

10 ideas

for a feminist and inclusive museum

INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND
RED CRESCENT MUSEUM TOOLKITS

By Rebecca Amsellem and Pascal Hufschmid,
with the support of the Museum's staff



What might a feminist and inclusive museum look like?

This question has been central to an almost three-year partnership between the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum (MICR) and Rebecca Amsellem. Together, we sought to explore it with humility, enthusiasm and pragmatism.

Rebecca's first task was to carry out a literature review (see page 18), supplementing her findings with her personal thoughts and experiences. She also interviewed cultural leaders as well as gender and diversity experts (see page 17). Rebecca then drew up a set of recommendations, which she discussed with MICR staff before sharing and refining them in a series of master classes. The sessions were arranged in conjunction with diverse experts and organizations as part of the Museum's Year of Gender & Diversity (2021–2022). Each year, the MICR explores a major topical theme within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the world of culture and wider society. In doing so, it aims to reaffirm its role as a hub serving the local community.

Here, we share our findings and lessons learned from this empirical process. While this toolkit does not claim to be exhaustive, it sets out some practical ideas for shaping a feminist and inclusive museum. And while the world of art serves as our frame of reference, our approach – which builds on collective intelligence – could equally be applied to other types of museums. We hope, above all else, that it proves useful to professionals in the museum sector and beyond.

We leave it to them to test, improve and challenge these ten ideas for a feminist and inclusive museum.

Pascal Hufschmid, September 2022



See video on YouTube
“MICR x Rebecca Amsellem:
thinking feminist museums”

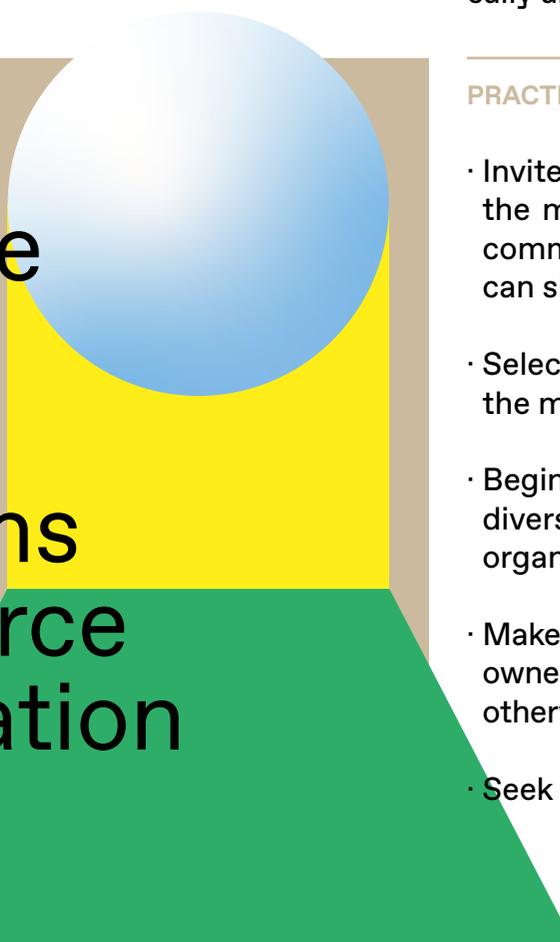


In their everyday work, museum professionals make a series of choices. For instance, they decide which objects to add to a museum's collection, which themes to address in an exhibition, and which artists to work with. Through these choices, they necessarily give greater exposure to some subjects and people than others. How can we acknowledge the scale and impact of these decisions from a feminist and inclusive perspective?

People look to museums as a source of expertise. They act as custodians of our heritage – preserving, studying and presenting objects of social importance, and passing them on to future generations. As such, they play a key role in lending legitimacy to the subjects and people they choose to place in the spotlight. Recognizing this fact and questioning the criteria and values that shape these everyday decisions mark an important first step towards a feminist and inclusive museum – one that acknowledges its role as a force for legitimization and thinks critically about how it can use this position to foster diversity.

PRACTICAL MEASURES

- Invite non-profits focusing on gender and diversity to interact with the museum in different ways – such as through panel discussions, committees and working groups, or in an advisory capacity – so they can share their perspectives on content development.
- Select a major societal issue and use it as the guiding theme for all of the museum's activities.
- Begin working towards a corporate label or mark certifying that diversity and inclusion are embedded in the museum's culture and organizational structure.
- Make clear that the museum provides opportunities for artists, business owners and service providers – in all fields – from communities that otherwise lack visibility in the museum sector.
- Seek to understand inclusive language and take a stance on its use.



