

PAPPION ARTISTRY LLC • AN INSPIRATIONAL COLLECTION

She Persisted, She Created

10 Female Artists Who Faced Impossible Obstacles
and Changed the World Anyway

A Resource for Young Artists & Aspiring Entrepreneurs

Curated by Christina Pappion • Pappion Artistry LLC

"The most courageous act is still to think for yourself. Aloud."

— Coco Chanel

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A Letter to Young Female Artists



Before you, there were women who painted through pain, sculpted in secret, and created masterpieces the world tried to ignore.

They were told no — by their fathers, by galleries, by governments, by the men who stole their ideas. They were rejected for being women, for being Black, for being poor, for being ill, for being too bold, for being too honest.

They created anyway.

This booklet is about ten of those women — their backgrounds, their battles, and the beautiful, world-changing art that came out of the hardest moments of their lives. It is not a history lesson. It is a love letter. And it is a reminder that every obstacle you face has already been faced by someone who looked a little like you — and she made it through.

"Your art is not a hobby. It is not a backup plan. It is a calling. These women prove it."

— Christina Pappion, Pappion Artistry LLC

The 10 Women Who Wouldn't Stop

Each profile includes: Background • Obstacle • How She Overcame • Accomplishments • Artwork • Lesson

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Frida Kahlo

1907–1954 • Mexican Painter

"I paint my own reality. The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to."

01 of 10

BACKGROUND	Born in Coyoacán, Mexico. Contracted polio as a child, then survived a devastating bus accident at 18 that broke her spine, collarbone, ribs, and pelvis. She endured 35+ surgeries throughout her life.
OBSTACLE	Chronic physical pain, near-total immobility, multiple miscarriages, a turbulent marriage, and a male-dominated art world that dismissed her work as too personal.
OVERCAME	Her mother had a special easel built so she could paint lying down with a mirror overhead. She turned pain into art — painting her reality with radical honesty.
ACHIEVEMENTS	First Latin American artist with a painting in the Louvre. Her face is on Mexican currency. Over 200 paintings. Celebrated globally as a feminist and cultural icon.

 **ARTWORK:** Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace (1940), The Two Fridas (1939). Blends Mexican folk art, symbolism, and surrealism.

LESSON FROM FRIDA KAHLO

Your pain does not disqualify you. It can become your most powerful creative material.

Georgia O'Keeffe

1887–1986 • American Painter

"I found I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn't say any other way."

02 of 10

BACKGROUND	Born on a Wisconsin farm. Struggled financially for years, working as a commercial artist and teacher while pursuing her own creative vision on the side.
OBSTACLE	Male critics reduced her flower paintings to sexual symbolism. She suffered a severe anxiety breakdown in 1933 requiring hospitalization and stepped away from painting entirely.
OVERCAME	She relocated alone to the New Mexico desert — far from New York's noise — and rebuilt herself painting bones, flowers, and desert landscapes entirely on her own terms.
ACHIEVEMENTS	Called the 'Mother of American Modernism.' Presidential Medal of Freedom (1977). National Medal of Arts (1985). Her painting Jimson Weed sold for \$44.4 million.

 **ARTWORK:** Jimson Weed/White Flower No. 1, Black Iris, Red Canna. Her oversized flower studies are instantly recognizable.

LESSON FROM GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

You are allowed to leave the room where people misunderstand you — and go build something new somewhere else.

Faith Ringgold

1930–2024 • American Artist & Author

"I am an artist. I have always known that."

03 of 10

BACKGROUND	Born in Harlem, New York, surrounded by the Harlem Renaissance. Earned her master's degree but was barred from teaching college art because she was both Black and female.
OBSTACLE	Rejected by major galleries for being Black and a woman. Arrested for creating political art. Largely ignored by the mainstream art establishment for decades.
OVERCAME	She invented her own art form — story quilts combining painting, quilting, and storytelling rooted in African American tradition that no gallery could dismiss.
ACHIEVEMENTS	Her quilt 'Tar Beach' became a beloved children's book. Work in the Guggenheim, MoMA, and the Metropolitan Museum. Received the Coretta Scott King Award.

 **ARTWORK:** Tar Beach (1988), The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles (1997). Her quilts tell vivid stories of Black American life.

LESSON FROM FAITH RINGGOLD

When the door is closed, build your own door. Your culture and heritage are not a limitation — they are your superpower.

Yayoi Kusama

1929–Present • Japanese Artist

"I want to use my art to heal the suffering of the world."

