Portraits Podcast – *A Cover Like No Other, With Gloria Steinem and Suzanne Braun Levine*

[INTRO MUSIC]

Kim Sajet:
It was 1972 and Gloria Steinem had just co-founded the feminist magazine, Ms. from an office about the size of a kitchen. Abortion had not yet been legalized, and most banks wouldn't even extend credit to a woman unless her husband cosigned, and women who chose to work- they were mostly relegated to low paying jobs, like teachers or nurses and secretaries. But Gloria had found her way into journalism, and made quite a name for herself, thanks in part to an article that she wrote, after going undercover as a Playboy Bunny.

Gloria Steinem:
You know, I also was rethinking and understanding that perhaps when I delivered a manuscript to the New York Times Sunday Magazine, I did not have to put up with the idea that the my editor gave me a choice, either I could go to a hotel room with him in the afternoon, or I could mail his letters on the way out.

Kim Sajet:
Wow.

Gloria Steinem:
I mailed his letters, but thanks to changed consciousness, I realized it wasn't right. I didn't have to put up with it. I could speak up about it.

Kim Sajet:
Ms. Magazine staff was small, but mighty. Women who were agitating for change, and into the mix walked their first editor, Suzanne Braun Levine.

Suzanne Braun Levine:
Well, I came to Ms. Magazine as a real feminist virgin, I was not an activist,

Kim Sajet:
Not an activist but something clicked. She loved the supportive vibe. And she quickly realized in this crowd, you could shed your heels and your girdle. So, she did.

Suzanne Braun Levine:
I figured it out and I got comfortable clothes. And I remember like my third day of work, I was in the elevator, in my jeans and T shirt and this man turned around and started yelling at me. He said, “How disrespectful of you to come to work in such sloppy clothes. Don't you know how to conduct business, blah, blah, blah.”

Kim Sajet:
That was another click.

Suzanne Braun Levine:

Which was, how threatening what we were talking about was to some people. That it was reassuring and liberating to some people like me, but it was very threatening and angry making to other people.

Kim Sajet:
Welcome to portraits. I'm Kim Sajet, Director of the National Portrait Gallery. Today, we're looking at some of the ways that female activists, women who resisted have been visually portrayed. That reaction that Suzanne encountered in the elevator can be traced across decades. You can see it in magazine covers and editorial sketches and photographs. Women were not serious enough, or they were too serious, or they were too manly, or they were too mad. And we're looking at how the women behind Ms. Magazine work to turn these tropes on their head. We kick things off with Gloria Steinem, the feminist writer and political activist. I wanted to ask her about an earlier archetype of female activism. It's a kind of portrait that you'll come across from the late 1800s. Many of these women were abolitionists and suffragists. Many were quite devout, even teetotal. And they often were photographed in somber dress, plain dark clothes, almost no jewelry. They were all about the books and the ideas. Ribbons and lace, well, not so much. The first photograph I showed to Gloria was of one such woman. It's a black and white print in an oval frame, taken sometime around 1900. Maybe you could describe who this is.

Gloria Steinem:
Ah, yes, well, this is my grandmother on the paternal side, Pauline Perlmutter Steinem. She was an extraordinary woman who was who testified before Congress who worked for the Ohio Women's Suffrage Association, who faced a lot of antisemitism in Toledo. I mean, for instance, she founded among the first if not the first vocational high school, because otherwise there was classical education, which did not lead to a way for poor people to make, make a living. But the high school was not named after her because it was a Jewish name. You know, so I wish I had known her better. I wish I hadn't been so young when she died, but I do know that my mother, her daughter in law, adored her.

Kim Sajet:
And what I love about this image that she's got her glasses on, which is actually quite unusual. I have to say you don't see this very often.

Gloria Steinem:
Oh, really? I hadn't thought about that.

Kim Sajet:
Yeah. And you'll see, you know, you'll often well, if you do see women, learned women with glasses, they're generally holding them, you know, appears snares in their hands, but to actually have them on the face is kind of unusual. And then she also has a sort of interesting, she's holding her hand in in such a way that she's sort of propping up her face. I've done a little bit of research in the early photography of the women's movement and found this sort of gesture of propping up your face is also code for a thoughtful woman. Someone who's not afraid is willing to be out there who is putting herself forward. You can hardly see what she's wearing. She has a very dark hue dress, maybe black or very dark brown, with a very sort of thin white ruffle. But again, it's a woman who is not highly adorned. She is a thinking woman, her hair is up. It's very typical, I think of how women were fashioning themselves if they wanted to be taken serious in the public realm. And her history as of activists in the women's movement was a bit of a surprise to you correct that you learned this later in life? Or?