Idea 1

Acknowledge

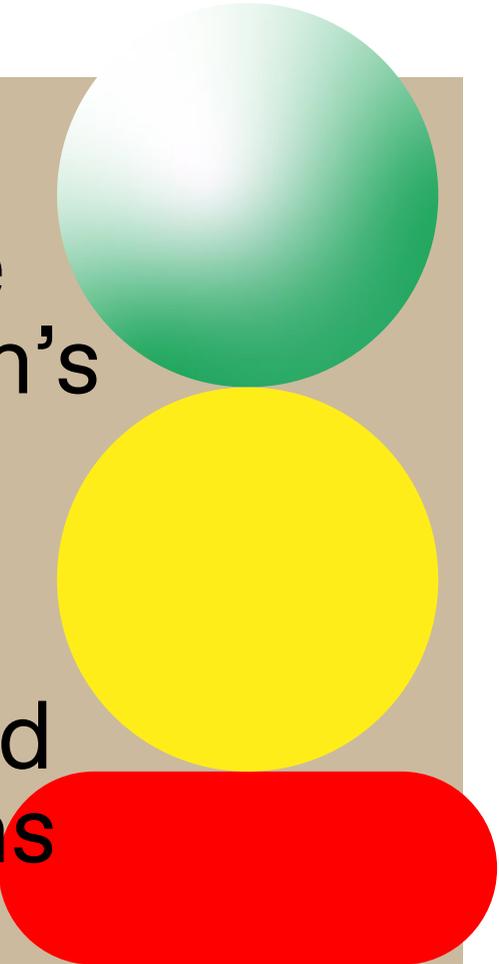
that museums
serve as a force
for legitimization

Every museum's collection is unique. It is a function of contextual factors, acquisition strategies, past decisions and opportunities that present themselves over time. Taken as a constituent whole, the collection has a quality of permanence and authority. In one way, it could be said to set a standard for future generations – because it represents what was important to those who came before them. But is the museum's collection gender-neutral?

Regardless of their history, nature or size, museum collections have been developed, preserved and interpreted predominantly by white, western, heterosexual men. Consciously or otherwise, their choices have been shaped by their lived experiences and their place in society, neither of which aligns with the realities of groups facing discrimination. Feminist and inclusive museums do not seek to rewrite the history behind their collections. Instead, they study, develop, preserve and present them in new and different ways, welcoming and embracing diverse perspectives.

PRACTICAL MEASURES

- Conduct gender- and diversity-based statistical analyses of the museum's collection.
- Set up scientific committees and gather expert insights into artists and figures – historical or contemporary – who are little-known or forgotten, as a way to spotlight their contribution and re-establish their influence.
- Expand the museum's collection by adding more pieces by racialized, female and non-binary artists, by supporting the production of new art and/or by acquiring existing works under the guidance of committees that include representatives of communities facing discrimination.
- Seek to ensure gender parity among in-house teams and outside suppliers working directly with the museum's collection.
- Identify professional networks working to spotlight artists from groups facing discrimination, participate actively in these networks and explore opportunities for partnerships.



