

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host Allison Tyra and today I'm joined by Evelien de Bruijn, a glass artist from the Netherlands, to discuss biases in how women's lives are documented, and the impact this has on future generations.

So why don't we start with how this topic first came up for you personally?

ED: I started as an artist, I was curious about my foremothers because I knew some of the history of my forefathers, but nothing of them. I didn't even know their last names because you get your last name from your father's side. And I wanted to make a series of the portraits of those people to get them out of oblivion and to tell their stories. So I started researching and in Holland, fortunately, everything is online. So I could do a lot of research and I could find birth certificates, censuses, local documents, legal documents. And that way I discovered dozens of stories of like common women from the 17th century to the 19th century in the Netherlands, who juggled careers with motherhood.

I've started telling these stories through my portraits. I've got not yet seven finished, but I've got many more stories. I work slower as an artist than I do as a researcher, apparently. So this was a very personal question. I also started because I wanted to know more about who I am. But I noticed that these women represent actually a lot of foremothers of people here in the Netherlands, and as well of some Australian and American people. There are a lot of them over there as well. And I knew I came from a line of millers on my father's side. So when you look at the records, you can see generations of my forefathers named as millers. But then I discovered that some of these men actually died quite young, and their wives took over their mill in their husbands names, and I have these women like Lamberta Segers, she was a miller in the 18th century. And in a very Dutch traditional windmill, from the pictures, this windmill also still exists. And Maria Dunkers is another example. She was a miller for about 20 years when her husband was only a miller for 10 years, in the late 19th, and 20th century, and she ran a modern mill, which had a steam engine with 17 horsepower, very fancy. And she had at least one employee, her son also worked in the mill and later took over the mill. But she had financial control, and she was always named as the widow of Fonteyn. But yeah, her own name was never or hardly ever in the records. But it shows that both had business insight and technical knowledge, which are skills that are not often ascribed to girls. And I can only imagine her walking around the steam engine and discussing what had to be done and controlling all the money.

AT: It seems like a classic case of "you can't be what you can't see", meaning if there's no proof of women as scientists or artists or businesswomen, it reinforces the idea even today that women aren't as good as men and can't accomplish the same things.

ED: Yeah, and that sets the standard that leads to the idea that women wanting another life than motherhood or not finding satisfaction in motherhood alone, are divergent and that feminism is a relatively new trend that only caters to the needs of a small group of women. But while in fact, there are many women from different backgrounds that had careers, and over the centuries, here in the Netherlands, women have only been registered as homemakers. And children can only compare their professional ambitions and talents to the careers of their forefathers. But when you know nothing about the temperaments and accomplishments of your four mothers, you don't know in which way you look like them. And for girls, the only example is motherhood. And I actually think that's a real job and unfortunately, women don't get paid for it.

AT: That's a whole other episode.

ED: Yeah, most definitely. Yeah. But what if motherhood doesn't fit those ambitions? Or if it doesn't feel like enough. Are they failing as a woman? Are they more like their fathers? And also in a way I think the same goes for men and boys as well. There are no records of men being homemakers. And boys don't think being a stay-at-home dad is an option or very masculine or something like that. Well, there might be a quite a lot of men who would enjoy the life of a homemaker, might be better at it than some women.

AT: Yeah, my husband would make an excellent househusband, but unfortunately, he decided to go the career route. (laughter) Now, obviously, you're approaching this from a Dutch perspective. But we do see this in so many different countries. Speaking as an American, back in 1888, activist Charlotte Smith convinced the US Patent Office to compile an official comprehensive list of women who had been granted patents, because she wanted to show that women are doing this, and four clerks spent 10 days putting together a list that a later analysis found, had probably left out at least one in five women. So even when they were specifically assigned to do this, it was such shoddy work.

