anonymous mass of factory workers and made little reputations for themselves—there was Sarah MacIntosh who made cut glass patterns, Bianca Bondi, the wood engraver, and Fanny Palmer, who designed lithographs for Currier and Ives. This female invasion of the art industries is noted in a description of the E. V. Houghwout Establishment, a factory and showroom in Broadway at Broome Street, published in 1859. The article states: “The employment of females in (china-painting) is but the forerunner of their more general employ in all the arts of design. . . . As painters, burnishers, &c. they perform quite half the labor of this great house. The day of woman’s disenthralment from the poor pittance and peril of the seamstress’s life is at hand.”

Before the Civil War some books on art were published especially for the instruction of women. Two examples will suffice to show the cur-
rent attitudes; their titles in themselves are clues. In 1845 there appeared in London The Handbook of Useful and Ornamental Amusement and Accomplishments, Including Artificial Flower Making, Engraving, Etching, Painting in All Its Styles, Modelling, Carving in Wood, Ivory and Shell, Also Fancy Work of Every Description, By A Lady. Such books were soon imported and later imitated in works like Madame Urbino’s Art Recreations, issued in Boston in 1860.

In 1859 that painfully elegant penwoman Mrs. Ellet published her Women Artists in All Ages and Countries. The very fact that such a book was compiled and issued in this country is perhaps not without significance to our subject. It is an odd compound of literary piracy, scholarship, and sentiment, braced with a mild grade of feminism. The introduction reveals that Mrs. Ellet found most of her book ready made (except for translation) in Professor Ernst Guhl’s Die Frauen in die Kunstgeschichte, published in Berlin in 1858. To this learned work Mrs. Ellet added five chapters on women artists of the nineteenth century culled from various sources. The last three chapters are devoted to American women.

A great many of the ladies listed here were never much more than amateurs, but she had discovered about fifty American female artists and hints that many more could be mentioned. There were plenty of miniature painters, a few art teachers (Mrs. Ball Hughes, Mrs. Chapin, and Miss Hamilton), there was a small but solid corps of sculptresses (Mrs. Lupton, Mrs. Wilson, Mrs. Dubois, all amateurs, and the professionals, then quite young, Hattie Hosmer, Louisa Lander, Margaret Foley, and Emma Stebbins). Among the painters named were Eliza Greatorex, Phoebe Pickering Jenks, and Mary Swinton Legaré, a Carolina blue stocking who was often heard to exclaim, “Could I but paint one picture like Doughty’s!” Her View on the French Broad (a Carolina River) was purchased by the proprietors of the Art Union in 1834.

In general the progress of the female artists before 1860 may be traced by the exhibition record of the National Academy of Design (recently compiled by Miss Bartlett Cowdrey). The year following the foundation of the Academy five women painters and one sculptress were elected to the rank of “Artist of the Academy” and in 1828 they were all promoted in rank to Associate or Honorary Member. None of these ladies is very well remembered today. The lonely sculptress was Mrs. Francis L. Lupton, and the others in this vanguard of professional women artists were: Miss Anne Hall, famous for her miniature copies of paintings by the old masters; Miss Julia Fulton, daughter of Robert; Miss Rosalba Peale, daughter of Rembrandt, and the Misses Emily and Maria Maverick.

Between 1830 and 1860 about eighty women exhibited at the National Academy of Design, most of them miniature painters. In those years only Jane Sully of Philadelphia was elected an Honorary Member (1831). However, five other ladies were singled out for election as Associates. These were three of some social prominence, Mrs. James Bogardus (miniaturist), Miss
Emma Stebbins (crayon portraitist), Mrs. Cornelia Dubois (an amateur sculptress and better known as a founder of the Children’s Hospital), and two professional painters Mrs. Hermine Dassell (a German immigrant trained in Düsseldorf) and Mrs. Lilly Martin Spencer of Newark, the best of all of them, who captivated the local connoisseurs with her humorous genre scenes.

At the beginning of the Civil War all the ground work had been marked out for the developments of the last three decades of the century. In the war years women artists contributed their paintings to be sold in the art galleries of the Sanitary Fairs to raise money for the wounded soldiers. Other women served as active members of the organizing committees of the art departments of these fairs. This precedent doubtless had its effect later on the formation and activities of the Women’s Committee of the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876 and resulted in the grand flourish and procedural pomps of the formidable Board of Lady Managers at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.

Shortly after the Civil War a Ladies Art Association was founded in New York (1867) and in the late sixties a few very determined American girls forced their way into the ateliers of Paris, hot on the heels of their brother artists. Several American sculptresses had already appeared in Rome in the 1850’s. Soon serious female art students from America could be found scattered in the countryside around Paris under white canvas sketching umbrellas.