Idea 2

Re-examine the museum's collection

through a gender and diversity lens

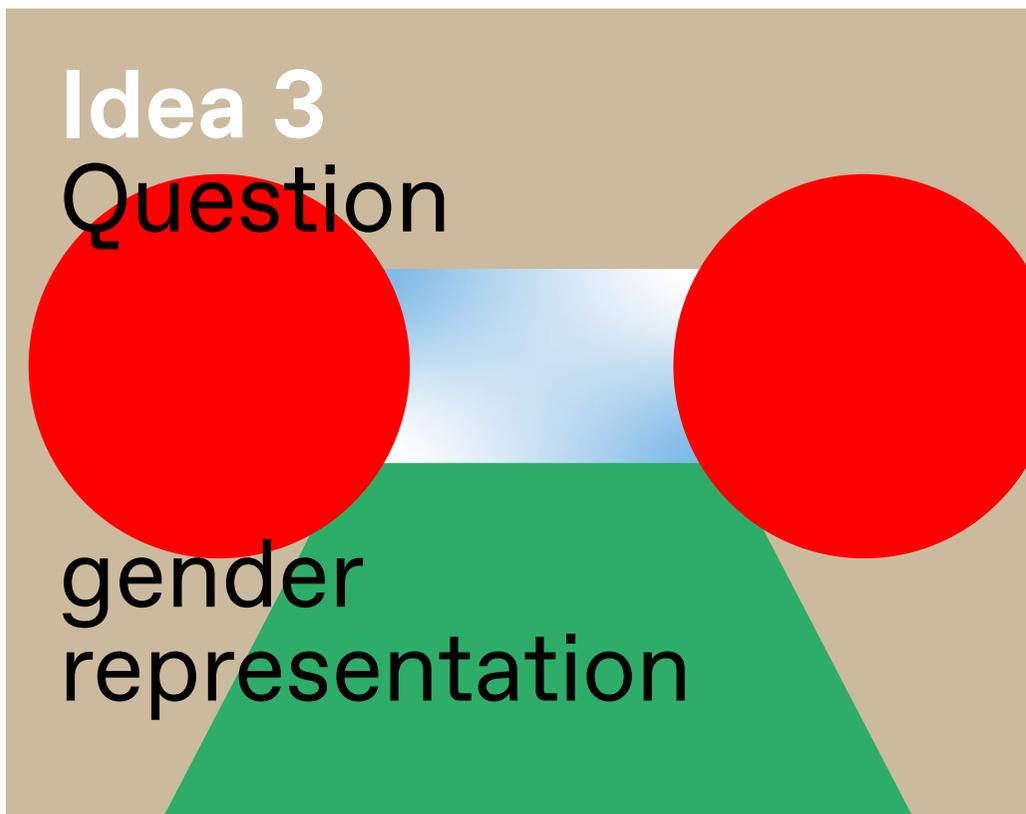


Historical and contemporary representations of humanitarian action have tended to assign very different roles to men and women: the former are associated with action and leadership, while the latter are seen as compassionate caregivers. This distinction can clearly be seen in the posters and photographs preserved in the MICR's collection. Does this division of duties accurately capture the complexity of humanitarian action and the lived experiences of aid workers past and present? Far from it. For although this example is specific to the humanitarian sector, it speaks to a phenomenon found in many walks of life: the disconnect between reality and representation.

A feminist and inclusive museum does not merely take objects and works at face value. It seeks to contextualize them in a way that reveals the social norms and gender stereotypes they reflect. It invites visitors to be proactive: to look beyond the objects and works themselves and to decipher the policies that shaped a given exhibit. A feminist and inclusive museum also thinks critically about how the items it displays – whether old or new – resonate and interact with contemporary societal debates.

PRACTICAL MEASURES

- Incorporate new perspectives on the museum's exhibits by inviting people from different professional circles, different generations and different communities to write alternative labels.
- Consider how the content on display may be received by diverse audiences and explore the appropriateness of incorporating, within the museum and as necessary, warnings for their consideration.
- Make clear, among academic circles, that the museum is a centre for research into gender representation, and take active steps to open the museum up to students.
- Avoid suggesting visitor itineraries based solely on the gender expression of the artists on display.





Male artists seem to dominate museum exhibitions and collections. Is this dominance justified? Have women and non-binary people not also contributed to the history of art?

Artistic talent is not an inherently masculine trait. The over-representation of men in art books and museums is attributable to social, economic and cultural factors. From a feminist and inclusive perspective, it is important to acknowledge that other people – possessing just as much talent – have not enjoyed the same privileges. A feminist and inclusive museum is interested in art *histories*, in all their complexity and diversity, and in identifying and spotlighting forgotten figures.

Idea 4 Put neglected artists

back in
the spotlight

PRACTICAL MEASURES

- Together with the public, identify the social, political and cultural factors that led to the creation of a masterpiece and its inclusion in our heritage, looking beyond artistic talent as the sole criterion.
- Look at the names of the museum's rooms and, when the opportunity arises, name a room in honour of a neglected woman or non-binary person.
- Employ different temporary exhibition formats (such as monographs, group exhibitions and thematic exhibitions) to shift the focus away from individual talent.
- Develop a thematic guided tour focusing on gender and diversity with input from a subject-matter expert.



