



INTERDISCIPLINARY DISABILITY STUDIES

ROUTLEDGE

# Disability and Art History

EDITED BY  
ANN MILLETT-GALLANT  
AND ELIZABETH HOWIE

# Disability and Art History

This is the first book of its kind to feature interdisciplinary art history and disability studies scholarship. Art historians have traditionally written about images of figures with impairments and artworks by disabled artists, without integrating disability studies scholarship, while many disability studies scholars discuss works of art, but do not necessarily incorporate art historical research and methodology. The chapters in this volume emphasize a shift away from the medical model of disability that is often scrutinized in art history by considering the social model and representations of disabled figures from a range of styles and periods, mostly from the twentieth century. Topics addressed include visible versus invisible impairments; scientific, anthropological, and vernacular images of disability; and the theories and implications of looking/staring versus gazing. They also explore ways in which art responds to, envisions, and at times stereotypes and pathologizes disability. The insights offered in this book contextualize understanding of disability historically, as well as in terms of medicine, literature, and visual culture.

**Ann Millett-Gallant** is a Senior Lecturer for the Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies Program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She holds a PhD in art history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and her research focuses on representations of disability in art and visual culture. She is the author of two books, *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art* and *Re-Membering: Putting Mind and Body Back Together Following Traumatic Brain Injury*, as well as a number of essays for academic journals. Prior to this volume, she has chaired several panels at academic conferences about and co-edited a special issue of the *Review of Disability Studies* on interdisciplinary art history and disability studies research. She also enjoys painting and drawing. Visit her website at [annmg.com](http://annmg.com).

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## **Interdisciplinary Disability Studies**

Series Editor: Mark Sherry

*The University of Toledo, USA*

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Disability studies has made great strides in exploring power and the body. This series extends the interdisciplinary dialogue between disability studies and other fields by asking how disability studies can influence a particular field. It will show how a deep engagement with disability studies changes our understanding of the following fields: sociology, literary studies, gender studies, bioethics, social work, law, education, or history. This groundbreaking series identifies both the practical and theoretical implications of such an interdisciplinary dialogue and challenges people in disability studies as well as other disciplinary fields to critically reflect on their professional praxis in terms of theory, practice, and methods.

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# **Disability and Art History**

**Edited by Ann Millett-Gallant  
and Elizabeth Howie**

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*“Disability and Art History* makes a definitive claim for the importance of disability in art. Moving seamlessly from the past to the present, and indicating an influential through line between the two, this collection of chapters shows not only how important disability is to art works, but how disability becomes a fascinating focus for artists of all kinds. The book particularly illustrates how transgressive disability art can be and how different bodies and minds redefine what we think about when we think about visual art.”

*Lennard. J. Davis, University of Illinois, USA*

“This original book offers fresh insights as it examines art history’s blindness to the burgeoning scholarship in disability studies. Rather than mock the discipline’s impairments or seek a cure, the diverse chapters think deeply about their social and cultural significance across an intriguing range of historical periods and places.”

*Jane Blocker, University of Minnesota, USA*

“Millet-Gallant and Howie’s *Disability and Art History* provides scholarly examples of how representations of disability reoccur and are recycled in visual culture. From photography to cinema, from Meso-American pottery figures to German Expressionism, from the disabled as artist to the artistic rediscovery of older representations of the disabled, this first-rate collection provides much for the Disability Studies classroom and will add substantially to a rethinking of Art History to introduce the student to the world of visual representations of disability.”

