

Women's work, men's professions – Museum trainees reflect on museums and gender

Men's electricity production

Contrary to what one might expect, the Paimio Electrical Museum is not only about the electrification of the countryside that began in the 1920 s and 1930 s. It also tells a story about gender roles and their impact.

Gender history is a field of research that examines the past from the perspective of gender. It is closely connected with women's history, which explores, for example, the experiences of women who have often received little attention in traditional historical writing. Gender history takes this a step further by investigating how gender has been understood in different periods and what characteristics or expectations have been associated with particular genders. It also examines whether historical phenomena have been gendered—that is, whether they have affected different genders in different ways.

Viewed from this perspective, the exhibition at the Electrical Museum is full of references to the gender concepts and roles of the twentieth century, which remained strongly divided for much of the century. While electrical fitters were almost exclusively men at the beginning of the century, women were primarily expected to be consumers of electricity. Electrical appliances such as electric irons greatly eased household tasks that were regarded as "women's work".

However, labour-saving domestic appliances were not the first purchases made by newly electrified households. Alongside electric lighting, the first investment was usually an electric motor for agricultural machinery. This primarily benefited the men on farms, whose work mainly involved forestry and fieldwork. Women, who were largely responsible for livestock and dairy work, did not gain access to electric milking machines until the 1950s, when livestock farming became increasingly electrified.

As the twentieth century progressed, women's role in the history of electrified everyday life became more diverse. Organisations such as the Martha Organization and electricity companies began offering home economics advice. Home economics advisers and consultants travelled from municipality to municipality teaching people how to use electrical household appliances. Both the advisers and those receiving the instruction were usually women, reflecting the widespread view that the home and care work belonged to the female sphere. To such an extent that educational work such as home economics instruction itself came to be regarded as women's work.

Although ideas about gender roles have become much more flexible in the twenty-first century, the electrical industry remains one of the most male-dominated sectors. This is significant because strongly gender-segregated fields tend to experience comparatively higher levels of gender discrimination and harassment. The industry's masculine image may also act as an implicit "men only" sign, discouraging others from pursuing careers in electrical engineering. This situation is hardly improved if the history of electricity continues to be told solely from the perspective of men, celebrating only males with agency.



Women's work or art?

Miila Craft Museum is exceptional because its foundation was made possible by a woman. Lyyli Tuomola, who lived in Halikko, bequeathed her entire estate to the City of Paimio so that a craft museum could be established there. It is equally remarkable that most of the objects in Miila were made by women: bridal trousseau items, lace tablecloths, embroidery, woven and crocheted rugs, and many other examples of traditional handicrafts.

The fact that such everyday objects made by women are considered worthy of preservation and exhibition in a museum is by no means self-evident. One might even ask whether a museum like Miila would exist at all without Lyyli Tuomola's bequest.

Traditionally, craft and art have been regarded as separate categories. Art has been seen as creative expression requiring exceptional talent, whereas craft, true to its name, has been understood as work—objects made for practical purposes according to established techniques. Craft certainly requires skill, but it has rarely been associated with individual genius. Objects made by women have generally been classified as handicrafts rather than art, and consequently they have not received the same recognition outside the home as works of art.

When men have engaged in similar activities, their work has more often been regarded as art. One example is the handicrafts made by soldiers during wartime, several of which are displayed at Miila. Decorative boxes, jewellery and other objects produced by soldiers at the front have become well-known elements of Finland's wartime heritage. Already during the Continuation War, competitions were organised for these handicrafts, and they were also sold commercially. At the same time, countless decorative objects made by women passed through homes and families without receiving comparable recognition.

Museums more broadly also present and reinforce ideas about gender and the roles and assumptions associated with it. Reinforcement refers to the way existing understandings are confirmed

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and passed on to future generations. The way gender is represented is always a matter of choice. The exhibitions at Miila reflect the traditional division of crafts: textile work belonged to women, woodworking to men. This perception still persists in many people's minds today. If museums continue repeating this narrative without questioning it, they also continue reproducing traditional gender roles. At the same time, they create a misleading picture of the past in which everyone supposedly conformed to these roles and no one lived outside a rigid gender binary.



Towards a more equal museum

Is it the role of museums to challenge gender roles? Probably not as their primary mission, but it is worth considering what museums tell us about history and art. Museums help us understand both the past and the world around us. For that reason, it is important to approach exhibitions critically and to consider the stories that remain untold behind the display panels.

A museum like Miila has an excellent opportunity to challenge outdated assumptions about gender and craft by increasing appreciation for women's work. Perhaps future exhibitions can also present new perspectives on gender. The Electrical Museum, in turn, has tremendous potential to explore both the history and the present of electricity production from the perspectives of people of different genders. Achieving this requires only courage and the fresh ideas that are essential for every thriving museum.

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