



Berthe Morisot: Painter of Modern Life

Description



Berthe Morisot

“It’s important to express oneself... provided the feelings are real and are taken from your own experience.”

The act of seeing is central to Berthe Morisot’s practice – both tangible, visible subjects and simmering psychological tensions beneath. With a canny, perceptive eye she captured scenes and people from 19th century Parisian life, famously painting women as they watch themselves being watched, dressed up and poised for the stage of daily life. Much like her contemporary Mary Cassatt, Morisot was a leading Impressionist in her day, yet her subject matter was narrowed by the small world she was permitted to inhabit, that of the feminine, domestic sphere. Historically this arena has left her reputation lagging behind that of her male contemporaries, who were her close friends, including Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas and Pierre-Auguste Renoir, painters who portrayed the backstage theatres, brothels and bars of the gritty industrialised city. But, as writer Rachel Cohen points out, Morisot’s paintings play as vital a role as those of her male peers, since they offer fascinating insight into the multi-layered, translucent veils that made up women’s physical and emotional lives in 19th century Paris, as she argues, “...what is ‘the domestic’ but the core of life, of eros, and of work?”



In England (Eugene Manet on the Isle of Wight) / Berthe Morisot / 1875

Of the three, Berthe was the most determined and ambitious, training as a copyist at the Louvre. There she befriended landscape painter Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, who encouraged her to expand her landscape painting with *en plein air* techniques, which she took to the popular painting district at Fontainebleau and to the Normandy countryside, capturing light, breezy scenes with a fresh, pastel luminosity. From 1864-1873 Morisot was one of few women to have work regularly accepted by the traditional Paris Salon, but, much like the circle of artists she had befriended, she was tiring of the Salon's preference for traditional mythological, historical and allegorical

scenes, with a greater inclination to paint modern, everyday life.



Berthe Morisot / by Edouard Manet / 1872

Morisot befriended the older artist Edouard Manet in the late 1860s and his influence would come to shape her art. In the early stages of their relationship Manet's sexism preventing him from seeing her true potential, as he revealed in a letter to a friend, "...the Morisot (sisters) are delightful. What a shame they aren't men; nonetheless they might, as women, serve the cause of painting by each marrying an academician." But over time Morisot worked her magic and had a marked influence on Manet's painting, encouraging him to paint outdoors and to lighten his colour palette. He also made around 14 portrait studies of her which reveal an enduring infatuation, though his marriage prevented them from having a romantic affair. Several years later Morisot married Manet's younger brother Eugene Manet, also a painter – not as driven as his older brother, he was quite prepared to relinquish his own career to support his wife's burning ambition.

Manet's sense of weight, composition and psychological tension undoubtedly affected Morisot's practice, but she soon began to incorporate these skills with a distinctive deft touch, balancing solidity with fluid air. Towards the end of the decade she was experimenting with a greater range of materials, incorporating elements of watercolour, oil and pastel drawing into a single work, while increasingly choosing to paint outdoors. When the progressive group *Societe des Anonyme Cooperative des Artistes Peintres, Sculpteurs, Graveurs*, (later the Impressionists), was established Morisot was quick to join them, particularly given the equal rights they claimed to support between the sexes.



Woman and Child on a Balcony / Berthe Morisot / 1871-2

Morisot found some commercial success when the renowned French art dealer Durand-Ruel bought 22 of her paintings, firing in the young artist an even greater desire to push forward into new territory. Throughout the 1870s her subjects were mostly figurative, illustrating intimate scenes of family and friends that seem to capture the undefinable spirit within, while teetering on the balance between expressive energy and descriptive language. She remained close to her two sisters throughout adulthood, even as they both gave up painting for marriage and children, and they often appeared in her work as pensive figures caught in a moment of silent reverie, pre-empting the Symbolist language of the following century. *Woman and Child on a Balcony*, 1871-2, is a symphony of light and dark, as Morisot's sister Yves becomes a black, heavy silhouette, with her young daughter in white gazing out into the city beyond as if contemplating her future. Liminal spaces such as balconies, doorways and windows were an ongoing source of fascination for Morisot throughout her career, echoing the same ephemeral transience of her Impressionist brush-marks, while suggesting the many in-between states women were forced to occupy.



