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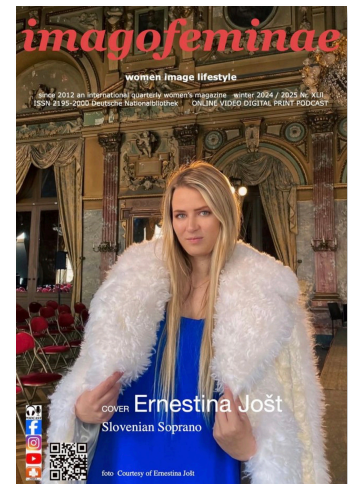
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COVER **Ernestina Jošt**
Slovenian Soprano



foto Courtesy of Ernestina Jošt

EDITORIAL



International & Independent

Art & Culture

The independent international women's magazine, *imagofeminae*, tries to open a space for women in every society in the world, offering any vision in **Art and Culture**, emphasising on the way women prefer to describe themselves, their works or their positions in the society.

Women in *imagofeminae* represent their personalities, their minds, their literature, their bodies, their fashion, their art, their emotions and their ways of life.

Women are the main editors and creators of *imagofeminae* in each interview, podcast or report we publish. *imagofeminae* remains a neutral women's magazine open to all cultures.

cordially

imagofeminae

Paiman Maria Davarifard

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Paiman Maria Davarifard'.



image: Liliane Weissberg Berlin 2025. Courtesy of Liliane Weissberg. © imagofeminae XLII winter 2025. foto: by Annette Hollitscher.

WHAT IS ENLIGHTENMENT? Questions for the Eighteenth Century An Exhibition curated by Liliane Weissberg DHM German Historical Museum Berlin October 18, 2024 - April 6, 2025

Enlightenment and The Role of Women

LILIANE WEISSBERG

INTERVIEW by Paiman Maria Davarifard

Liliane Weissberg is a Christopher H. Browne Distinguished Professor in Arts and Sciences and Professor of German and Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania, USA. Her research interests mainly focus on rediscovering a German-Jewish literary and cultural tradition from the late 18th to the early 20th century, as well as the Enlightenment and European and American Romanticism, Edgar Allan Poe, Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, Hannah Arendt, and early 19th-century writers like Henriette Herz, Dorothea Schlegel and Rahel Varnhagen. She has organized several exhibitions in the USA and Germany, including for the Slought Foundation in Philadelphia, the Jewish Museum Frankfurt and the German Literature Archive Marbach. She is a part of the Scientific Advisory Board of the German Historical Museum (DHM). She is the curator of the Exhibition WHAT IS ENLIGHTENMENT? QUESTIONS FOR THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY in German Historical Museum in Berlin (October 18, 2024 - April 6, 2025). In an Interview with imagofeminae (Paiman Maria Davarifard), she explains the role of women in the era of Enlightenment and her choices as a curator in arranging the Exhibition in German Historical Museum in Berlin.

imagofeminae: Professor Weissberg, what is special about this exhibition dealing with the Enlightenment in Germany and beyond?

Liliane Weissberg: In 2024, we celebrated the anniversary of **Immanuel Kant**. Several recent exhibitions focused on his works. Our exhibit opened in 2024, and wants to show the context in which philosophers like **Kant** could emerge, in order to understand his works better, but also to understand the works of other philosophers and scholars of that time. Our exhibit is unusual for the German Historical Museum (DHM) in two respects.

First of all, the DHM is a history museum. While the 18th century may be historical period for us, question „What is Enlightenment?“ is a philosophical one. With our exhibit, we have tried to investigate what the Enlightenment is, and have broken down this large question into smaller ones, for example: What is the role of reason? What does emancipation mean? What is the significance of pedagogy? What are the gender roles at that time? These are also philosophical questions in a wider sense.

