
Led by a Franco-Brazilian team of scholars in the humanities, social sciences, arts and literatures, this joint research project is developing a digital platform for Transatlantic Cultural History to be published in four languages. In a series of essays exploring cultural relations between Europe, Africa, and the Americas, it presents a connected history of the Atlantic space since the 18th century, highlighting the cultural dynamics of the Atlantic region and its crucial role in the contemporary process of globalization.

Women Artists across the Atlantic

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☐ South Atlantic - North Atlantic - Africa - Europe - Caribbean - South America - North America

☐ The Atlantic Space Within Globalization - The Consolidation of Mass Cultures - The Steam Atlantic - Atlantic Revolutions and Colonialism

This collection focuses on the women artists and mediators who have shaped the history of the Atlantic. In addition to the canonical figures, it also includes the intermediaries who usually remain in the shadows. The history of women's emancipation has been shaped by these journeys, which have sparked transformations that expand our imaginaries.

This collection of articles was born of a realization: in 2024, that the [Transatlantic Cultures](#) platform featured only six monographic articles devoted to women—[Sarah Bernhardt](#), [Gisèle Freund](#), [Sarah Maldoror](#), [Tina Modotti](#), [Amália Rodrigues](#), [Susan Sontag](#)—even though they were also mentioned in many other texts. At the same time, nearly forty monographic articles focused on men. This gap reflects the state of research and the greater recognition accorded to men in cultural history. Although the editorial team includes an equal number of men and women, as well as scholars specializing in women's history, the privileged place traditionally allotted to male figures reappears unless specific steps are taken to ensure that men and women are adequately recognized as historical agents. A simple statistical count was enough to reveal the extent to which this classic disproportion affected our own project. The international conference "Women artists in the Atlantic space: migration, creation, emancipation" held from April 3 to 5, 2025 at the Abbey of Royaumont aimed at remedying this disparity by encouraging contributions on the role of women in the history of transatlantic cultural circulations.

The aim of this collection, which brings together publications resulting in part from the conference and which will be enriched with new articles over time, is to examine the ways in which geographical displacement opened up spaces for creation and opportunities for emancipation, in order to consider the history of cultural circulation from the point of view of women. This approach invites us to look beyond the canonical history of the arts, towards other genres, other temporalities, other networks and actors. Addressing women's artistic creation entails bypassing the mythological stature of the few celebrated women artists, to widen the focus and tackle genres which are sometimes considered "minor" but widely practiced by women, such as children's literature, textile arts, travel writing or translation. Our goal is both to revisit the history of key figures in the light of these transatlantic exchanges, and to (re)discover less visible personalities.

Creators and cultural intermediaries

The articles gathered here seek to identify, retrace and problematize the trajectories of women pursuing artistic careers, in order to question the effect of these journeys across the Atlantic (whether temporary or permanent, voluntary or forced, individual or

collective) on their political emancipation as well as on the legitimization of artistic practices. In the wake of the social sciences' analysis of art, encompassing all the actors who contribute to the production of culture, this collection focuses both on the artists themselves and on cultural intermediaries involved in the making, circulating and legitimizing of artworks. Far from being mutually exclusive categories, these two roles—the artist and the cultural broker—often coexist in the same individual. All the more so as circulation itself turns artists into intermediaries par excellence between different countries, languages, cities, circuits and artistic fields.

Authors in this collection discuss the journeys of various women artists, whose frequently multifaceted careers require us to redefine the vernacular divisions between “fine” and “minor” arts, or between “art” and “crafts.” Several texts also invite us to analyze the role of women as cultural intermediaries—whether as translators, collectors, publishers, patrons, or teachers—, as well as women hosting social gatherings (salons, bookshops, galleries) or involved in activist networks (mobilizing for cultural rights and shaping cultural policies, among others). These women intermediaries are often overshadowed by the authors or artists whose work they bring to light, especially when they belong to an artistic couple or a collective. And yet, by creating bridges between cultural scenes, they play an essential role in the circulation of works and ideas. The analysis of artistic couples, the way in which they are recomposed and, for some, decomposed in the course of their travels across the Atlantic, deepening the erasure of women or, on the contrary, minimizing it, constitutes a major issue here.

Travel as emancipation

This collection allows us to explore and test the hypothesis that travel is a factor in emancipation. For some women, travel plays a foundational role in their work, their creativity or their political and feminist commitment, opening up horizons that were previously closed, beyond the conventions and expectations that traditionally weighed on their lives. Indirectly, individuals and ideals traveling from one side of the Atlantic to the other also become reference points that broaden cultural imaginations, definitions of gender and conceptions of femininity. The history of women's emancipation has been shaped by these cultural exchanges, and in return has brought about transformations and innovations that continue to permeate our societies. Raising the question of women's specific places and trajectories thus opens a stimulating path for renewing research themes and shedding light on forgotten, overlooked or invisibilized figures. The analysis of these trajectories also enables us to identify other practices and strategies of cultural and artistic circulation, which are often less “institutionalized,” less “public,” but which nonetheless bring into relief the importance of informal socialization circles and networks of solidarity between women.

The very principle of a collection dedicated to women artists across the Atlantic raises several difficulties. The first one is the risk of a double essentialization, reducing the figures concerned to their gender on the one hand, and to their geographical identities on the other. This reductive prism cannot be the only grid for analyzing their work. Beyond the history of women alone, these journeys also tell us a cultural history in the broadest sense, and help analyze issues that concern men too. For this reason, the various articles in this collection are always accessible via the thematic entries on this site, by geographical region, historical period or theme (visual arts, music, etc.).

The second pitfall is that of maintaining a regime of exceptionality for women artists, relegating a little further into the shadows those who operate in the background, particularly when they are in a relationship and dedicated to the glory of their more renowned husbands. The very notion of emancipation deserves to be questioned, as it can take so many different forms. It should never be used as a normative criterion to assess the success of some women at the expense of others. Highlighting these trajectories should not give rise to hagiographic narratives or heroic celebrations. In contexts where cosmopolitanism is positively appreciated, women travelers benefit from an added value, even a form of exoticism that offers them the opportunity to reinvent themselves. Expatriation often occurs when they study or when they are about to enter into professional life. It enables them to escape the social context of their origin through networks of solidarity—sometimes tinged with rivalry—between exiles. These opportunities should not, however, obscure the obstacles, failures and difficulties they encounter, sometimes directly linked to their status as women. These obstacles add to and combine with other factors of discrimination linked to social class, skin color or sexual orientation, for example. Female travelers and exiles moving northward from the Global South tend to experience downward social mobility. It is less often the case for

women traveling the other way around.

Despite these limitations, this collection of articles paves the way for further research. In particular, it is possible to pursue studies on exchanges with the African continent, as well as on cultural intermediaries, both within already well-identified networks, as well as less exposed and less privileged environments. Access to sources, and the role of heiresses and intermediaries in the preservation of archives also deserves to be explored in greater depth, as do the discourses and experiences of the women concerned, particularly with regard to their bodies, sexuality and the decision of whether or not they wish to have children. Paying attention to these women travelers invites us to follow a reflexive path that broadens our frameworks, our questions and our methods to renew the cultural history of the Atlantic space.

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