Gloria Steinem:
Yes, because she died when I was very, very young. So, I only have sense memories of her. And I owe to researchers in Toledo, feminist researchers who went back and wrote about her and so I learned about her in a much more full way only after I was grown up. I mean, I do have sense memories of being in her always very clean kitchen. And the fact that she would not even use vanilla because it had alcohol in it. She was such a…

Kim Sajet:
That's funny.

Gloria Steinem:
prohibitionist.

Kim Sajet:
Does it have a lot of alcohol?

Gloria Steinem:
I don't know enough, enough so that she didn't use it right?

Kim Sajet:
I brought up another photograph. And this is one from our collection and it's kind of iconic. It was taken in 1971 by Dan when and it features Gloria Steinem and her friend Dorothy Pitman Hughes, the child welfare advocate. They're wearing what looks like plain beige leotards. And if you're looking for fashion choices, again, it's not about that. They both have their right fists raised in the air. It's a nod to the civil rights movement and to protests against the war in Vietnam that were going on at the time.

Gloria Steinem:
And we just out of street Habit, put our fists up. And actually Dorothy continuously throughout our lives and she's still with us, of course, and living in Florida, made fun of me because she said I did not know how to make a fist because if you'll notice, my thumb is not clenched within my other fingers, right?

Kim Sajet:
Yeah, your thumb is not in front of your knuckles.

Gloria Steinem:
Yes.Right, right, right. So, she never let me forget that.

Suzanne Braun Levine:
One word- power. It just says power.

Kim Sajet:
That’s Suzanne Braun Levine again. She served as editor of Ms. Magazine for 16 years. And she's also written several books about women's issues, friendship, and aging.

Suzanne Braun Levine:
It's not only a raised fist, but it's thrust it's a punch.

Kim Sajet:

If you look back at the magazine covers from the late 60's and the early 70's, you'll see an interesting framing emerge. These women who dared to punch the air with their fists were often depicted as being out of touch with reality or inexplicably furious. In 1969, Time magazine called women's rights activist the angries. And some articles pondered, why are they so unhappy?

Suzanne Braun Levine:
Well, anger has always been one of the responses from women that is least encouraged and least welcomed. You know, you'd walk by construction workers and they would say, why aren't you smiling baby? I mean, there was expected that you were supposed to be agreeable.

Kim Sajet:
I showed Suzanne a time cover from 1970 That might be read as a perfect example of the quote, angry woman. It features the face of a young student yelling at the top of her lungs. And in the background. You can see the White House lit up in a glowing red.

Suzanne Braun Levine:
What happened, I think to a lot of us, is once we figured out that we were angry, that was very energizing. But the other component was that we weren't alone, and that we could count on each other. Which was another one of the important gift to the women's movement, I think was women learning to trust each other.

Kim Sajet:
And I wanted to show you this image of the angry woman that goes, you know, has a long history. Here is a picture of Susan B. Anthony on the cover of The Daily graphic in 1873, can you describe what you see here and how you think about it?

Suzanne Braun Levine:
Well, she looks like a frowning, menacing schoolmarm, like an angry nun, with an Uncle Sam hat on, and she's glaring. And there seem to be a bunch of women marching way in the background. She is also alone. She's very independent, and tough. But all alone.

Kim Sajet:
Yeah. And then the caption is, "the woman who dared". But what you'll notice of these sort of this subtle symbols because the two men in the distance to her one of them, if you'll realize is actually holding a baby.

Suzanne Braun Levine:
Oh.

Kim Sajet:
I think the inference is, you know, these two guys are having to now look up, bring up the children and in the background are all these women protesting. But exactly like you said, Susan B. Anthony is looking like this very frowny school mommy, menacing, actually, you know, back in the day was this idea that you were you were no longer feminine that you had taken on somehow masculine traits against God's order. A continuation, I think of this idea of the scary woman, you know, screaming on the cover of the Time Magazine.

Suzanne Braun Levine:
Yeah. I mean, now you have the internet and you have all kinds of interesting legislation and you have a lot of support. But at the beginning, there was nothing but mobilization of angry women.

Kim Sajet:
On the other side of the break, America's first feminist magazine hits the newsstand and promptly sells out. Its preview cover did not feature an angry woman, and there wasn't a single weight loss plan inside. Stay with us.