*Sander L. Gilman, Emory University, USA*

**This book is dedicated to the many people who played hardworking and vibrant roles in its production: scholars, educators, editors, curators, and foremost, the many artists whose work created the ideas and objects analyzed within its pages.**

**We must honor and pay tribute specifically to Tobin Siebers (1953–2015), whose teaching, writing, lecturing, and mentoring has contributed to the work in this specific volume, as well as the interdisciplinary projects this book continues.**

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## Notes on contributors

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**Elizabeth Howie** is Associate Professor of Art History at Coastal Carolina University in Conway, South Carolina. She received her PhD in art history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Publications include “Proof of the Forgotten: A Benjaminian Reading of Daguerre’s Two Views of the Boulevard du Temple” in *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Change: An Interdisciplinary Approach*; “Bringing Out the Past: Courtly Cruising and Nineteenth-Century American Men’s Passionate Friendship Portraits” in *Love Objects: Emotion, Design, and Material Culture*; and a co-edited a special issue of the *Review of Disability Studies* on interdisciplinary art history and disability studies research.

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# Disability and art history

## introduction

*Ann Millett-Gallant and Elizabeth Howie*

This is the first volume to feature interdisciplinary art history and disability studies scholarship, despite the commonalities these disciplines share in their investigations into culture and representation. Where disability studies and art history overlap most compellingly is in terms of visual experience. The appearance and performance of disability in visual culture has been analyzed by disability studies scholars such as Lennard J. Davis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Tobin Siebers.<sup>1</sup> These scholars' theories have been revisited and reinvigorated in this volume in art historical terms—chapters in this book address the relationship between “the stare” and “the gaze”; the mainstream public's reaction to and sometimes repulsion from visibly disabled individuals and representations of them; the social construction of disability, specifically in relation to visibility and visual culture; and the consequences of representation of and for individuals with visible versus invisible disabilities.

Chapters in this volume explore ways in which art responds to disability, envisions disability, at times stereotypes and pathologizes disability, and raises questions about the visibility of disability. Along similar lines, these chapters raise questions about conventional diagnostic assumptions, both physical and psychological, made about disability.

This volume makes no claims to be comprehensive, but the gaps are reflective, to some extent, of the newness of this form of inquiry. Admittedly, most of these chapters center on physical and visible disabilities, as visual art is primarily, but of course not exclusively, a visual practice, and certainly an exhaustive compendium of scholarship on this topic would need to address, for example, sculpture designed for a blind audience, sound-based works, and so on.

Disability studies is a multidisciplinary academic field and political movement, beginning in the 1980s, which still aims to combat historical notions of disability as a medical problem or a metaphor for destruction or disintegration.<sup>2</sup> The recognition of disability as a category of identity that must be acknowledged in social terms has been facilitated in the United States by the 1990 passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which prohibits discrimination in public services, telecommunications, employment, and public accommodations.<sup>3</sup> Disability studies challenges the medical model, which operates on the idea that disability is

an illness or problem that must be cured or fixed, as well as a misfortune or tragedy that elicits pity.<sup>4</sup> Instead, disability studies asserts the social model, which recognizes disability as a social construct that marginalizes people with impairments.

If the medical model focuses on fixing the non-normative body, the social model addresses changing cultural structures that oppress disabled people.<sup>5</sup> Hence, disability studies differentiates between “impairment” and “disability.” Impairment is a term that refers to the specific corporeal (including both physical and psychological) ways in which a body might diverge from the so-called normal or average body in ways that create functional limitations. The term “impairment” also serves as a reminder that more than other marginalized identities, disability is one that anyone may pass in and out of because of the relationship of impairment to accident or illness; moreover, the affected individual may at times choose whether to be identified as disabled. The term “disability” in this context refers to the social consequences of an impairment in relation not only to the body, but also to social constructions that result in limitations as well as a social and personal identity. Disability studies has also coined the term “ableism” to align the oppression of disabled people with that of other marginalized groups; “ableism” strategically raises associations with racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and so on, to draw attention to the way that dominant culture’s marginalization of otherness relates to disability.

