Women Art Educators V: Conversations Across Time

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From Accomplishments to Zines: Schoolgirls and Visual Culture[1]

Mary Ann Stankiewicz
Associate Professor, Art Education, School of Visual Arts
The Pennsylvania State University

Caroline Negus (1814-1867) attended Miss Catharine Fiske's Seminary for seventeen and a half weeks from May to October, 1833, during the summer term when Miss Fiske boarded 40 young ladies as part of the school family.[2] Caroline was billed $36.46 for board and tuition. The receipt found in the Negus Family Papers in Deerfield, Massachusetts recorded other expenses as well: $.16 for pencils; $.24 for blank books; $.10 for postage; $.12 to have shoes mended; $1.00 for Dr. Twitchell (Caroline's family had a history of weak lungs); $.37 for the use of schoolbooks; $5.00 for six weeks tuition in music; and $.06 for drawing paper.[3]

> **Give her another hundred years, . . . give her a room of her own and five hundred a year, let her speak her mind and leave out half that she now puts in, and she will write a better book one of these days. She will be a poet . . . in another hundred years' time.**
> (Woolf, 1927/1959, p. 98)

Rebecca starts college in a few days. The summer of 2001 has been a busy one for my older daughter--getting her driver's license, first paycheck, a credit card in her own name, and now starting college while dually enrolled in high school. She is anxious to be independent, but also more affectionate as we get closer to packing the car and driving to New England. She has chosen an early college, a unique institution that specializes in educating teenagers who are ready for college work, eager to avoid the stresses of many traditional high schools and the boredom of some senior years. The campus is small, with sloping grounds, trees, and a pond. One of the students we met last spring described the school as her home.

Who Was Caroline Negus?

Caroline Negus was a teacher, botanical illustrator, portrait, and miniature painter born in Petersham, Massachusetts, on January 3, 1814. She was the 14th child of Joel and Basmath

[1] This paper is an experiment; I have written a standard historical essay on 19th women and art education with a counterpoint (in italics) of reflections on my summer with two 21st century young women, my daughters. These reflections are deliberately informal in tone, influenced by my readings from Rebecca's collection of zines. By writing from two positions, scholar and mother, I hope to encourage readers to make connections between past and present, to ask questions of both, and to compare schoolgirl visual culture then and now.

[2] Primary source materials on Caroline Negus include the Negus Family Papers and the Fuller-Higginson Family Papers in the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association Library, Deerfield, Massachusetts. Information on Catharine Fiske and her school can be found in the Catherine Fiske Papers, Historical Society of Cheshire County, Keene, New Hampshire (hereafter referred to as HSCC). Research during the summer of 2001 was supported by grants from the Institute for the Arts and Humanistic Studies and from the College of Arts and Architecture, the Pennsylvania State University.

[3] Caroline's total bill was $43.53; after a discount of $3.53, she paid $40, an amount that would be worth $665.20 in 2000 dollars. To repeat these calculations, see Friedman (2000).

Gould Negus, the 11th girl. When Caroline was less than a year old, Joel was injured in a sleigh accident. He died in November 1822, leaving his wife with nine children, two of whom would die during the following year. The older Negus children contributed to support their mother and younger sisters. Caroline's brothers had both been apprenticed before their father's death; Nathan to the painter John Ritto Penniman in Boston. The four oldest girls taught school, braided straw hats or spun yarn as part of the "putting out" system that offered an early source of cash money to women (Dublin, 1994). As the older girls married, they were able to help their mother and younger sisters. Fanny, the second wife of Aaron Fuller of Deerfield, invited her sisters to help with her growing family. In 1826, fifteen-year-old Mary Angela, the sister next to Caroline in age, enrolled in Deerfield Academy, a coeducational secondary school where she was taught drawing and painting along with academic subjects (Flynt, 1988). Although the Negus boys earned their educations through apprenticeship, most of the girls attended, at least briefly, schools that offered early 19th century versions of higher education, including education in art (Kelly, 1999).