Designing and producing an exhibition is a complex, time-consuming process that requires input from various professional disciplines. Is there a simple way to avoid losing sight of the numerous key issues to do with gender and diversity?

The Bechdel-Wallace test is a useful starting point. Devised by American lesbian author Alison Bechdel and her friend Liz Wallace, the test measures for sexist undertones in the representation of male and

female protagonists in fiction. It is primarily applied to films. In order to pass the test, a film must satisfy three requirements: it has to have at least two named women in it (first and last name), the two women must talk to each other, and they must talk about something other than a man. Many films fail the test. This same model could be transposed to the museum sector, with an exhibition only passing the test if it satisfies the following three requirements: it offers a horizontal and transdisciplinary perspective on the works and artists on display, it incorporates works by artists with different gender expressions and recognizes their contribution, and it does not include these artists merely for box-ticking purposes or solely as representatives of their community.

PRACTICAL MEASURES

- Acknowledge that the viewpoints of curators are expressions of situated knowledges and that other legitimate opinions exist. Set these viewpoints against the perspectives of other museum professionals, for instance.
- Develop exhibitions in partnership with other institutions or with independent curators – from within or outside the museum sector – as a way to provide a platform for diverse voices and insights.
- Regularly re-hang permanent exhibitions, giving prominence to collection pieces by racialized, female and non-binary artists.
- Question the museum's institutional practices and discourse around gender and diversity when hosting temporary exhibitions that address these themes.

Idea 5 Subject the museum's exhibitions

to a test

Many people are uneasy about going to a museum. They find the experience intimidating and fear they may not understand the content. What responsibilities do museums have to address this problem? How can they establish a reputation as open, welcoming community spaces?

A feminist and inclusive museum is one that sees visitors as partners, giving them a central, active role in the design and development of its content and messaging. Aside from its in-house expertise, it recognizes that visitors have important insights to contribute to the debate and provides them with opportunities to share their perspectives. The museum thinks with its audience, not for its audience. It also acknowledges that visitors may not always have the time, desire or focus to see and understand everything. For this reason, it designs exhibitions with multiple touchpoints, allowing visitors to explore and make the most of the experience in keeping with the intentions behind their visit.

PRACTICAL MEASURES

- Explore the option of developing content and conducting research with visitor input, using a crowdsourcing model (on site and online).
- Commission artists to create participatory art on site, then add these pieces to the museum's collection.
- Set aside a dedicated, clearly identified point, within the exhibition space, where visitors can give critical feedback. Follow up on visitors' questions and comments, including through online content.
- Set up a student consultative committee, in partnership with local universities and other training providers, to advise the museum's management team and challenge its decisions.
- Make clear that the museum is an organization that learns with its visitors.



Idea 6 Co-develop content

with the public



A museum's collections and exhibitions are not gender- and diversity-neutral. The same applies to its physical spaces: in most cases, the layout, temperature and accessibility of museums are conceived with the needs of able-bodied men in mind. How can museums ensure they are welcoming and comfortable for all visitors?

A museum that cares for its visitors recognizes that the way people physically experience the space differs according to age, body size and gender expression, along with any disability. A feminist and inclusive museum is committed to providing the best possible experience for all visitors and listens to their views.

Idea 7 Adapt

the museum's
physical spaces

and make them
accessible to all

PRACTICAL MEASURES

- Consider installing gender-neutral toilets, place baby changing units in all toilets and provide free sanitary towel dispensers.
- Make life easier for parents of babies and young children, such as by providing play areas and breastfeeding facilities.
- Check that the temperature inside the exhibition rooms is comfortable for all visitors, without adversely affecting the items on display.
- Make the building accessible to all visitors, in a way that is both clear and visually appealing.
- Provide more spaces for visitors to rest and interact.



Museum staff represent a wide variety of skills and backgrounds. But what about the people who fill these roles? Is the museum's team equally diverse in terms of social composition, age and gender? How can the museum foster a culture of diversity and inclusion?

A feminist and inclusive museum recognizes that diversity is not an end in itself. It acknowledges that shaping a diverse workforce is an ongoing endeavour – one that plays out every day, at every level and in everything the organization does. Everyone is responsible, in their own way, for creating conditions conducive to diversity and inclusion.