Yeah, I don't get why they don't find it a priority. But fortunately for women in the Netherlands, they had a bit more independence than in other European countries. I heard later that it was exceptional, I didn't know this. But they were allowed to trade in their husband's name. Girls had an equal share in the inheritance, but no control over their money until they married. Widows had full financial independence. And one of my foremothers, Christina, she lived during the first half of the 18th century, and she was married to a traveling salesman, and he would drive his horse and cart with butter and beer to Belgium and Germany. This also sounds very Dutch. But when I read the judicial archives, I found that she would sometimes travel with him. But also she handled a lot of the finances. The funny thing's that the thing where women were, seemed like incapacitated or not able to do, so that you see that mostly women are, I saw this many more examples, that women are the ones dealing with the finances. And she was also pretty tough when it came to collecting debts. And I found also this weird or funny example of her demanding her debt in the name of her husband from another woman. And that woman responded very witty that while she couldn't have any debt because she was financially incapacitated, because she was married, and her husband had control of the money. So yeah, there was nothing to pay. I thought, this is funny that they took advantage of their own problem. They used it in their own benefits.

AT: And I was actually just talking to someone about an American businesswoman, Sarah B. Cochran, who ran this massive business empire. But census records for her occupation, were often left blank or just they said, None. And it means it's also a lot more difficult for people, like the person I was talking to is a biographer, and she was having a really hard time trying to piece together the story, even though she knew exactly who she was looking for, and where to look. But just because the records are incomplete or inaccurate, so it makes it a lot harder for the people who are looking for these stories.

ED: Yeah, exactly. And it's the same here also, because you don't know the last name. So it's much harder to find. Sometimes the last name is not even in some of the birth certificates or records, you just have a first name and then you will have to search from there. And most women here were, as I said, described as homemakers or as widows of so and so. And it's especially hard to find traces of poor women. And a large part of my family were relatively poor farmers. And we know that these women worked for sure, because they had to help on the farm next to raising children and husband and wives, they both worked together on a farm to keep it going. But you hardly find anything about these women. And I have to use my imagination to see what kind of life they had. It's also dependent on the municipality because some were very diligent and others were very sloppy. In Nuenen, a village where I talked about before, two of my foremothers Maria Habraken and her daughter-in-law Maria van Lieshout. They were both from upper-middle-class families, so they weren't poor. And both became widows at an early age. And they were actually registered according to their professions, which is nice to see. So now I could discover this. I wouldn't have found out otherwise. But Maria Habraken ran a small textile factory factory that was so well respected. And she was so seen in the village as a real businesswoman that they titled her a manufacturer, which was normally only a title given to men. And Maria van Lieshout, she ran a local pub from home because she had young children and so she could earn money while taking care of her small children and pouring beer for local men.

AT: I would imagine it doesn't hurt to be popular as the person making the beer.

ED: No, most certainly not. If people did this, if I understood, in the Netherlands, they just did it from their home. From their living room, let's say, then people would come and have that beer to drink.

AT: And coming back to modern times, when we're looking at scholars, historians, archaeologists, there's this issue with androcentrism, meaning the tendency to focus only on what the men were doing and just ignoring the women. And sometimes it's really blatant, like you've had guys who will bend over backwards, trying to insist that a woman buried with weapons and armor wasn't a warrior, for no other reason than they just don't believe a woman could be a warrior. And apart from overlooking women's accomplishments, on the archaeological side, it creates this blind spot that hides important factors around entire cultures. So modern understanding of the Vikings, for example, focuses almost exclusively on male warriors, because that was the focus of the scholarship and media depictions. But in 2020, an archaeologist Michèle Hayeur Smith, published "The Valkyries' Loom: The Archaeology of Cloth Production and Female Power in the North Atlantic." So she pointed out that the women were producing this high-quality, standardized woolen cloth and it was valuable enough that it was literally used as currency in Iceland, like this cloth formed the backbone of Viking trade, and it was particularly desired in England. So it was important financial support for the Viking community. And because they were ignoring women's work and thinking textiles weren't important, archaeologists just overlooked this major aspect of the entire civilization. So it's undermining the entire foundations of what we know.