[INTRO MUSIC]

Kim Sajet:
Ms Magazine ran a preview issue in late 1971. It included a poem by Sandra Hochman, titled, “The Lover Goes Out Like a Tooth”. There were also articles about how to write your own marriage contract, and how to raise children without sexism. And there was a story called, “We Have Had Abortions”, signed by 53 well known women including Billie Jean King, Judy Collins, and the magazine's co-founder Gloria Steinem.

Gloria Steinem:
It seems to me and the majority of Americans clear that if you don't have decision making power over your own body, you're not living in a democracy. Authoritarian regimes tend to start with controlling the bodies of women and democratic ones ensure universal power both men and women over our own physical selves.

Kim Sajet:
The cover for this issue had to be something really special. And the team came to rest on an illustration by Miriam Wosk. It depicted a pregnant Hindu goddess with eight arms holding a skillet, a phone, a steering wheel. Let's get back to our conversation.

Gloria Steinem:
We were trying for the first issue of Ms. Magazine to portray an every woman on the cover. And at first we had a large face. And the face was of different skin colors. But it looked very peculiar, you know, you couldn't, it didn't work.

Kim Sajet:
Yeah, that’s interesting.

Gloria Steinem:
It didn't work as a visual image. So, Miriam arrived at this way of showing a woman patterned on Krishna, the Indian god with many arms. And you know, making her blue was a way of making her universal. She has a baby in her tummy. She has an iron and typewriter, a mirror, you know, to symbolize how good she has to look at telephone. You know, all these ways in which women were supposed to behave, which, of course, is why she has tears running down her cheeks. I thought it was brilliant of Miriam to come up with this image. And it has been much used ever since then.

Kim Sajet:
She's wearing heels too, which is sort of fascinating.

Gloria Steinem:
Yes, and she’s stuck with wearing heels, when of course makes it much harder to work.

Kim Sajet:

It's fantastic. Well, what was standard at the time, and here is a magazine cover of Vogue is a very beautiful model, wearing a lovely floral outfit. And I found what was really fascinating was the words on this cover. So, it's a special issue dedicated to the life and looks of the American woman in 1970. And the stories inside her “Family Today”, “The Liberated Woman”, “How a Frenchman Trains His American Wife”, and “How to Shape Up Your Husband”, and finally, “The Fashion That American Women Love to Wear”. But right at the bottom, you can see finally, and there seems to be this kind of messaging on pretty much all the covers from the 1970’s I’ve discovered is, “How to Stay Ten Pounds Thinner”. Was the Ms. Magazine very deliberately, a counter to this kind of imaging for women?

Gloria Steinem:
Yes, because that imaging was directly attached to advertising. You know, from having written for other women's magazines, I well understood that you were not supposed to initiate controversy in the pages that might alienate advertisers. You were not supposed to photograph even a famous woman without makeup or with except in fashionable clothes that were then credited in the caption in the women's magazines for not because of their editors who were smart, wonderful women, but because of their support by advertising, were chained far too often, to saying what pleased the advertisers who were supplying the ads that made the magazine profitable.

Kim Sajet:
One of the women who picked up the preview issue of MS magazine was Suzanne Braun Levine, who would soon become its editor.

Suzanne Braun Levine:
And I thought it was wonderful. I loved it, it seemed to speak to me.

Kim Sajet:
What really spoke to her was that article about women who'd gone public with the fact that they'd had an abortion.

Suzanne Braun Levine:
Which at that time was very brave. And at the bottom, there was a little coupon that said you can add your name if you've had an illegal abortion And I had never told anybody. But I was so excited to be welcomed and to be included in this recognition of this life experience.

Kim Sajet:
Suzanne says that this first cover image with the eight armed goddess reflected a core message that all women were welcome.

Suzanne Braun Levine:
Like everything it misses, the effort was to touch all the bases. So that if you talked about one aspect of women's lives, you didn't diminish the other aspect of women's lives. That it was totally supportable to be a woman who stayed at home and that was also supportable to be a woman who was a lesbian. And it sometimes it was, it got funny. But this, this cover attempted, and I think fairly well succeeded, in touching all the bases of women's experience.

Kim Sajet:
But what they sort of failed to tell you or I think what we all started to realize is that instead of choosing one path, you actually had to do three or four different jobs, you had the the job at home, you had the job at the office, you had the mother's job, the wife's job, and this cover of

Ms. Magazine is where she's literally juggling everything, right. But that also means that you're actually taking on more work.