04 of 10

BACKGROUND	Born in Matsumoto, Japan. Experienced hallucinations from childhood. Her conservative family disapproved of her art. Moved to New York in 1957 with little money.
OBSTACLE	Severe mental illness throughout her life. Lived in poverty. Her work was plagiarized by male artists including Andy Warhol, who received credit for her innovations.
OVERCAME	She used her hallucinations AS her art — turning illness into infinity rooms and polka dot installations. She voluntarily entered a psychiatric facility in 1977 where she still creates daily.
ACHIEVEMENTS	World's highest-selling living female artist. Net worth over \$50 million. At 94, one of the most influential artists alive. Retrospectives at Tate Modern and MoMA.

 **ARTWORK:** Infinity Mirror Rooms, Pumpkin series, polka dot installations. Her immersive environments have been experienced by millions worldwide.

LESSON FROM YAYOI KUSAMA

What makes you different may be exactly what makes you extraordinary. Don't hide it. Create from it.

Alma Thomas

1891–1978 • American Painter

"Color is life, and light is the mother of color."

05 of 10

BACKGROUND	Born in Columbus, Georgia. First fine arts graduate of Howard University (1924). Spent 35 years teaching art at a D.C. middle school — painting on the side the entire time.
OBSTACLE	Did not begin her most celebrated work until her 70s. Faced racism, sexism, and ageism. Critics questioned whether an elderly Black woman could produce truly innovative modern art.
OVERCAME	She kept working every day at her kitchen table despite severe arthritis, developing her signature mosaic color style inspired by her garden, the seasons, and the space program.
ACHIEVEMENTS	First African American woman with a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum (1972). Her work hangs in the White House. The Smithsonian honored her with a major retrospective.

 **ARTWORK:** Alma's Flower Garden, Resurrection, Wind and Crepe Myrtle Concerto. Her colorful mosaic-like abstractions feel joyful and alive.

LESSON FROM ALMA THOMAS

It is never too late. Greatness does not have an expiration date. Keep working.

Kara Walker

1969–Present • American Artist

"I'm interested in the complexities of the American story — the dark parts that don't get told."

06 of 10

BACKGROUND	Born in Stockton, California. Received her MFA from RISD and rose to prominence in her mid-20s with large-scale silhouette work confronting slavery, race, and gender.
OBSTACLE	Her work received fierce criticism — including hate mail and public condemnation from prominent Black arts figures who felt she was exploiting painful historical imagery.
OVERCAME	She continued making the work anyway. She engaged the criticism directly and publicly, refusing to sanitize history. Her unflinching commitment to truth became her signature.
ACHIEVEMENTS	MacArthur 'Genius Grant' at age 28. 'A Subtlety' drew 130,000 visitors in 10 weeks. Work in MoMA, Guggenheim, and Whitney. Time 100 Most Influential People.

 **ARTWORK:** A Subtlety (2014), Gone: An Historical Romance (1994). Her black paper silhouettes address the legacy of American slavery with haunting beauty.

LESSON FROM KARA WALKER

Tell the truth in your work — even when it makes people uncomfortable. The most important art often does.

Mary Cassatt

1844–1926 • American Impressionist

"I am independent! I can live alone and I love to work."

07 of 10

BACKGROUND	Born into a wealthy Philadelphia family. Defied her father's opposition to pursue art in Paris. Women were barred from the prestigious École des Beaux-Arts.
OBSTACLE	Barred from formal art education. Could not sketch outdoors without a chaperone. Repeatedly rejected by the Paris Salon. Her domestic subject matter was dismissed as minor.
OVERCAME	Invited by Edgar Degas to exhibit with the Impressionists. She focused on intimate scenes of women and children that male artists had overlooked, elevating them to fine art.
ACHIEVEMENTS	The only American — and one of few women — at the core of French Impressionism. Work in the Louvre and Metropolitan Museum. Mentored American collectors who brought Impressionism to the U.S.

 **ARTWORK:** The Child's Bath (1893), In the Loge (1878), Mother and Child series. Her tender portrayals of women's everyday lives redefined domestic subjects.

LESSON FROM MARY CASSATT

The scenes of everyday life — of women, of home, of quiet moments — are worthy of great art.
Your experience matters.

Artemisia Gentileschi

1593–c.1656 • Italian Baroque Painter

"I will show you what a woman can do."

08 of 10

BACKGROUND	Born in Rome, trained in her father's workshop. Women were almost entirely excluded from professional artistic life. She showed extraordinary talent from childhood.
OBSTACLE	At 17 she was assaulted by her painting tutor. During the trial she was tortured to 'verify' her testimony. He served less than a year. She had to rebuild her life and reputation.
OVERCAME	She channeled her trauma into paintings of powerful biblical heroines — Judith, Susanna — with psychological intensity no male artist had captured. She became the first woman in the Florentine academy.
ACHIEVEMENTS	First woman admitted to the Accademia delle Arti del Disegno in Florence (1616). Commissioned by the Medici family and King Charles I. Rediscovered as a feminist icon in the 20th century.