Idea 8 Make

diversity and inclusion

an ongoing
priority

PRACTICAL MEASURES

- Explicitly encourage applications from candidates with diverse backgrounds.
- Provide employment opportunities to people who are socially excluded and to the long-term unemployed.
- Build gender and diversity criteria into the museum's service-provider selection process.
- Invest in continuing professional development, individually and collectively, at all levels of the organization.
- Develop a mentoring programme for students.



Museums that want to position themselves as open, welcoming community hubs also need to reflect on their own organizational structure. How is power exercised and distributed internally? Is the museum a place where employees feel empowered, where collective endeavour is the norm, and where everyone is valued for their role and contribution? To what extent does the museum prioritize diversity and inclusion in its operations and working practices?

A feminist and inclusive museum aligns its actions with its words. If it publicly addresses major societal issues through its exhibitions and other projects, it must also question its own values, culture and organizational structure in light of these themes.

Idea 9 Value

individual
contributions

to the collective
endeavour

PRACTICAL MEASURES

- Develop, with input from all employees and stakeholders, an institutional strategy that clearly and pragmatically addresses inclusion and diversity issues.
- Ensure that every employee's role and contribution are recognized and valued.
- Give employees access to their colleagues' annual performance targets, as a way to establish a level playing field, foster team unity and develop a culture of accountability.
- When it comes to exhibitions and other projects, do not allow perfection to be the enemy of impact.



Part of a museum's role is to preserve our heritage for future generations. Although museums tend to operate on long cycles, they can also be responsive to new developments. How can they establish themselves as porous spaces? How can they best serve the surrounding communities, here and now?

A feminist and inclusive museum is open to the wider world, collaborating with and actively participating in the surrounding communities. It helps us make sense of the world around us, opens our eyes to new perspectives and brings us closer together, fostering a sense of community. It fully embraces the major societal debates unfolding around it, seeking to contribute with humility and without over-simplifying their complexity.

PRACTICAL MEASURES

- Recognize that everyone makes mistakes.
- Celebrate success and take responsibility for failure as a team.
- Acknowledge the limits of each person's expertise, bring in experts and recognize their contribution.
- Actively seek critical feedback from visitors and follow up on it in a meaningful way.

Idea 10

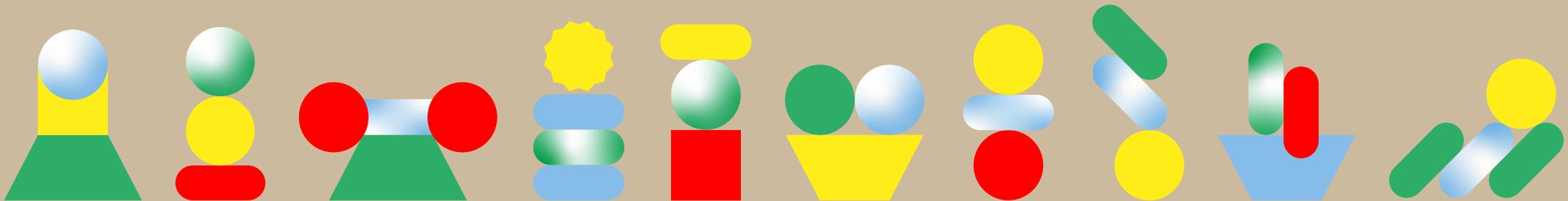
Walk the talk

and talk the walk



Rebecca Amsellem has proposed the following definition of a feminist and inclusive museum

“ A feminist and inclusive museum should acknowledge its role as a power-broker and aim to demasculinize its heritage and lend legitimacy to avant-garde social themes. To do so, it should commit to spotlighting neglected female and non-binary creators and presenting diverse forms of masculinity. It should support advanced research in intersectional and feminist disciplines that have received little funding from universities. The public, rather than being considered passive visitors, should be active agents in its exhibitions. ”



Bios



Rebecca Amsellem

Rebecca Amsellem is a French-Canadian feminist activist, creator of the *Les Glorieuses* newsletter and founder of Gloria Media, a newsletter production company. She holds a PhD in economics. Her thesis, *Museums go international: new strategies, business models*, was published by Peter Lang. She has instigated various equal pay movements in France, including the #5Novembre16h47 hashtag, which, signified the point in 2019 after which women worked for free for the rest of the year because of the gender pay gap. She recently published *La Méthode*, a documentary podcast on creating a feminist utopia, co-produced by Louie Media. Rebecca is the author of *Les Glorieuses: Chroniques d'une féministe* and has contributed to several collective works including *Une bibliothèque féministe*, edited by Agathe Le Taillandier and published by L'Iconoclaste.