ED: Yeah, and I don't understand it, sometimes it feels, and I know I have thought so before ever looking into this, that women have been suppressed for ever since humans walk the earth. But it's, I thought that it wasn't right, but that it was natural, because men are stronger. And I think a lot of people think the same. But a lot of this is bias. As your example shows, there were periods and cultures where women were equal to men sometimes even had like leading roles. And sometimes I don't really understand why this has changed. Why were women so suppressed and undervalued in so many cultures all over the world for such a long time? And it's just, it's not like all men had a meeting and said, Let's go and make women are slaves or subordinates or whatever. But then I read "Caliban and the Witch," by Silvia Federici. She wrote that women in Europe had gained more freedom in the Middle Ages. And from the 15th century, economic systems changed more from sustenance farming, to market-driven production. And for that reason, a large workforce became important and because of sickness, sometimes there weren't enough people to work. So women were seen as producers of more workforce. And therefore it became important to get more control over women and to get them to focus on having more children, which literally became women's labor. And she states that witch hunts were a way to control the female population. So independent women were punished, obedient women survived. And in the late 16th century, I also see this example in my foremothers lives. They lived through one of the biggest witch hunts in our country, right in their small village of Lierop, a tiny hamlet, it's still very small. There were only a couple of hundred inhabitants and seven women were tortured and killed. And in the neighboring villages, more than 18 women were murdered. And the most horrible death was that of a 90-year-old woman, which really sad, she was probably senile, and couldn't confess to her crimes and she was burned alive on the moor. It was horrible. My oldest known foremother Ida, I don't know her last name. She must have been a child or a teenager around the time. And maybe it was her mother who was murdered, maybe her grandmother or her aunts, but she must have known at least one of these people. And this trauma must have impacted her life immensely, and it must have affected the way she raised her two daughters, of which Margriet is my foremother. And then you read the opinions of other historians about the witch hunts and they say, "Oh, they were not exclusively focused on women, it wasn't against women." Because about 25% of condemned witches were male. And I'm like, still 75% were women, it's very big difference. And maybe these men might have also been different from most men. Maybe these were also independent or maybe gay men. Yeah. I don't know.

AT: It's like the women warriors. Like there are some people who will look for any excuse to say, Oh, this wasn't sexism. It's like, "well..."

ED: Yeah. Yeah, no, there were men as well. And I'm like, Yeah, but still, you know, perhaps if it was 50/50/75% women? Sorry. And in this case, they were all women. There are no, no men.

AT: Yeah. And they're also like, if you look at the patterns, there's a lot of things like women who are financially independent, like you were saying, and it's just like, come on guys.

ED: Here it's the same, especially widows were financially independent in the Netherlands. And they were targeted.

AT: Plus, I feel like anytime you're defending people who burned other people alive...

ED: Not a good thing.

AT: Probably on the wrong side. Okay, so on a more positive note, I did have Dutch women specifically. And I did find a few interesting examples that I just wanted to share real quick. So there's Golden Age painter, Judith Leyster, whose entire body of work was attributed to men or left unattributed for many years. It was a case of the nameless wife, so like you were saying, a lot of these women we don't have a last name for. Some of them, we don't even have a first name for because when she died, the inventory of the estate attributed many paintings to "the wife of Molenaer," and I'm sorry, if I'm mispronouncing.

ED: Oh, yeah, "the wife of Molenaer," it's actually "miller."

AT: But not to Judith Leyster. And her husband was one of the painters that her work was attributed to, but there was actually at least one case of deliberate forgery. In 1893, the Louvre discovered her signature underneath a forged Hals signature - this is another male artist - on a 1630 painting called The Carousing Couple or The Jolly Companions. And the fraud actually dates back to the 1600s, possibly even her lifetime, which was 1609 to 1660. And another version of the painting had been sold in Brussels in 1890. And her distinctive J L monogram had been crudely altered to an interlocking F H for Frans Hals, and an investigation in 1893 happened because one dealer bought it from another, sold it on to a customer. And then they noticed the odd signature. So the buyer took the case to court. And an art historian examined the painting, testified it was definitely not Hals's signature, but Leyster's. And it really shows the monetary incentive that dealers and museums have to not look too closely at potential attributions, because the painting's value dropped by 25%. And each dealer was blaming the other, no one was paying attention to the rediscovery of this once-renowned painter's work. And it did lead to seven more of her paintings being identified. And I will say recognition and appreciation for her work has increased since the 1890s. One of her paintings sold for \$2.3 million in 2018. But it really goes to show that even when someone is doing something very publicly visible, she was very well known at the time, but it was so easy to erase her name from her own work.