As the years passed, more and more American girls found the means to study abroad for a year. Many of them, quite poor, had skimped and scraped along at home for years saving up for the great adventure. An historical document which most faithfully reveals the character and habitat of the feminine art student of the seventies and eighties, her teachers, her boarding houses, her fears and delights, and her dressmaker’s bills, is a little book published in 1879 by Louisa May Alcott’s sister May (Madame Nieriker), the artist of the Alcott clan.

While Louisa was grinding out her stories (“moral pap for the young”), establishing herself as a major force in shaping the minds of generations of American women, her sister May endeavored to start an art class in Concord. She drew about her all the talented girls of the neighborhood, and two young men, later to be famous sculptors, also owed her much for inspiration and encouragement (Edwin Elwell and Daniel Chester French). But May was always especially interested in helping girls who wished so earnestly to study art. Miss May’s greatest contribution in this direction is her book Studying Art Abroad and How to Do It Cheaply. It is full of prudent and practical advice on where to buy sturdy ready-made undergarments as well as cheap art materials in London and Paris. The timid voyager is told that the higher price of passage on a “Cunarder” is worth the extra expense because of the sense of fatherly protection given by the gallant captains. Girls who were not too proud were advised to take paper collars and cuffs for the great saving on laundry bills. Suitable sketching grounds for “booking” picturesque and saleable potboilers are minutely described. In London,

Art student sketching in Normandy. From the “Monthly Illustrator,” 1895
she says, the whole history of painting “from Cimabue to Rosa Bonheur” is spread before one at the National Gallery; however, the copyists to be found there are a light-minded and idle set, very annoying. For your “black silk” (the “little basic dress” of the time) you must go to Hilditch’s for durable stuff at low prices.

“All Paris,” she says, “is apt to strike the newcomer as being but one vast studio” and a sketching excursion in the country “is like opening a portfolio of sketches by Millet.” In the city the “well ventilated” atelier of Monsieur Krug, 11 Boulevard Clichy, “devoted to female students in all branches of art” is especially recommended, for there “one has the advantage of severe and discriminating . . . criticism . . . from Monsieur Carl Müller, the painter of the well-known Conciergerie During the Reign of Terror.” Since the students in this atelier were all women “the much discussed question of the propriety of women’s studying from the nude” in mixed classes never arose.

A tour of the Paris studios of American artists of both sexes, says Miss May, revealed that in general the work of American women was “far superior and, what is somewhat surprising, far stronger in style than most of that done by the men.” Always excepting, of course, the work of Mr. John Sargent. No other man exhibits “in his pictures the splendid coloring always to be found in the work of Miss Cassatt (Mary Cassatt) of Philadelphia, or the strength and vigor of Miss Dodson’s Deborah.”

Rome was, in her estimation, a place much better suited for the student of sculpture than for the painter, but any girl planning to winter in Rome should prepare herself with plenty of flannel petticoats, and a copy of Hawthorne’s Marble Faun.

At first the ladies had some difficulties in gaining admittance to classes in American art schools. A writer of the eighties recalls that “not twenty-five years ago, the appearance of a young lady student in the antique room of the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts created . . . a sensation. When a few years later, a life class for women was begun, it almost created a riot.” During the winter season of 1871-1872 the National Academy of Design, after a great deal of hemming and hawing, opened its doors to women. The following year the classes for women were not resumed on the feeble plea of “lack of funds.” This short-sighted move was one of the main factors in bringing about the organization of the Art Students’ League (1875). Ten years later it was believed that no artistic center in Europe offered so many advantages to women studying art as New York.

Some of the leading lady artists of the 1870’s were Mrs. Henry A. Loop, the portrait painter; Cornelia Adele Fassett, who sold her tremendous group picture The Electoral Commission in Open Session to Congress for $15,000 (it contained 258 recognizable portraits); and Elizabeth Jane Gardner, who later became Madame Bougereau. The younger generation of the 1880’s included Anna Elizabeth Klumpke, disciple and biographer of Rosa Bonheur; Ella Condie (Mrs. Lamb), who designed church furnishings; Caroline Powell, the illustrator; and Helena deKay Gilder, in whose front parlor the rebel Society of American Artists was organized in ’77. All these and many more are to be found listed in Clara Clement’s Art and Artists of the Nineteenth Century (1879).
In the 1880's, especially after Oscar Wilde's lecture tour in 1882, a great number of schools of decorative or applied arts were started. Even the Christian Endeavor societies in obscure towns in the hinterland had their evening drawing and design classes. The artistically inclined ladies who could afford neither the time nor the money for an art tour of Europe, or even for a year of study in New York, were, however, not idle. Those who could not paint flowers as prettily as Miss Fidelia Bridges, or kittens snarled in yarn as skillfully as Miss Elizabeth Bonsall, began to turn their hands to the production of what were known as "Household elegancies"—embroidered plush lambrequins and portieres painted with cattails. China-painting became a raging mania even though "it must be confessed . . . that the odors of violet, which are supposed to float from the presence of refined womanhood, are sadly overcome by the combined fragrance of turpentine and lavender or—worse—oil of aniseed, which persistently haunt the porcelain painter's studio."
The field of applied art was almost exclusively populated with women who, with varying skill, embellished everything they touched.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century American women artists had achieved their goal of full equality with men. Many American women were not only supporting themselves as professional artists, they were also competing successfully for honors at the Annual Paris Salons as well as at the annual exhibitions at home. Though several cash prizes were established as annual awards for women painters none of the men seemed to think this discriminatory. The Mary Smith Prize given by the Pennsylvania Academy was awarded with almost monotonous regularity to Miss Cecelia Beaux. Women artists readily found employment as teachers of drawing, design, anatomy, as well as china-painting, in the schools which sprang up after the Centennial Exposition.