Pascal Hufschmid

Pascal Hufschmid is an art historian specialized in photography. He has spearheaded multidisciplinary projects both within and outside Switzerland, drawing on his expertise in museology, the art market and international organizations. Since 2019, he has served as the executive director of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum in Geneva. In that role, he has sought to foster dialogue between humanitarian action, art and research – and to bring a broader audience into the debate – through the exhibitions and other projects that he designs, including *Covid-19 and Us by Magnum Photos and You* (2020), *Concerned: 30 Artists on Humanitarian Issues* (2021) and *To Heal a World. 160 Years of Photography from the Collections of the Red Cross and Red Crescent* (2021).



View of the exhibition *Who cares? Gender and humanitarian action* (31.05-9.10.2022)
© Aline Bovard Rudaz

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum (MICR) asks a central question: how does humanitarian action affect us all, here and now? In order to reflect on this question with its visitors, it invites artists and cultural partners to examine the issues, values and the current situation of humanitarian action. It thus asserts itself, in an open, agile and warm manner, as a place of memory, creation and debate.

Resources

Master classes



Susanna Pettersson Florence Schechter

Rebecca Amsellem in conversation with Susanna Pettersson (director general, Nationalmuseum Sweden), Florence Schechter (director, Vagina Museum) and Pascal Hufschmid (executive director, MICR), MICR, 23 September 2021.



Alayo Akinkugbe

Rebecca Amsellem in conversation with Alayo Akinkugbe (student and founder of [@ablackhistoryofart](https://www.instagram.com/ablackhistoryofart/)), MICR, 26 November 2021.



Eythar Gubara

Rebecca Amsellem in conversation with Eythar Gubara (photographer), Geneva International Film Festival and Forum on Human Rights (FIFDH), 7 March 2022.



Seraina Rohrer Idil Efe

Rebecca Amsellem in conversation with Seraina Rohrer (head of Innovation & Society, Pro Helvetia) and Idil Efe (diversity activist and curator, Berlin City Museum), moderated by Denise Tonella (director, Swiss National Museum) and Pascal Hufschmid (executive director, MICR), Swiss National Museum Landesmuseum Zürich, Zurich, 29 June 2022.

People interviewed by Rebecca Amsellem

Isabelle Alfonsi, essayist and gallery director

Julie Beauzac, creator, “Vénus s’épilait-elle la chatte?” podcast

Julie Botte, PhD in aesthetics and art science, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle

Corinne Estrada, founder and director, Communicating the Arts

Eva Kirilof, author

Juliette Lecorne, curator, Fondation Cartier

Elizabeth Ann Mcgregor, curator and art historian

Amjad Mohamed-Saleem, head of the inclusion, engagement and protection unit, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Susanna Pettersson, director general, Nationalmuseum Sweden

Océane Saily, founder and director, Hunna Art gallery, and PhD candidate, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle

Florence Schechter, director, the Vagina Museum

Thérèse St-Gelais, feminist art historian

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She Loves Black Art

Instagram account | [instagram.com/shelovesblackart](https://www.instagram.com/shelovesblackart)

A Black History Of Art by Alayo Akinkugbe

Instagram account | [instagram.com/ablackhistoryofart](https://www.instagram.com/ablackhistoryofart)

La Superbe by Eva Kirilof

Newsletter | lasuperbenewsletter.substack.com

Muzeodrome by Omer Pesquer

Newsletter | muzeodrome.substack.com

Morose Morisot

Newsletter | morosemorisot.substack.com

Association musée·e·s

Twitter account | twitter.com/assomuse_e_s

Vénus s'épilait-elle la chatte by Julie Beauzac

Podcast | venuslepodcast.com

Great Women Artists by Katy Hessel

Podcast | thegreatwomenartists.com

Awkward Questions for Kara Cooney

Podcast | portlandartmuseum.org/podcast/awkward-questions-for-kara-cooney

5 Plain Questions

Podcast | soundcloud.com/eleven-warrior-arts

Museum Confidential

Podcast | npr.org/podcasts/557204718/museum-confidential

Les accroché·e·s

Twitter account | twitter.com/accrochee_s

She Curates

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Feminist Curators

Website | feministcurators.org/members.html

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