

## Dedicated Donor | Mary Ross Taylor



Mary Ross Taylor at NMWA's recent Endowment Celebration

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“The National Museum of Women in the Arts does what nobody else does,” says Mary Ross Taylor, who has championed the museum since it was just an idea. In the 1970s, while she was an arts advocate and bookstore owner, she first heard about the plans for NMWA. “Ann Sutherland Harris, a pioneering feminist art historian and curator, was in my Houston bookstore in about 1975 and told me that a museum of women’s art was in the planning stages in Washington, D.C. I could hardly believe it!” She got involved soon afterward and has been a steadfast supporter ever since, promoting Founder Wilhelmina Cole Holladay’s vision, participating in committees that help women artists build careers, and contributing to long-term initiatives such as the *Legacy of Women in the Arts* endowment campaign.

Taylor’s career has given her an ideal background to advocate for women artists. She left a dissertation “back in the days when the University of Texas didn’t put married women on the PhD candidate job list” and opened her bookstore. Through the store, she hosted book signings for feminist authors and met artist Judy Chicago (whose work is currently on view at NMWA in *Circa ’75*)—initially, she says, because “I was selling her memoir *Through the Flower* to women who weren’t artists, so I read it to see why it was so popular.” She went on to organize the exhibition of Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* in Houston, worked for Chicago’s nonprofit in California, and earned a master’s degree in museum administration. She returned to Houston to revitalize an alternative arts space, a position that “taught me what emerging and established artists value and prioritize.”

Holladay has found Taylor to be an invaluable ally: “Mary Ross Taylor’s generosity and friendship over the years has been meaningful. She has helped the museum achieve many of its goals and has been most helpful in strengthening committees.” Taylor has been gratified to observe Holladay’s influence “on the revisiting and rewriting of art history. By

1980 we all knew Frida Kahlo and Georgia O’Keeffe, but that was pretty much it. Of the early exhibitions at the museum I especially remember Remedios Varo and later Camille Claudel as exhibitions that won serious reviews saying that NMWA had changed the way these women artists were seen and evaluated.”

Taylor’s support for NMWA’s committees and endowment strengthens the museum’s reach and longevity. “No two committees are alike,” she says, so taking part in both the New Mexico and Arkansas committees “has been fun and very instructive. I think the most important work of the committees is helping women artists move to the next level professionally, to show their work in museums. Committees educate their communities about women artists and support NMWA’s programs financially.” She also feels that the museum’s endowment is crucial, and her gifts have helped it grow over the years. Her hopes are high for the museum’s future: “one of my goals is for NMWA to find the resources to replace admission revenues,” further expanding access and feelings of ownership to new audiences.

NMWA’s special significance, Taylor says, lies in the fact that “the percentage of women artists in other museum collections is still miniscule. The percentage of women who have midcareer retrospectives is still tiny. If you keep track of what is on view at your local museums, you will be surprised—it is so taken for granted that nobody asks why these are museums of men’s art!” NMWA’s impact has reawakened other museums to work by women artists in their own collections, she says. “Many forces combined to enlarge the historical perspective, but I believe Mrs. Holladay’s program was effective in opening the way for women artists of the past to be reconsidered. This makes a tremendous difference for women artists practicing today, and for students and art appreciators of all ages.”