Caroline was 19 when she attended Miss Fiske's Seminary. Her studies included rhetoric, philosophy, natural history and botany, as well as, optional music lessons and drawing. When she left the seminary, she moved to Deerfield qualified to teach a district school. Among Caroline's students was Eliza Allen Starr (1824-1901), who remembered learning botany from Miss Negus, making a herbarium and painting a butterfly which her mother kept until her death. According to Eliza, Miss Negus emphasized drawing from life rather than following the common practice of copying engravings (McGovern, 1905).

In June, Rebecca and I stopped in Salem, Massachusetts. Rebecca and her younger sister had wanted to visit the Witch City ever since they watched Sabrina the Teenage Witch and Buffy the Vampire Slayer on television. Rebecca has shared books on Wicca, herbal magic reconstructed from Celtic beliefs, with friends in Florida. Last summer she bought herself a tarot deck. The fact that Rebecca's grandmother was born in Salem in 1907 is peripheral to her reasons for wanting to see the city.

What Caroline Did With Her Education?

Like her brother Nathan (1801-1825) and her nephew the painter George Fuller (1822-1884), Caroline Negus wanted to be an artist. In the late 1830s she moved to Boston where one of her early commissions was a series of botanical drawings lithographed as illustrations for *The American Vegetable Practice*, a guide to family health and herbal remedies first published in 1841 (Mattson, 1845; Hitchings, 1978). The publisher, William Sharp, one of the earliest lithographers in Boston to print in color, was noted for the high quality of his work (Norton, 1978). Caroline's drawings, reproduced through one of the newer technologies of her day, were distributed in a popular format, rather than in the high art of engraving.

In Boston Caroline continued her education, studying German and French, taking singing and piano lessons, and attending "Miss M. Fuller's Philosophical class every Thursday," as she wrote to her cousin, George, in February 1844.

Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) used a conversational format to share her classical education with middle and upper class women in Boston and Cambridge, giving them opportunities for systematic reflections on ideas and life (Capper, 1987). In letters, Caroline described the conversations as a source of "much real healthy instruction" and "an intellectual treat" (Negus Family Papers, PVMAL; Fuller-Higginson Papers, PVMAL). Many 19th century women left school eager to continue self-improvement through reading and informal means of education.

Caroline visited Boston's art dealers and galleries, sharing comments on the work she saw with her cousin George and sometimes sharing a studio as well. She established herself as a painter of miniature portraits, although she also drew full-scale likenesses. According to one report, Caroline charged from $30 to $40 per head for crayon portraits (Penny, 1870). In 1844 Caroline Negus married Richard Hildreth, a high-strung scholar who had written several volumes on a theory of morals and would go on to write a history of the United States. In order to allow her husband to immerse himself in his historical writing, Caroline took on all the household responsibilities, as well as maintaining her studio and mentoring a live-in pupil, Eliza Allen Starr.

Eliza Starr was impressed by the artistic arrangement of the Hildreth's home and enjoyed evenings of music or tableaux vivant with George Fuller and other young artists. These extended visits were more than an initiation into techniques of art. Through the Hildreth's she was introduced to Washington Allston's widow, heard the Transcendentalist preacher Theodore Parker, and visited exhibitions at the Atheneum. Eliza described Caroline Negus Hildreth as a superb teacher, devoted to her art, beautiful but serious. Eliza remained friends with Caroline until the older woman's death from cholera in Venice in 1867.

In the motel room, I asked Rebecca to plan our sightseeing. We only had time for two of the many local attractions, most of which seem to have "witch" in their names. Rebecca decided we should visit the Witch Village and the Salem Witch Museum, marking our route on the free tourist map. The morning was sunny and humid, promising early summer heat. We walked cobblestone streets under shady trees, past restored 18th century buildings and shops with tee shirts, botanicals, crystals, black cats, and hand-made crafts. We ignored the gift shop at the Witch Village, choosing instead to sit on a recycled church pew to watch a feminist video on prehistoric sculpture and witchcraft as power for women. At the Salem Witch Museum, visitors sat around a red-lit pentagram in a large, darkened space (was it a recycled church?), with high ceilings, to watch a succession of lighted tableaus and listen to a male voice tell the history of the witchcraft trials. Here, witchcraft was interpreted as the result of adolescent girls having time on their hands and little opportunity for fun, instead of as female power that threatened male hegemony.

