

INTRODUCTION

COMMUTING FROM MY HOME in northern Manhattan to my office in Midtown, I daily encounter buildings shrouded in scaffolding, wrecking balls, construction crews, and holes dug deep into the island's rocky substructure to lay new foundations. It was similar in the 1860s and 1870s when Eliza Pratt Greatorex (1819–97) determined to record the old structures that were being lost to progress in pictures and in her folio volume *Old New York, from the Battery to Bloomingdale* (1875). That book solidified her status as the most famous woman artist of the day, an intrepid Irish-born painter and graphic artist who blazed a pioneering trail for her daughters Kathleen Honora Greatorex (1851–1942) and Eleanor Elizabeth Greatorex (1854–1908) and their generation. She initially painted in the Hudson River mode, but then laid down her brushes to draw in pen and ink in Germany, Colorado, and New York. By 1880 she was reinventing herself for a third and final reincarnation as a leader of the Etching Revival. Hailed as the only female member of the National Academy of Design and the Artists Fund Society and a founding member of important art colonies in Cragsmoor, New York, and in Colorado Springs, Eliza Greatorex was the first American woman to earn an international reputation



FIGURE 0.01
Ferdinand Thomas Lee Boyle, *Eliza
Pratt Greatorex*, 1869. Oil on canvas,
30 × 25 ¼ in. National Academy of
Design, New York (ANA Diploma
portrait; 145-P). Courtesy
Bridgeman Images.

as an artist, travel writer, and pioneer of the Etching Revival. A widow of limited financial means who supported her four children through her art, Eliza Greatorex was celebrated as a model for the women's rights movement. And yet today, she has been all but forgotten (fig. 0.01).

In the tradition of accounts of creative women from Megan Marshall's *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism* to Hayden Herrera's *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo, Restless Enterprise* brings Greatorex's life back into focus.¹ She delineated the Hudson River, chronicled the destruction of Old New York's streetscapes and landmarks, traveled across Europe, and made art in Morocco. Drawing in the Colorado Rockies made her the first eastern woman artist to produce artwork in the West. Through close affiliations with suffragist Susan B. Anthony, actress Charlotte Cushman, and founding editor of *Harper's Bazaar* Mary Louise Booth, her art and enterprise blazed a trail for subsequent generations of female artists. All of her creative endeavors were shared with her two unmarried artist-daughters and her sister Matilda Pratt Despard (1827–1915). Exploring

her fierce ambition and creative path, this book reveals how this formidable female and her circle of art women helped to shape American gender politics, visual culture, and urban consciousness.

HER LIFE

To narrate her life, the book unfolds in a series of nine chapters focused on key episodes in a career that starts in Ireland and extends from the antebellum era through the Civil War and Reconstruction to the Gilded Age. Since these same years witnessed the birth of the modern art world, this narrative structure allows the reader to track its development as she negotiated studio space, the pitfalls of a predominantly male art establishment, the new class of art dealers, international travel and exhibition, shifting aesthetic tastes that necessitated successive self-inventions, and a balance between career and child rearing as a widowed single parent. No existing study provides such a panorama of the cultural realm, and certainly not from a woman's perspective. The successes she achieved in these overlapping arenas led one critic writing in the early 1880s to proclaim her the first artist of her sex in America.²

The history of nineteenth-century American art is generally divided into two broad periods, demarcated by the Civil War: Antebellum and Gilded Age. As this account demonstrates, however, the years between the Emancipation Proclamation and the Centennial—the high point of Greatorex's career coinciding with political Reconstruction—comprise a distinct and complex moment. It argues, therefore, that these years should be distilled out from the broad and inappropriate heading “Gilded Age” and treated as a discrete period with its own unique character. It was a moment of not only great promise but also dark genius, when women, like African Americans, stepped out from the shadows. The art scene of that moment evidenced diversity and experimentation, played off against the increasingly conservative sensibilities of the 1880s and 1890s. The fulfillment of American social equality seemed possible, as Walt Whitman proclaimed in the great literary document of the age, *Democratic Vistas*. But all too soon, in 1877, the nation betrayed the ideals of Reconstruction, withdrew troops from the South, and pushed women along with blacks back into the shadows. With a complete suite of her works on display in the Women's Pavilion, Eliza Greatorex was at the top of her game in 1876. But within two years she was forced to sell off the contents of her New York studio and retreat back to Europe in 1878.

This pattern of a steady rise to success across the '70s and a rapid fall at the decade's end was repeated in the careers of many artists of her generation—men as well as women. A great sea change had occurred. Women and blacks had to wait another century, for the Nineteenth Amendment of 1920 and the civil rights and women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s, to experience the same sense of possibility. In the case of Greatorex, she was able to rally one last time and rise like a phoenix from the ashes to become a leading figure of the Etching Revival of the 1880s.