Perhaps the full realization of the changed status of women artists is best illustrated by their prominence at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, and here most especially in the Woman's Building. There was a Woman's Pavilion at the Centennial in Philadelphia in 1876 but this, compared with the later building, was only a faint indication of what the ladies could do. The Philadelphia Woman's Pavilion housed an array of tortured woodwork made by the carving girls of the Cincinnati Art Academy, a statue of Woman modeled in butter, and quantities of needlework. Things were very different in Chicago eighteen years later. In 1893, by decree of Mrs. Potter Palmer and the Board of Lady Managers, there rose a stately plaster palace facing a lagoon full of gondolas imported direct from Venice. It was designed in the Italian Renaissance style approved by the best academic taste of the Ecole des Beaux Arts. The architect, Miss Sophia G. Hayden, recently graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, though a competent draughtswoman, had never supervised the actual construction of one of her designs. She, poor girl, was driven to a state of mental collapse by the conflicting and imperious architectural whims of the ladies of the Board. However, the structure was completed
on time and Miss Sophia accepted her thousand dollar prize, her expenses, and a precious letter of congratulation from the dean of American architects, Richard Morris Hunt.

All matters of art were placed in the capable and practiced hands of Mrs. Candace Wheeler (founder of the Decorative Arts Society), who was known as "the artistic genius of the Woman's Building." The decoration of this building—the architectural sculpture and the mural decorations were all the work of American women artists. It housed all sorts of things of interest to women and things made by women, ranging from a model kindergarten to a faintly Babylonian lounge on the roof known as "the Hanging Gardens." The display of women's arts and handicrafts was astonishing in size and variety; perhaps the most novel exhibit was the work of a lady blacksmith from California. The paintings were in large part a mass of academic banality, no better, and certainly no worse than the chef d'oeuvres offered by the men in the Palace of Fine Arts near by. One of the principal exhibits was a collection of relics of Queen Isabella of Spain, that noble woman who pawned her jewels to pay Columbus's way on his epoch-making voyage. And there was Grace Darling's lifeboat surrounded by incredible quantities of lace culled from all the royal houses of Europe.

One work of art that was a notable exception to the general level in this Woman's Building was a mural decoration painted by Mary Cassatt. From the beginning the Board of Lady Managers was rather miffed about this work because, though all the other women artists rushed to contribute their works free, Miss Cassatt, who knew the value of her time, demanded payment. When the mural was unveiled in the court of honor it was received with pained expressions and a good deal of rather shrill criticism. Everyone preferred the walls decorated by Mrs. Frederick MacMonnies or by Lydia Emmet and her sister Rosina.

Miss Cassatt had been given the subject Modern Woman. On the wall opposite was Mary MacMonnies' Primitive Woman for contrast. Primitive woman was a tame allegorical poster showing women doing the ancient tasks that women should—caring for the young, wrestling with the rudimentary loom, and meekly toting water jars on their heads. Miss Cassatt's Modern Woman, on the other hand, seemed to be doing things she shouldn't. One of the principal troubles was that Miss Cassatt treated her wall space as a decorative problem and not at all as a sounding board for the feminist propaganda then rampant. For her there was no room for allegorical commonplaces acted out by sweet-faced prairie belles in classic robes. Though her subject was treated as a flat color pattern, obviously influenced by Japanese print design, it was certainly not without meaning.

In fact, as one studies the pictures of this mural today, the feeling grows increasingly strong that this decoration was perhaps a most pointed and telling comment on the modern woman of 1893. Miss Cassatt was noted in her day for her sharp tongue and her down-to-earth opinions. She was reputed to be one of the few people who could match words with the notoriously vitriolic Degas, her friend and master. One feels sure that there was small place in her vocabulary for platitudes about "the nobility of American womanhood," that favorite phrase, that battle cry of the time, or platitudes about anything for that matter, except, perhaps babies, an amiable feminine weakness.