Although artistic pedigrees are usually traced through the male line, Caroline and Eliza were part of a series of women who taught art to each other. Caroline taught Eliza who in turn gave early art instruction to her nieces, Mary Houghton Starr Blaisdell (1849-1934) and Ellen Gates Starr (1859-1940). Mary Houghton Starr

continued her art education in Boston at the Museum School and in Paris from 1881 to 1883 where she studied at the Academie Julian, with Carolus-Duran, and painted in summer artists' colonies at Concarneau and Grez. She had a studio in Boston before her marriage to Charles Blaisdell. Ellen Gates Starr also received early art lessons from Aunt Eliza, in turn inviting her aunt to talk on art history at Hull House, the Chicago settlement that Ellen co-founded with Jane Addams.

Female friendships, many formed in school, were an important part of women's culture in the 19th century middle class (Smith-Rosenberg, 1985). Bourdieu (1984) identifies four types of capital that move through social space, constituting a class-based "economy of cultural goods" (p. 1). Social capital is generated through relationships, like the friendships between Caroline and Eliza or Ellen and Jane. Economic capital includes income and inherited financial wealth, the money that made Caroline's education and later independence possible. Cultural capital can exist as dispositions, tendencies to act in certain ways; as objects, e.g., the draperies and artistic furniture Eliza admired in Caroline's home; or in an institutionalized state. The transmission of institutionalized cultural capital is one mission of schooling. Academic credentials indicate the acquisition of cultural capital. Finally, symbolic capital is economic, social, or cultural capital that has been legitimated by those in power within a certain context. Participation in the world of high art is one type of symbolic capital, as is being male, having an Ivy League education or inherited wealth (Moi, 1991).

Before lunch, Rebecca and I separated to shop. Rebecca explored the comic book store, hoping to add to her collection. I walked around, looking for a birthday gift for my best friend from childhood. As I walked, I wondered what my mother's experience of Salem had been. When she was born in 1907, one of the youngest children of a shoe factory operative, many of the now-restored colonial buildings had probably been run down. I wondered if she had lived in a tenement like the one we parked near. I remembered visiting Salem with my parents when I was about Rebecca's age and listening to my mother compare the 1960s city with her girlhood experience. Over lunch, Rebecca began reading her new comics. "Mom, who was Lucy Stone?" "A 19th century feminist and advocate for female suffrage who believed that women should keep their own names," I responded, continuing, "You're reading a feminist comic." "No, I'm not," she replied. A few minutes later, "I guess I am."

The roles of women in art education history have been downplayed since Henry Turner Bailey (1893, 1900) wrote his first accounts. The patriarchy that Bailey traced to Walter Smith and the horror of pretty pictures expressed by supporters of Massachusetts' 1870 Drawing Act, along with the male-dominated world of modern art, have helped obscure women art educators, hide schoolgirl arts, and blind us to the significance of the visual arts in female education and life.

Miss Fiske's Ladies' Boarding School

On May 1, 1814, Catharine Fiske (1784-1837) opened her Ladies' Boarding School in a

large brick house on Main Street in Keene, New Hampshire.[4] Although often referred to as a seminary (see 1831 catalogue, Fiske Papers, HSCC), the school was a venture school, operated primarily through tuition revenues, displaying most of the characteristics of the early 19th century American academy, a term used interchangeably with seminary (Sizer, 1964; Tolley & Beadie, 2001). Miss Fiske charged about $100 board and tuition for a 48-week school year, divided into two 24-week terms. Additional fees were charged for foreign languages, music, drawing and painting, fuel for winter pupils, and lectures in chemistry and botany. A woman of property who left an estate valued at $10,000, Miss Fiske owned 20 acres of farmland behind the school and another 20 acres on Beech Hill where she kept cows that furnished milk and butter.[5]

Miss Fiske selected a remarkable group of religious, civic and political leaders as the school's Visiting Committee: two ministers, two attorneys, three members of the first school committee appointed at the 1819 town meeting, and a future governor. Both of the ministers' wives served on the female Visiting Committee, as did Mrs. Dinsmore, not only the wife of a future governor, but also the mother of another. Rev. Zedekiah S. Barstow, first chair of the town school committee, was the last Congregational minister appointed by both town and church, reflecting the disestablishment of the Protestant church which, as Douglas (1977) has argued, was a precondition for the emergence of sentimental popular culture dominated by women writers of books and magazines.