Secondly, we are showing the exhibition in the German Historical Museum, but it is not focused on Germany only. The DHM features currently another exhibit, „Roads Not Taken,“ that deals with specific moments in German history. The period of the Enlightenment has to be addressed in an international scope, however. The Enlightenment is not simply a German topic. We are dealing with Western Europe primarily (England, France, and Germany), but also with European philosophers and politicians who

have forged connections with the world at large. To study nature, they had to travel to America or Asia, collected plants and animals that were brought back home, and learned about different peoples and religions. Philosophers established epistolary networks with scholars in other countries, exchanged ideas, translated foreign texts. And they published books that could be distributed



image: Robe à la française mit Ballonmotiven, vermutlich Frankreich, um 1783 © Deutsches Historisches Museum. Imagofeminae History winter 2025.

widely. In Europe especially, literacy was on the rise, and there was a hunger for books. One can argue that the idea of a modern Europe established itself in the context of those international conversations.

The German Historical Museum was actually founded with the idea of dealing with German history in a European context. Thus, we just took the idea of Europe, and expanded the

geography a bit – we are also showing objects from Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

imagofeminae: Did the status of women change during the period of the Enlightenment?

Liliane Weissberg: Many philosophers at that time began to demand the equality of all human beings. We explore this demand in regard to the rights of minorities, the poor, but also in regard to women.

There is, first of all, the question of the

to marry Catholics, Lutherans had to marry Lutherans, etc. Jews could not marry Christians and the same was true for Moslems - of which were very few in Germany. **Zöllner** argued that civil unions would be against the interests of the state. He added a footnote to this essay, in which he explained that the idea of civil unions must have come from those Enlightenment people with their new and fancy ideas, and that he did not even quite know what Enlightenment meant.

Zöllner's question, "What is Enlightenment?" was curiously posed at the very end of the