The Cradle / Berthe Morisot / 1872

In the first Impressionist exhibition of 1874 Morisot chose to submit another family portrait, *The Cradle*, 1872, which depicts her other sister Edma watching her new baby with a quiet, internal determination. Basked in sheaths of white light, both mother and baby take on a spiritual innocence, capturing the quiet intimacy of early motherhood, with just a hint of tense unease in her body language. Critics almost unanimously tore apart the first Impressionist exhibition, with some expressing horror and disgust at the sketchy lack of finish in their work. Morisot was one of few to get off lightly, though the description of her work's "feminine grace" had a patronising ring. Throughout her career the labels of 'feminine' and 'delicate' were consistently attached to her work, a reference to her pastel hued palette, deft brush-marks, and domestic subject matter, a language which disregarded the complexity of her work. *Hanging the Laundry out to Dry*, 1875, is one such example, capturing women carrying out daily chores against a whitewashed landscape. It is easily read as a sentimental view of the times, but Morisot was fascinated with the independent daily lives of these independent working women and the intimacy they shared with their employers in the domestic sphere, capturing a bygone moment in time.



Hanging the Laundry out to Dry / Berthe Morisot / 1875

Public criticism and lack of commercial success left Morisot crippled with self-doubt as she wrote in a letter to Monet, “(I am) becoming a bronchial old lady... engaged in a war with my canvases. Do not depend on me to cover much wall space. I am not doing anything worthwhile despite my desire to do it.” Despite her misgivings she continued to paint and exhibit with the Impressionists, showing work in nearly all their group exhibitions and planning their final exhibition single-handedly in 1886. Critical success gradually came her way in the late 1870s as the public slowly warmed to the Impressionists; art historian Philippe Burty was full of praise for her inimitable

ability in “making everything cohere into an overall harmony of shades of white”, while critic George Riviere wrote of her “unpretentious allure that we can only admire,” describing her “extraordinary sensitive eye (that) succeeds in capturing fleeting notes on her canvases, with a delicacy, spirit and skill that ensure her a prominent place at the centre of the Impressionists’ group.”

As she gradually gained success, her work was at least as popular with art buyers as that of her male peers, but gaps began to widen as Impressionism took hold in the wider international arena. While there has often been an implication that Morisot’s work was led by her male contemporaries, in reality she was as fierce, driven and independent as they were.



Eugene Manet, Berthe Morisot and their daughter Julie Manet at Bougival /
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1880

After having her own daughter, Julie, in 1878 Morisot made ongoing portraits capturing the transition from baby, to young child and later adolescence with great sensitivity and pathos. In the 1880s her work grew more expressive than ever as brushstrokes became looser and colours brighter, catching the fragile qualities of flickering light, as seen in *In the Country (After Lunch)*, 1881, *Night-time Toilette*, 1886 and *Young Girl with a Vase*, 1889, where figures begin to dissolve into showers of light. A true modernist, she embraced the contemporary influences of photography by cropping her compositions, and Japonisme, with elements of linear outline, flat pattern and heightened colour. She also befriended Paris' leading literary figures, including the poet Stephane Mallarme and writers Charles Baudelaire and Emil Zola. In her later work of the 1890s personal space became a recurring subject, as bristling brushwork suggests spaces alive with vital energy. Morisot's career was cut tragically short when she contracted pneumonia while caring for her daughter and died in 1895. Following her death, the painter Pissarro was quick to point out how important, yet underrated she was, lamenting in a heartfelt letter to his son, "such a splendid feminine talent and who brought honour to our Impressionist group which is vanishing – like all things. Poor Madame Morisot, the public hardly knows her!"



Night-time Toilette / Berthe Morisot / 1886

In contrast with many of her peers who continued to develop their practices into the next century during the advent of modern art, Morisot's earlier passing may in part explain in part why she fell under the radar in the century that followed, along with sexist attitudes that have tended to sentimentalise her subjects. Small steps have gradually been made to restore her stature; in 1941 a Paris retrospective celebrated the centenary of her birth, while poet Paul Valéry wrote in the catalogue, "the qualities that she alone among the Impressionists possessed and which, besides, are of the rarest in painting, can now be appreciated." He was a little premature in his prediction, given how many public displays of Impressionist work since then have failed to include her work, with the exception of a 1987 show organised by National

Gallery of Washington and Mount Holyoke College Art Museum. In the past decade her legacy has been subject to a major reappraisal, with a monograph at Musee Marmottan Monet in 2012 and *Berthe Morisot: Woman Impressionist* held at Musee National des Beaux Arts in Quebec in 2018, and touring worldwide in 2019.



Winter aka Woman with a Muff / Berthe Morisot / 1880

These displays reveal not only the outstanding depth and range of her skilled practice, but they also show how she was a highly valued and influential member of the Impressionist group, a great supporter for her female contemporaries including Mary Cassatt and Eva Gonzales, and a progressive, trailblazing leader who reflected the realities of the physical and emotional lives of the women around her. Writing on the inequalities she rallied against throughout her life, she concluded, “I don’t think there has ever been a man who treated a woman as an equal, and that is all I would have asked for – I know I am worth as much as they are.”

CATEGORY

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2. WOMEN IN ART

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