 **ARTWORK:** Judith Slaying Holofernes (1614-20), Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting (c.1638). Her heroines are powerful, active, and unafraid.

LESSON FROM ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI

What is done to you does not define you. What you create from it does.

Augusta Savage

1892–1962 • American Sculptor

"If I can inspire one youngster to develop the talent I know they possess, then my monument will be in their work."

09 of 10

BACKGROUND	Born in Green Cove Springs, Florida — seventh of fourteen children. Father beat her for sculpting clay figures. Moved to New York and became central to the Harlem Renaissance.
OBSTACLE	Accepted to a France program, then rejected when white students refused to travel with a Black woman. Denied commissions and housing due to race. Spent much of her life in poverty.
OVERCAME	She fought her rejection publicly, bringing national attention to racial discrimination in the arts. She opened a FREE art school in Harlem training hundreds of young Black artists.
ACHIEVEMENTS	Created 'Lift Every Voice and Sing' for the 1939 World's Fair. Founded the Harlem Community Art Center. Mentored Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, and a generation of American artists.

 **ARTWORK:** Lift Every Voice and Sing (1939), Gamin (1929). Her sculpture Gamin — a Harlem street boy — brought her national recognition.

LESSON FROM AUGUSTA SAVAGE

Use your platform to lift others. The legacy of a great artist is often the artists they helped become great.

Zanele Muholi

1972–Present • South African Visual Artist

"I am not a photographer. I am a visual activist."

10 of 10

BACKGROUND	Born in Umlazi, Durban, South Africa under apartheid. Studied photography and became a visual activist documenting the lives of Black LGBTQ+ people during extreme violence against that community.
OBSTACLE	Death threats, harassment, and having years of irreplaceable work stolen by South African police. Working in a country where being LGBTQ+ was and remains dangerous.
OVERCAME	Muholi kept creating and rebuilding lost archives, exhibiting globally to bring visibility to communities the world tried to erase. They used their own face as the subject of a powerful self-portrait series.
ACHIEVEMENTS	Named one of Time's 100 most influential people (2020). Retrospectives at Tate Modern and Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Honorary doctorates from multiple universities.

 **ARTWORK:** Somnyama Ngonyama (Hail the Dark Lioness) series, Faces and Phases series. Their striking black-and-white portraits are profound acts of visibility and love.

LESSON FROM ZANELE MUHOLI

Visibility is an act of courage. Showing up fully as yourself — in your art and in your life — changes the world.

Resources for Young Female Artists

BOOKS TO READ

- Big Magic — Elizabeth Gilbert — On living a creative life fearlessly
- The Artist's Way — Julia Cameron — A 12-week course in creative recovery
- Frida Kahlo: The Complete Works — A visual journey through her life
- Becoming — Michelle Obama — On building a life on your own terms
- Art & Fear — David Bayles — On the challenges every artist faces
- The Diary of Frida Kahlo — Her own words and drawings

ORGANIZATIONS & SCHOLARSHIPS

- Women's Caucus for Art — wca-national.org — Scholarships and community
- National Museum of Women in the Arts — nmwa.org
- Black Artist Fund — Grants for Black artists
- United States Artists — Fellowships for working artists
- YoungArts Foundation — youngarts.org — Programs for high school artists
- Congressional Art Competition — Free, open to all high school students

MUSEUMS CELEBRATING WOMEN ARTISTS

- National Museum of Women in the Arts — Washington D.C.
- The Studio Museum in Harlem — New York
- The Frida Kahlo Museum (La Casa Azul) — Mexico City
- Georgia O'Keeffe Museum — Santa Fe, New Mexico

ONLINE RESOURCES

- Artsy.net — Browse work by women artists across all eras
- Google Arts & Culture — arts.google.com — Free virtual museum tours
- Khan Academy Art History — Free lessons on every artist in this booklet
- TED Talks: Search 'female artists' for inspiring talks by living artists
- Instagram: [@nmwashington](https://www.instagram.com/nmwashington), [@studiomharlem](https://www.instagram.com/studiomharlem), [@themuseumofmodernart](https://www.instagram.com/themuseumofmodernart)



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A Final Word

"Every woman in this booklet was told — in some way — that her art did not matter, that she did not belong, that the world did not need what she had to offer. Every single one of them was wrong about that. So is anyone who has ever said it to you."



Now go make something.

The world is waiting for what only you can create.



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