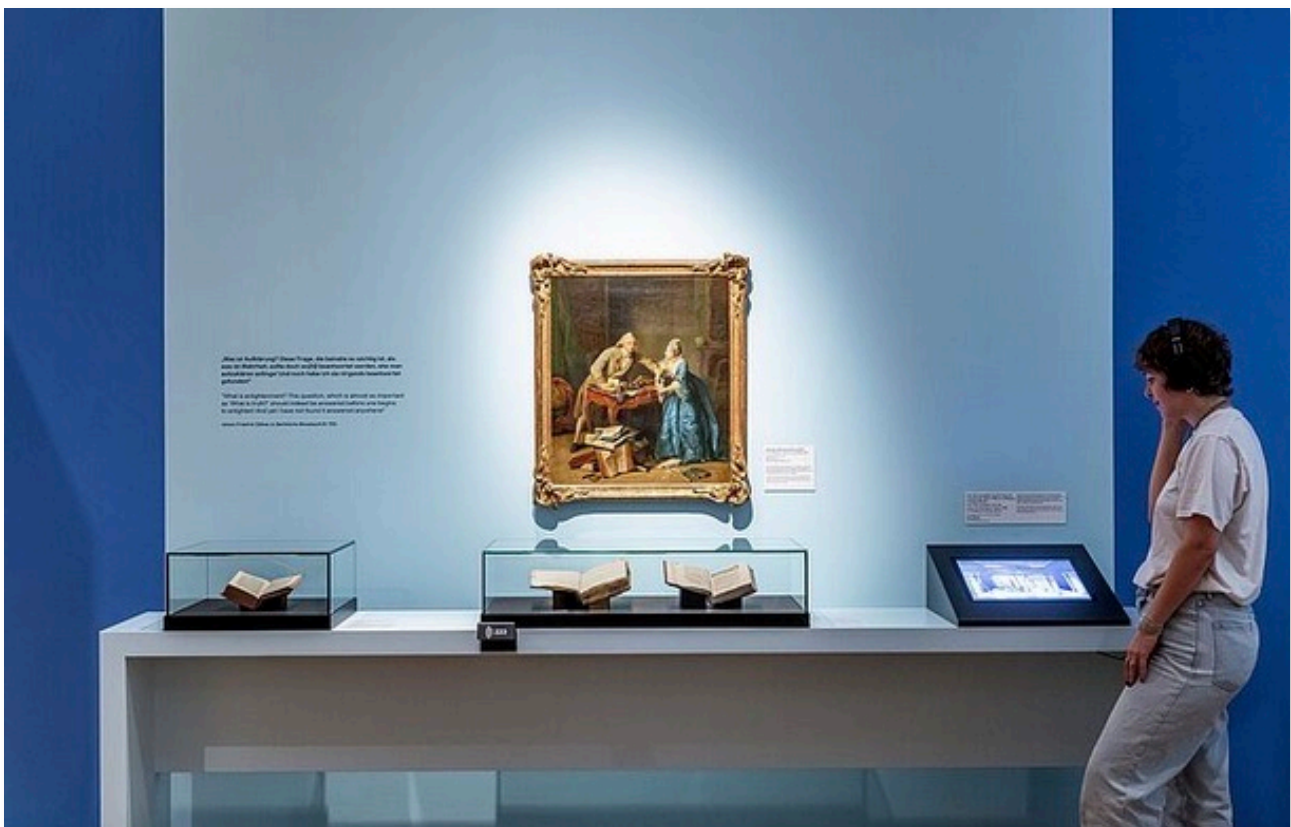


image: Ausstellungsansicht "Was ist Aufklärung? Fragen an das 18. Jahrhundert" © Deutsches Historisches Museum, Foto: David von Becker.
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relationship between men and women exemplified by marriage. The question „What is Enlightenment?“ was formulated as an essay competition initiated by a new journal, the **Berlin Monatsschrift** in 1793, that was aiming for a wider readership. In September 1793, a Berlin clergyman called **Johann Friedrich Zöllner** wrote an article for that journal about civil unions. At that time, marriage was only possible in church, which means Catholics had

18 th century, when much of the Enlightenment ideas had already been long in circulation. Many readers sent their answers to the **Monatsschrift**, including **Immanuel Kant**. **Kant** was not really interested in exploring the status of marriage in his essay, he was rather concerned with the emancipation of the individual. But you have the writings of **Mary Wollstonecraft**, who strongly rejects marriage in general, as it would limit the woman's

independence and make her subject to the husband's will. And we show a painting by **Georg Melchior Kraus**, „The Relationship Between Science and Marriage.“ It shows a

husband and his wife in a dispute over scholarly work, here firmly in the man's hands. In the 18th century, female literacy was on a steep rise in Europe as well, and women did not only become avid readers of literary and scientific work, they increasingly authored

Göttingen, one the German reform universities. **Dorothea Schlözer** received a doctorate in philosophy from the University in Halle. Many more women became authors of literary works. **Sophie von La Roche** wrote one of the earliest German epistolary novels. Letter writing in general was deemed as particularly acceptable for women, the writing of drama less so. This may have had to do with the elevated status of drama at that time. And there were also a few women painters who could establish



image: Ausstellungsansicht "Was ist Aufklärung Fragen an das 18. Jahrhundert" © Deutsches Historisches Museum, Foto: David von Becker.
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works, although many published their books anonymously or under pseudonyms. In the exhibition, we show for example manuscripts by **Isaac Newton**, whose experiments in optics revolutionized the way people thought about science, now based on the study of nature rather than a reading of the Bible. Next to these manuscripts, we have placed a book by **Émilie du Châtelet** who revises **Newton**. A few women—very few—gained access to universities. **Christina Dorothea von Erleben** was the first German woman to receive a doctoral degree at the University of

themselves, for example **Anna Dorothea Therbusch**, who was employed by members of the Prussian court. At the same time, the discussion about the nature of women put them in a place away from scholarship and the public eye in general. Pedagogical works claimed that women were close to Nature than men, and hence particularly suited for raising children. They were to stay at home, have children, and raise them, following a division of labor that would place only men in the public sphere. Women were to care for the household and for the education of their

themselves as cosmopolitan. At the same time, it was the age of colonialism. **Voltaire** or **Kant** may have spoken out for the equal rights of all men, but they established hierarchies also. Once again, we have the issue of domination. Science did not only establish order, but also a hierarchy of men that was to justify slavery. Everyone profited from the slave trade, as it was the fundament not just of the American, but also the European economy — and beyond. The trade of human being was part of the trade of goods. Black bodies were brought to the Americas, coffee, chocolate, sugar, or tobacco