Like other forms of identity politics, disability culture, in art as in other areas, seeks to allow its members to identify and define themselves, rather than be defined by others. Wherever possible we have sought to distinguish conventional, pathologizing terms for disability from terms that are embraced by disability culture. There is not necessarily a consensus about preferable terms; some seemingly derogatory terms have been recuperated and reframed. Examples of such terms that require definition in relation to disability culture and disability studies are “freak” and “crip.” “Freak” is a term that originates with the exploitative display of disabled individuals with highly visible impairments, and evokes the idea of disability as spectacle, but at the same time can articulate voluntary performance, display, and celebration of non-normative appearance. “Crip” is a term that has been recuperated to represent the disability community at large in relation to disability rights, and also allies the disability community with queerness.<sup>6</sup>

Disability studies as a discipline may have emerged in the 1980s, but Lennard J. Davis has thoroughly investigated how categories of “normal” versus “abnormal” individuals were constructed in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> The chapters in this volume confirm this concept that disability is a social construct related specifically to sociohistorical contexts. Disability as a social category is at least in part a product of changing attitudes toward the body that arose during the Industrial Revolution. This same historical period, the era of Modernism, also witnessed new expressions of and understandings of identity and identification. During that time, photography’s ability to seemingly document truth fed the public’s growing fascination with visible otherness, and with disability in particular. Disability studies and women’s studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has most thoroughly analyzed the “stare,” which disabled people receive in everyday public encounters, and how photography in particular articulates and reproduces it.<sup>8</sup>

Disability studies in the second half of the twentieth century has followed the political movements of civil rights and feminism; disability art has, influenced by the work of second-wave feminist artists, provided new avenues for artists to complicate notions of the performance of identity, as discussed in chapters by Shayda Kafai and Elizabeth Howie in this volume. Addressing disability through art history opens ways to think about art historical tropes that tie together appearance, character, and identity, in diverse geographical and historical contexts. Disability studies-based analysis also extends beyond modern and contemporary Western art, as exemplified by chapters in this volume by William Gassaway and Rebecca Stone.

Art history, also interdisciplinary, conceives that an artwork is an object that visually represents an idea or experience, which in turn creates related but distinct experiences in the viewer. Art history addresses artworks as forms of individual expression, historical documents, and acts of social communication. Through analysis of aesthetics, production, and historical context, art history examines visual and material culture, whether historical or contemporary, in terms of its meaning both originally and over the history of its existence. In addition, art history not only points out what the art shows, but how it shows—not just what objects or ideas the artwork displays, but how, through form (media, composition, etc.) it represents its subject. And in some cases, art history interprets works of art in terms of what they fail to show, or even hide. Many art historians analyze artworks, especially figurative examples, through the lens of identity, both that of the artist and of the subject of representation. “Identity” here means that art history often incorporates discourses on race, gender, class, nationality, and sexuality, although disability as a social and historical construct and as a vital element of human diversity has been, until very recently, largely overlooked by art historical analysis.

Art history seems at times to excel at ignoring the obvious. There are many works that represent disabled individuals—for example, Raphael’s *Resurrection of Christ* (1502), the Master of Alkmaar’s *The Seven Works of Mercy* (1504), Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s *The Beggars* (1568), Rembrandt’s *Hundred Guilder Print* (1650), and Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* (1656). Art history as a discipline emerged in the nineteenth century, when the medical model of disability became entrenched, and thus perhaps unsurprisingly, art history’s interest in disability has traditionally followed the medical model, with the result that analyses of such works have largely overlooked the social and political status of the disabled subjects depicted in them. Despite the frequency of representations of disability in art history and visual culture (with widely varying degrees of accuracy and/or appropriateness), art history has only recently begun to focus on and reconsider such examples.

Tellingly, historical works of art that represent disability, and the scholarship that addresses them, are hard to track down using academic databases. They are frequently not indexed by the term “disability,” nor are essays that discuss them. Instead, the researcher must use pejorative terms such as “cripple” and “lame,” or even more troubling, perhaps, “fool,” as well as other descriptive terms such as “blind,” in order to find art historical analysis of such works. And even if such