ED: Yes, and Frans Hals, he just sold so much better than Leyster because he was a man and famous. And Judith Leyster, fortunately with some other Dutch female Masters, is finally getting some more recognition also in the Netherlands. Because I only learned about her existence a couple of years ago on a TV program, and this showed they were looking to attribute a portrait of her, not by her, and they wanted the portraits will be by Frans Hals, of course, because that would get a lot of money. The hosts were trying to find other likenesses of Judith to compare with. And then they showed one other portrait, which they knew for sure was by Frans Hals, and two of her self-portraits. And the weird thing was that there were no strong similarities between the portrait by Frans Hals and her self-portraits. But the presenters of the show still thought that Frans Hals's portrait was

probably the most most accurate, because it looked most like the unattributed portrait that they wanted to be by Frans Hals. And I thought it was sort of weird because Judith for sure knew best what she looked like. And I also really liked the self-portraits she made by herself because they show much more personality than the ones by Hals where her face is a bit made more soft, less serious, more feminine, I think. And in her own paintings, you see more features more expression, which I like

AT: Yeah, and I'm not an art historian. But I've heard the same said about Italian painter, Artemisia Gentileschi, when you compare her work to her father, so her father had would paint women in his very idealized, kind of soft manner. And Artemisia is over here, doing the best depiction of Judith beheading Holofernes that I've seen. I don't know if you've seen that. It's so good.

ED: Yeah. I haven't seen it live. But I've seen it. It's great. Yeah.

AT: Yeah. And you compare it to men's paintings of the same scene, and the woman's like reluctant and you know, hesitant and very, like, the body language is so different. Whereas hers is like, "No, I'm here to cut a guy's head off. And we're gonna do it."

ED: Yeah, she's in control. Yeah. Yeah, it's, it's very strong. I like it as well. Yeah.

AT: And just switching over to the sciences. Dutch botanist and geneticist, Jantina Tammes was one of only 11 women students at the University of Groningen, in 1890, where she was allowed to attend lectures, but not take exams, culminating in a teaching diploma, rather than a degree in science. She then went on to be the first professor of genetics in the Netherlands, of any gender, despite having to put up with that nonsense.

ED: And I only learned this year of her existence. I mean, this is all not known. For a long time, people thought that having one example of a smart Dutch woman was enough, you know, and for us, that became Aletta Jacobs, who was the first Dutch female with a university degree and also a feminist, she was a doctor. But one example isn't enough. We need many more to give girls and women the feeling that these are accomplishments that are not only possible for exceptional women, but for every woman, and just as much, much as a man. And I want boys as well to notice the accomplishments of their mothers, to look up to their mothers and say, "Oh, when I grow up, I want to be like my mommy," instead of "my daddy." And you also just briefly dropped the word gender. And that's also a point we haven't touched on yet, because the past centuries, people were only registered as either male or female. And I've been talking about foremothers and forefathers being examples to girls and boys. And even though this is written in black and white there, I know that there are more and more examples found also in historical documents that even back in the day, people didn't feel so binary. And famous examples are of course Anne Lister, the English diaries from the 19th century there's also nice TV series from the BBC about her, and Sappho, Greek poet from Lesbos, where the name lesbian comes from, the word lesbian. And in the records of my foremothers, I couldn't find anything that hinted to homosexuality, or gender issues, there's just too little known about them. And these things weren't registered on this, or somebody who wrote a lot and stories are left behind. But I do have a strong feeling that there is one because in my mother's family and extended family, there are a lot of gay people, I know of at least six. Two of them are my uncle and aunt, a brother and sister. And so for the portraits I'm making of my foremothers, I have asked women in my family to be a model, because I don't have any pictures of the real foremothers. And I asked these women to imagine being them and how they would live their lives as their foremothers and I asked my Aunt Maria, who is gay, to imagine being her great-grandmother, Maria van Vlerken, and she was a farmer's wife in the late 19th century. And she died in childbirth. And I wanted the story from her perspective as well. And I thought well, knowing my aunt, I expected her to say that she would completely suppress her sexuality her whole life and be a good wife and a good mother. But to my surprise, she actually said that she would have tried to find romance if it meant sneaking

around, that she would have probably wanted to find love outside of marriage. And I'm sure that stories like these must have happened. And I'm very happy and honored that I get to tell one of them through my portraits.