Europeans enjoyed the goods that were the result of the slave trade. Blacks who ended up in Europe led a complicated life. **Anton Wilhelm Amo**, a black former slave from West Africa, studied philosophy in Halle and Wittenberg, but returned after his doctorate to Africa where he settled at a port of the Dutch company that had sold him as a slave. The former Black slave known as **Angelo Soliman** became a servant at the court of the **Prince of Liechtenstein** in Vienna. **Soliman** became a cherished employee, joined the **Free Masons**, and was a member of the same Loge as

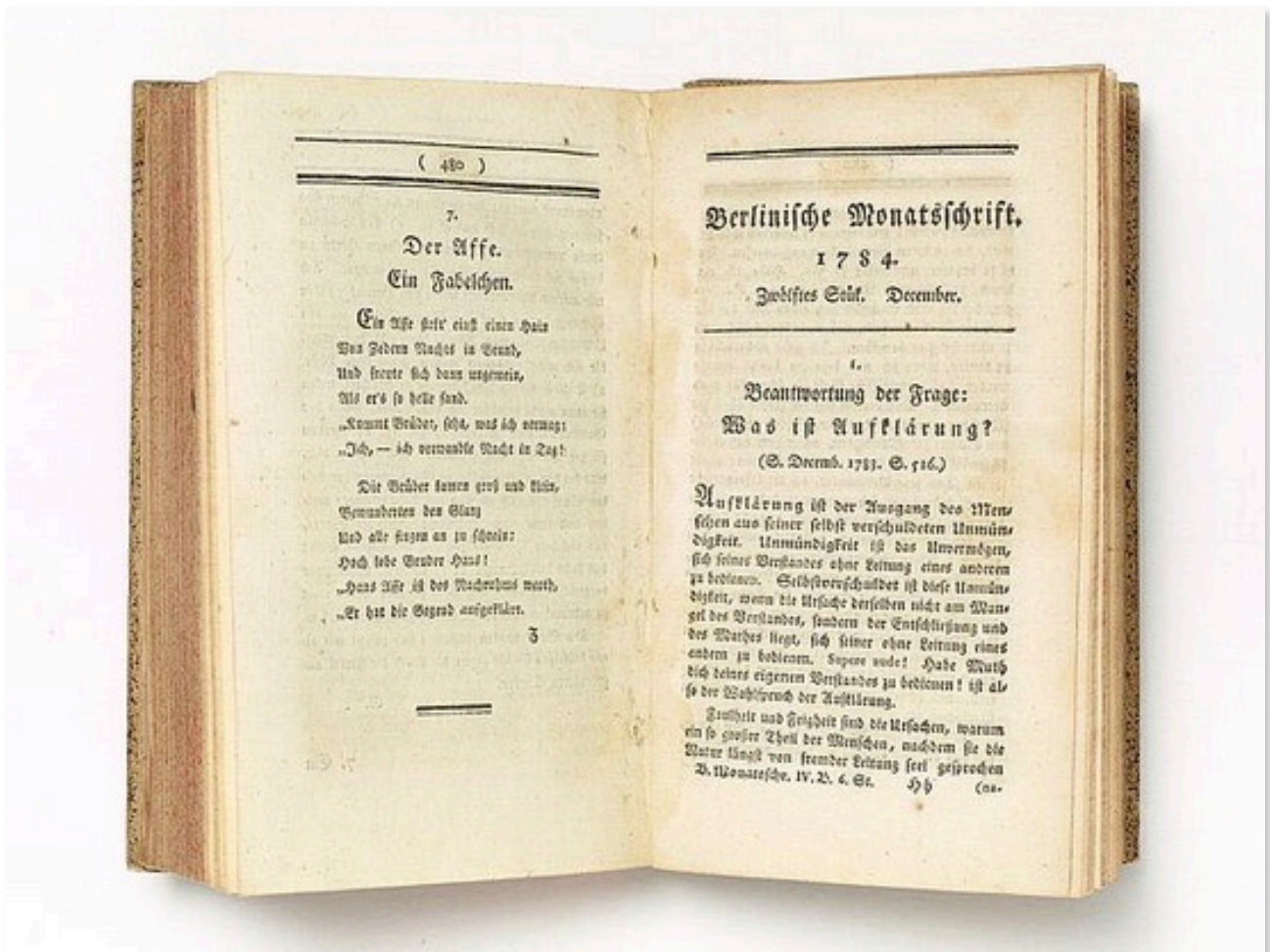


image: Titelseite von Immanuel Kants Aufsatz „Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?“, in: Berlinische Monatschrift, Berlin, 1784 © Deutsches Historisches Museum. Imagofeminae History winter 2025

back to Europe, alcohol and guns shipped to Africa. At its core, it was a triangular trade, but it was also extended to Asia and South America. And everyone was implicated. Just think for a moment: If cotton would not be imported to England, we wouldn't have had the industrial revolution that began in Manchester.

Mozart. As a black man, he may even have been a model for the figure of **Bassim** in **Mozart's** *Abduction from the Seraglio*. **Angelo** married, although he was not supposed to do so as a servant, and his daughter married into the Austrian aristocracy. Her son, **Soliman's** grandson, was the poet **Eduard von Feuchtersleben**. But what happened to

Soliman himself? When he died, the Emperor asked for his body, had it stuffed and exhibited it in his natural history collection. He became an object for display.

imagofeminae: How does diversity or do women’s issues impact your work as a curator?

Liliane Weissberg: In regard to the question of dominion, and to what and who a human being is, diversity and gender meet, of course. In the 18th century, we do not have a fully developed racial theory yet, but certainly race thought. What happened then leads the way to the 19th century and the age of Nationalism, as well as to later discrimination. When I was conducting the interviews, I was primarily