Later in the summer, Rebecca found another comic store in Maine. She took her list of "most wanted" comics into the store while I browsed in an antiquarian bookstore across the street. When we returned to the car, she commented that the store was prejudiced against women. All the other people in the store were men. The man who waited on her had offered her reprints of some of the comics, rather than the originals she wanted. "They don't think girls know anything about comics," she said with some anger.

Miss Fiske seems to have taken seriously the idea that a residential school acted in loco parentis, emphasizing moral education. She and her students referred to the school as the family, anticipating the motives of the settlement house movement started by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr. Like a family and other academies, the school housed adolescent girls of varying ages. Students were typically middle-class, i.e., their fathers "were property owners who relied on their own household labor for production," a description that fits Caroline Negus (Beadie, 2001, p. 256). While the school offered a four-year curriculum, most students seem to have attended for one or two terms or less. Exceptions to the pattern of intermittent attendance common in academies can be found, for example, the two daughters of Sarah Josepha Hale, author and editor of Godey's *Lady's Book*, whose names appeared in three consecutive catalogues.[6]

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[4] Following Miss Fiske's death and the closure of her school, this house was owned by E. C. Thayer. In 1909, it became the home for the President of the new Keene Normal School and is today the home of the President of Keene State College.

[5] $10,000 is 1837 would be equal to $151,180.77 in 2000 (Friedman, 2000).

Rebecca and her sister are amazed when I tell them that I wasn't allowed to read comics as a girl. They remember borrowing old issues of Archie from a friend and later being permitted to buy a limited number at the used bookstore in Florida. I'm not sure when Rebecca became a serious collector; I know it was after she gave up baseball cards. One of her senior friends introduced her to underground comics during her freshman year of high school. As Rebecca puts it, you always have a special bond with the person who introduces you to a certain comic. I think her interest in zines developed about the same time. By the beginning of this summer, she had put together most of her third zine and was eagerly reading zines she bought from online distros (distributers).

Beadie (2001) argues that academy attendance meant more than teacher training or social entree to 19th century girls. Even irregular attendance and partial courses were "part of a larger project of self-definition that had academic and intellectual dimensions" (Beadie, 2001, p. 261). Women were making themselves, parallel to the construction of middle-class, self-made men. Their project was a liberal one, "aimed at cultivating intellectual and moral virtue rather than at instrumental ends" (Beadie, 2001, p. 261). The sciences, which constituted a sizeable part of Miss Fiske's curriculum, typically entered female education more easily than male schooling, in part because they were expected to train "students to observe critically and think logically" (Tolley, 1996, p. 131).

A zine is a hand-made, amateur publication. Some are related to underground comics, others began as fan publications on science fiction or punk music. Most of those in Rebecca's collection are half the size of an 8 .5 x 11 inch page or smaller. She does her layouts on computer. Other zinesters write by hand or cut and paste then photocopy. As one web page describes them, "girl zines claim an active role for girls in American culture" (Revolution grrrl style now, 2001). Many zinesters, like Rebecca, publish their own poetry and drawings, journal entries, and deeply personal essays in their zines. Rebecca won't let her parents read all of her zines, perhaps because she uses her zine for self-confession, revealing emotions she wants to shield from our eyes. As part of a DIY (do it yourself) girl culture, zinesters represent themselves as creative, independent individuals who want to control their own lives and who set themselves apart from mainstream popular culture.