Never remarrying after her husband Henry Greatorex passed away in 1858, she became the head of her art matriarchy that embraced her sister and daughters. Although attractive and talented, Kathleen and Eleanor seem to have had little romance in their lives. Frequent moves from one location to another and extended stays abroad made it difficult to have sustained relationships with eligible males. But one also suspects that their bonds with their mother were a factor in their single status, perpetuated by a mix of filial duty, guilt, and love of the artistic life the three of them shared. Writer Annie Emaux once recalled, "Even living far from [my mother], as long as I wasn't married, I belonged to her still." The artist's daughters experienced a similar possessive tug.³

HER ART

The Greatorex studio functioned as a cooperative where different hands contributed individual skills to the final outcome. The daughters did the decorative work on the title pages and covers, conducted the necessary correspondence in their neat script, and assisted in instructing the many students who passed through their doors over the years. There was a hierarchy of tasks, but also a spirit of collaboration. This was the model upon which this family and their close female friends functioned, supported by her brother, brother-in-law, and her nephew, all of whom contributed to the artwork that bore the Greatorex name. Their *modus operandi* was a mark of respect for the old ways, an expediency to get the work done, and the practical strategy of a busy mother who needed to care for and educate her children while she tried to earn a living. It eschewed the emphasis of the solitary genius characteristic of male production, and embraced a spirit of community and solidarity characteristic of female creativity.

As a professional artist, Eliza Greatorex repeatedly had to choose between home life and work. Facing what would later be called the dilemma of

the single mother, she juggled competing demands. Twice she went off to Europe leaving her children in the care of her sister, but other times she devised ways to keep them with her: she brought them along on sketching excursions in the Hudson Valley and Colorado, and they set off together for Germany, France, and Morocco. So if their art education was rather hit or miss, their joint travels across Europe, the American West, and North Africa were eye-opening.⁴

Greatorex the elder's style of landscape painting had one foot in the Hudson River School and the other in Barbizon, while her graphic work evolved from pen-and-ink drawings that demonstrated a nervous line and mannerist handling of form to more refined plein air etching. Her daughters belonged to the next generation, trained in a looser and more fluid touch that was somewhere between Tonalism and Impressionism. Both sisters engaged in flower and figure painting, but diverged in their focus and manner. Eleanor Greatorex also painted likenesses, while Kathleen Greatorex steered away from the demands of portraiture and tended more toward the imaginative and decorative. Like many of their contemporaries, they were cosmopolitans who trafficked back and forth between New York and Paris and comfortably negotiated both locales. They were technically better trained than their mother, but lacked her talent and drive. Their innovative flower pieces and figure studies earned them a place in the late nineteenth-century transatlantic art world, which Eleanor helped to chronicle in the popular press. Although this book takes Eliza Pratt Greatorex as its primary subject, the art women of her circle played crucial supporting roles, as did her daughters, whose careers deserve separate study.

FINDING ELIZA GREATOREX

I have been pursuing Greatorex, her family, and her female contemporaries for over two decades. Extensive investigation in newspapers, government records, and manuscripts in New York, Washington, Philadelphia, and beyond has led me to identify her as the leading woman artist of her historic moment. It has also allowed me to fill in the broad outlines of her career and identify three important themes that provide the leitmotifs of this book. First, the story of Greatorex's life and art from the 1850s through the 1880s *is* the story of American art in those decades. Her career provides the lens through which to view the age. Second, she was linked with one of the most important social issues of the day: women's rights. Eliza Greatorex lost no

opportunity to champion the cause of women in the arts: she spearheaded the movement of New York–based women artists to participate in the Centennial, counted as friends suffragists Susan B. Anthony, Mary Louise Booth, and Emily Faithfull, and used her talent and position to help young women entering the artistic ranks. And third, as a participant in the Irish diaspora in America, she experienced that feeling of being between the land of her birth and her adopted homeland. Her imagery, as a result, is redolent with loss and memory. This extends from her early Irish landscape paintings to her major records of the historic landmarks of New York that were being destroyed to make way for the business establishments and mansions of the Gilded Age.

To reconstruct the career of Eliza Greatorex, I have relied almost exclusively on primary research in the United States, Ireland, France, and Germany. Her paintings, three published books, and several portfolios of prints provided my foundation. Aside from published sources, years of searching have yielded a limited number of letters, a modest group of canvases (twenty-five have been identified out of approximately one hundred titles from period records), a series of original drawings, one painted portrait of her, and a handful of photographic and printed likenesses. Writing the lives of such forgotten women is like chasing shadows. Investigation of them usually depends upon private sources: diaries, letters, and the like. In the case of Greatorex, it was just the opposite. The intimate details of her thought processes and day-to-day life were private, for she had no patience for keeping diaries or writing letters, and when a journalist asked for information, she provided only the barest outlines. However, her name frequently appeared in newspapers and journals all over the country, including innumerable articles and notices from the *New York Times*, *Daily Tribune*, and *Brooklyn Eagle*. I supplemented this material with documents related to her family—especially her sister and two daughters—with whom she formed a unique association, and then expanded this search to embrace the lives of female artists, writers, collectors, and galleries in Britain and America with whom she had direct contact. More and more material was becoming available on the World Wide Web, allowing me to augment my database.

Secondary literature is scanty. Phyllis Peet's doctoral dissertation of 1987 and her catalogue and exhibition *American Women of the Etching Revival of 1988* discuss her prints.⁵ Since the start of the new century, more attention has been paid to nineteenth-century American women, including Laura

Prieto's 2001 book *At Home in the Studio: The Professionalization of Women Artists in America*.⁶ In 2008 April F. Masten's *Art Work: Women Artists and Democracy in Mid-Nineteenth-Century New York* devoted several pages to Greateorex as a model of a hardworking professional woman.⁷ That Greateorex could be called "a famous woman artist" in 1897 and be largely lost to us a century later is unacceptable. It is fitting therefore that this book goes to press in time for the anniversary of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution granting women the right to vote in August 1920.