looking for experts of the 18th century who were prominent voices in their fields, who could also relate to our concerns today. I interviewed **Annette Gordon-Reed**, for example, a professor of history at Harvard, who worked on **Thomas Jefferson**, is an expert of the Black American experience. I wanted her not just to talk about **Jefferson**, his family, and his slaves, but also whether and how this history informs the *Black Lives Matters* movement today. Another interviewee, **Kwame Anthony Appiah**, a philosopher at New York University, has an interesting personal history. He grew up in Ghana and England, and is related to the **King of the Asante**, as well as to British aristocracy. He was able to comment on the complexity of African society, and also on slavery in Africa itself. Of course, these are examples that deal with the content of the interviewed. Next to **Gordon-Reed**, we are

exhibition. Our exhibition core team was female, by the way, and we tried to keep a gender balance throughout. Our catalog features essays by prominent women, and we have invited a good number of women to be

featuring the American philosopher **Martha Nussbaum**, the former director of the Berlin Max Planck Institute **Lorraine Daston**, the head of the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin, **Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger**, the Mayor of Frankfurt, **Nargess Eskandari-Grünberg**, the German actress and film maker **Maryam Zaree**.

I have published widely on women authors as well as feminist theory myself, and I have also been very much aware of my own position as a woman. I am the first woman who received tenure as a professor of German at my institution, the University of Pennsylvania, and just a couple of years ago, I was awarded an honorary doctorate in Philosophy from the University of Graz in Austria; I was the first woman to receive such a degree from Graz.

imagofeminae: Thank you for the opportunity you gave our readers with this interview

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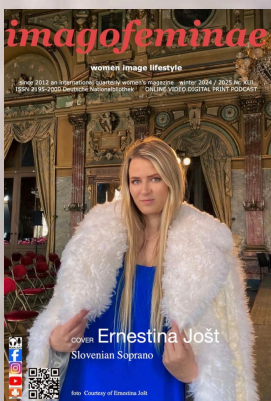


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