AT: It's crazy to me that people try and claim that, being genderqueer, or non-heterosexual is a new thing, because it's more visible now. But when you look at the repercussions for people who felt like they had to hide, because they did. I mean, there are so many stories. We have another episode about Freda du Faur, who was a lesbian, and her partner was admitted to an insane asylum, and Freda herself later ended up killing herself because the environment they were living in was so toxic to women who loved other women. It was horrible. One of the issues that you see with the preservation documents is who controls them after their creator died. So when we're talking specifically about queer women, obviously this happened with Emily Dickinson's work after she died. A lot of the queerness was edited out by her brother's mistress. Because Emily had a long-standing romantic relationship with her sister-in-law. So her brother's wife. There was this fight over who controlled her stuff after she died. And the mistress whether for morality-based reasons, or because she was just being petty about her married lover's wife, edited out a lot of the like, dedications to this woman and that sort of thing. So you do see that, I think on both fronts, with women, and particularly with queer people. And just to bring it back to the Netherlands, I think we can agree the most well-known diary in modern history is Anne Frank's. But after she died, the diary was given to her father. And as we've later discovered, there were a lot of things that were edited out to make her seem more innocent, more childlike, as opposed to the teenager that she was. So it wasn't giving, again, going back to that issue that we were talking about with idealized women rather than realistic women, or in her case, teenagers. So some of the things that were edited out, she apparently talked about her sexuality, touching her friend's breasts, menstruation, which I think a lot of teenage girls would find a lot more relatable. But she talks about sex and childbirth and sex workers. It is kind of understandable that a father would not necessarily want that sort of content that his daughter had written, being put out into the world. But it definitely creates a very different picture of this sort of idealized, sexless perfect child, who isn't talking about, you know, issues that she had with her mom. But it's not accurate. It's not an honest portrait of who this person was.

ED: No, it's not. And Anne Frank was also a very important example for me and my sister when we were younger. We both looked up to her. And, yeah, we thought she was a mysterious girl, who was so smart when she was only a teenager. And who had gone through so much, who had unfortunately died, right before the end of the war. And in the early '90s, they printed a special edition of her diaries, and it was called "The Complete Diaries of Anne Frank." And my sister, she got the book for her birthday. And in it, you can see three different versions of the diary, which was really nice. One is the version, the one that her father edited next, one was a later edition where they cut out less stuff. And there is one version completely unedited. And you see on one page, you can see fragments of all three and then it goes on. It's kind of funny to see. So you can read immediately all three versions in one page. And I would read and compare these different versions. And I knew that her father had cut out negative comments about his wife, because Anne was very critical about her mother. As well as the stories about puberty and sexuality and her crush on Pieter is only a little bit in there. And I read most of the diaries as a 12-year-old. At the time, I wasn't that interested in the whole sexuality stuff. And I don't understand why people get so upset about it, that it's there, they want to ban the book, I have no idea. Because children will read what they want to read in it and what they associate with it. And at that time, I was most of all, happy to see that the unedited version was full of mistakes. Because before I had the feeling that Anne was very, very smart and had superb writing and linguistic talent. And now I knew that she was just a normal girl like me, and that I might be able to become a writer. That's also what I what I wanted to show with this project, is that there are many examples in history of normal women trying to live a life outside the edges, or on the edges of convention. And as times are changing, I think the stories send more and more of a message to people now like, you can do this too. And you're not alone. And I like that.

AT: It's a lot more relatable to see a real person and not feel like you have to live up to some unrealistic ideal. Looking at you, Instagram filters and impossible beauty standards.

ED: Yeah, yeah, that's it, it sometimes feels like, oh, that's only possible for a few people. And maybe the top of something like being an artist as big as Judith Leyster. That's not attainable for me. But I can be an artist. You know, it is attainable. But there are more examples than we think. You don't have to be the best to be good at something and to do this kind of work. And you don't have to be a unique woman, to follow your ambitions and to enjoy that. You can see in history that women try to do that and sometimes successfully, but also sometimes, unfortunately, unsuccessfully. And now there's more opportunity and more stories known, I think more women will accomplish this success.

For me, this project has sent me on a whole road of discoveries and now on a podcast. And I'm really looking forward in the future not to just dig into my own foremothers but also into the foremothers of other people and discovering their adventures.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.