The mural, a long horizontal with an arched top, was divided into three panels. In the central panel a group of women and children in pink dresses wander in a sun-flecked orchard gathering apples. "Apples?" the Board of Lady Managers asked themselves; were these merely country girls frolicking among the winesaps or were they modern Eves pilfering the bitter fruit of the tree of knowledge? Bad as this central panel seemed there was worse on either side. In the panel on the left were shown a nude girl soaring into space and three women running after her in joyous abandon across a grassy meadow pursued by hissing geese. "Geese?" How very perverse and impertinent of Miss Cassatt. In the panel on the right were shown two women seated on the grass, one playing a guitar, and behind them danced a girl whirling her skirts in the most shockingly carefree manner, quite like those shameless lost creatures.
The Letter, a print by Mary Cassatt. Gift of Paul J. Sachs, 1917. Lady at a Tea Table, painting by Mary Cassatt. Gift of the artist, 1923
who pranced in the tawdry sideshows of the Midway.

The Ladies of the Board were not only embarrassed, they did not know whether they were being outrageously teased or flatly insulted. Modern Woman was quite too sacred a subject to be treated flippantly with geese and skirt dancers, and surely this was no place to bring up an uncomfortable Bible story even though it most certainly did revolve around a woman. Miss Cassatt had evidently been exposed altogether too long to the debilitating shams of foreign society and had forgotten how seriously organized American women could take themselves. She was, unfortunately, so prominent as an artist, and so well connected socially, that the mural could not be withdrawn; besides they had been forced to pay for it. It could, however, be ignored, and in the official history of the Fair no picture of it appears.

In the turmoil of closing the exposition this interesting painting by the best and most important American woman artist of the time seems to have been lost or mislaid—perhaps it was deliberately destroyed—perhaps it is buried in some dusty Chicago loft or storeroom, awaiting rediscovery.

By the end of the century the Emancipated Woman was (except for the power to vote) a gloriously realized actuality. Everyone was reading George du Maurier’s *Trilby*, and every girl thought she could be an artist’s inspiration and model, if not an artist. A sub-species of the Emancipated Woman was the Truly Artistic Woman, a pre-Raphaelitish creature, an aesthetic literary phenomenon, who appeared in flowing dun-colored robes adorned with stylized stenciled tulips. She could talk knowingly about art and artists though she never touched brush to canvas.

As the new century loomed upon the horizon women, as well as men, faced its dawning ready for what it might bring. But murmurs were heard from Boston condemning what was known as “Feminine Bohemianism.” One of these Bohemians, doubting the value of her hard-won freedoms, wrote: “The great outside world sees only the jolly chafing-dish side of female Bohemianism . . . . The man who has participated in the creating of a Welsh rarebit and has tossed his cigarette-stumps into the grate while he told ludicrous stories, sometimes with a bit of ginger in them, needs no exposition of this side of the question. He perhaps never dreams that those same girls who know how to entertain so royally, and laugh so merrily . . . . in their cozy dens . . . . know, too, how to conceal an aching heart beneath a mask of smiles.”

But in spite of the heartache and the perils of life in the city to which the girls were exposed, they remained faithful to the arts, though only a few won through to affluence and great reputation. They made wonderful teachers, they were dexterous and clever and very adaptable as pupils. Some could imitate the works of their masters, Hunt, Chase, LaFarge, and Eakins so closely as almost to defy detection. There was Caroline May of Boston, a pupil of Allston’s who worked in his style, and later many women worked in the hazy manner of Hunt. There was Miss Charlotte Coman who could turn out a good “misty Corot” landscape with ease and countless lady animal-painters who followed in the footsteps of that old master Rosa Bonheur, notably Matilda Lotz, who specialized in portraits of camels.

In the nineties “the regenerative influence of the girl student” was noticeable in taming down the Bohemian atmosphere of the art schools, and the men mourned the good old carefree days in ’75 before the schools were overrun with women. In fact American women painters seemed to be everywhere—they were working in Tokyo and Biskra as well as in the more usual foreign art centers. When the Empress of China consented to have her portrait painted by a foreign devil Miss Kate Carl of New Orleans was selected for that honor. Women artists were painting and modeling, designing and decorating; no field of art was closed to them and in every field they were honored with prizes and commissions, some won in equal competition with men.

However, in spite of prizes, medals, and fame, and unlimited opportunity, it was still maintained, in some quarters, that the greatest contribution to the world of art that could be made by any woman was to be the mother of a genius.