The arts, specifically drawing and needlework, played a role in the self-construction of the seminary student. Korzenik (1999) explains that early 19th century visual art education was about more than mere dexterity; it encompassed the development of taste, the cultivation of high ideas, and the ability to see nature more clearly. Needlework, drawing and painting were typically referred to as accomplishments or ornamental studies. Both terms were used with positive and negative connotations, regarded as important elements in a humanistic education

[6] Sarah Josepha Buell Hale (1788-1879) included a biographical sketch of her former teacher in her book of sketches of distinguished women from the creation to 1854 (Fiske Papers, HSCC). As a magazine editor, she argued the importance of women's education and contributed to the consolidation and dissemination of the ideology of woman's sphere with its emphasis on domesticity, distance from commercial culture, and woman's destiny as wife and mother (Cott, 1977; Douglas, 1977).

for both men and women or, alternatively, as mindless, frivolous pastimes (Nash, 2001). According to Ring (1983), the teaching abilities of preceptresses of early schools for American women were judged by their skill with the needle. In the best circumstances, mastery of such accomplishments as dancing, music, or drawing was expected to enable a gentleman or young lady to become an ornament to genteel society. Artistic accomplishments could also provide diversion for sedentary women and comfort to difficult lives. The products of fancywork decorated homes, making them more comfortable and attractive.

A young woman bent over fine embroidery was herself a social ornament, able to display her beauty without exhibitionism, bending her gaze modestly over her delicate work without challenging the male gaze. As Parker (1984) has discussed at length, embroidery became part of the definition of femininity. Shifts in the ideology of femininity followed social changes and found expression in changing styles of needlework. According to Bermingham, "the discourse surrounding accomplishments was a largely disciplinary one" (2000, p. 188), that is, the definition of an accomplished woman was inseparable from a definition of femininity used to control women and to hold them to an ideal standard created by and in relation to men.

Capitalizing a Life

While one might interpret the inclusion of drawing and embroidery in 19th century girls' schooling as following traditions of female education, as useful social skills for girls destined for good marriages, or as ways to keep students happy and occupied, Bermingham's (2000) study of learning to draw in early 19th century England argues that drawing and the related arts of watercolor painting and embroidery were means by which individuals constructed social identities, expressing their gender, class, and relationship to the formation of commercial culture. Today, zines and other aspects of girl culture serve similar functions. Although zines could be compared with diaries, journals, and letters written by 19th century girls, zines are not just verbal texts. The layout and images that their authors include, as well as their dependence on photographic technologies, make them aspects of visual culture (Duncum, 2000; Mirzoeff, 1999). Nineteenth-century schoolgirl embroideries and drawings, like 20th century zines, provided sites where girls could engage in the process of constructing their identities within a sociocultural context. Although 19th century educators, like Catharine Fiske, seem to have placed more emphasis on conforming to social expectations than on criticizing them, one can find hints of independent voices in girls' writings and drawings.

Socialization and self-realization (i.e., making one's self real, constructing one's self, what the 19th century saw as self-improvement) co-exist as motives for female education. That is, education disciplines a girl to follow societal expectations of gender and class, but can also help her find a voice and create a self-image. In her analysis of 20th century British working-class women, Skeggs writes, "access to knowledge is a central feature of class reproduction" (1997, p. 75). Access to knowledge is indispensable to class formation as well. Girls like Caroline Negus used their initial economic capital to pay for schooling that would

enable them to support themselves and enter the emerging middle class. Through the academic and ornamental curriculum of a school like Miss Fiske's, they acquired cultural capital. Through the friendships developed at school, they began to build social capital. Their participation in the ideology of 19th century womanhood constituted a form of symbolic capital. As women, they had narrowly defined power, much less than the power men took for themselves. The relationship of socialization and self-realization in girls' development is more complex than it might appear from descriptions of passive 19th century young ladies or troubled 20th century adolescent schoolgirls (Orenstein, 1994; Pipher, 1994).

The visual arts, as components of material and visual culture, can be more than ornament, self-expression or therapy in the life-worlds of schoolgirls. Critical examination of visual culture vis a vis girls should encompass several areas: first, the larger culture, including gender and art worlds; second, changes in social factors, such as the economics of money and time, the development and application of technologies, and rise of educational institutions; and, third, but not least, the voices of girls themselves as agents constructing their own identity.

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MARY ANN STANKIEWICZ is Associate Professor, Art Education, in the School of Visual Arts of The Pennsylvania State University, as well as President of the National Art Education Association. She is the author of *Roots of Art Education Practice* (Davis, 2001) and numerous articles on art education and its history. She can be contacted at: 207 Arts Cottage, University Park, PA 16802-2905, or by email: mas53@psu.edu