Suzanne Braun Levine:
Well, that became a sort of a trope, you know, you can have it all. And that was never meant to be the message. Because everybody realizes that you can have it all but not at the same time. But it almost was a way of putting us back in our place by failing at having it all.

Kim Sajet:
Over the years. Ms. Covers would feature politicians like Nancy Pelosi, entertainers like Beyonce, and even the blonde bombshell, Marilyn Monroe. Gloria has said that at first, she felt embarrassed by the way Marilyn seemed so vulnerable and eager for approval. But later, she came to see Marilyn's sex goddess persona as a kind of an indictment, a sign of just how vulnerable women were made to feel.

Gloria Steinem:
We put her on the cover of Ms. Magazine, actually, to try to talk about the real Marilyn Monroe, and talk about her life as an almost orphaned child and sexually abused in her later life. And just the contrast between who she really was as a person and the image, the commercial image that she needed to fulfill in order to become a well-known and movie star, make a living, whatever it was.

Kim Sajet:
This is a portrait by Philippe Halsman from 1952. Can you describe this sexy Marilyn, that was what people how people identified her.

Gloria Steinem:
Well, she she's spoken of whispery childlike voice which was obviously artificial. I mean, she didn't talk that way in real life. She was always encouraged to if not compelled to wear very sexy clothing. In fact, she had first made money and come to fame and as a nude on, on a calendar photograph. So, it just seemed very sad, you know that she could not be herself. And she, you know, she was, at least in later years quite conscious of it. She would talk about I just want to be taken seriously.

Kim Sajet:
I brought up one last photograph from the collection for Suzanne to look at the one of Gloria Steinem and Dorothy Pitman Hughes with their fists in the air. Only this photo was taken in 2013 by Dan Bagan. So, 42 years later, they're in exactly the same pose. In fact, Gloria's thumb is still tucked into her knuckle, but now she's wearing a crochet belt tied in a knot, and Dorothy has on a sleeveless dress with a floral slip. And this time, Gloria has her arm around Dorothy's waist.

Suzanne Braun Levine:
Oh, I love this picture. Because they've still got the power, but they look so much more relaxed, and so much more authentic and you know they're half smiling. I think there's so much more as they say comfortable in their own skin.

Kim Sajet:
As I mentioned, Suzanne has written extensively about aging as a woman, she even coined a phrase that really sticks in your brain, that FU 50's.

Suzanne Braun Levine:

There is an assumption that I think really is true is that women become more radical with age. And I think one of the reasons is that you get to a point, and it's like a click, it's like those early clicks, and something happens, or you say something, or you wake up one morning, and you say, I don't care what people think anymore. And you look around you and you say, oh, boy, that changes everything.

Kim Sajet:
And here's Suzanne referred to her mother. She'd married a much older man and was a devoted housewife.

Suzanne Braun Levine:
When he died, she was in her early 50's. And she had the fuck you 50's And she was liberated by widowhood. She went on she finished college, which she hadn't done. And she got a master's in social work, worked as a social worker, went out on protests, went to Washington campaign for Jimmy Carter, and got her PhD at 82.

Kim Sajet:
Oh my goodness, wow. Before we say goodbye, Suzanne brought up Emma Goldman, the anarchist who fought for women's rights in the early 1900s. She had once been told not to dance at a get-together, especially not to dance was such reckless abandon. Of course, she refused to stop. "Our cause could not expect me to become a nun" Goldman later wrote, "I did not believe that a cause which stood for a beautiful ideal, for anarchism, for release and freedom from conventions and prejudice should demand the denial of life and joy."

Suzanne Braun Levine:
If you're going to have a revolution, you have to dance at the revolution.

Kim Sajet:
I want to send a huge thank you to Gloria Steinem and Suzanne Braun Levine for coming on the show. A special thanks also to Carolyn Kitch at Temple University for sharing her insights. And this will wrap it up for Season Four. But we'll be back in your feed soon with more stories behind the portraits. Gloria and Suzanne have written too many books to list them all here. But just to mention a few by Suzanne, *Can Men Have It All?* and *You Got to Have Girlfriends* and by Gloria *My Life on the Road*, and *Marilyn Norma Jean*. Ruth Morris produced this episode, and our podcast team also includes Justin O'Neill, Ann Conanon, Deborah Sisum and Rebecca Kasemeyer. Our music is by Joe Kye and Brake Master Cylinder and our engineer is Tarek Fouda. Until next time, I'm your host Kim Sajet.