

Sept OOM: “The Artist’s Daughter, Julie, with her Nanny” Berthe Morisot



1884, oil on unprimed canvas

Accession # 96.40

G351

The Artist: Berthe Morisot (1841-1895) has been called ‘Impressionism’s Leading Lady’ as she was the only woman among the founding members of the Impressionist group. Born in France to upper middle class parents, she and her sister Edma were given a decent education for the times, including drawing lessons. In 1858 they both set out to study painting in depth and registered as copyists in the Louvre, copying Veronese and Rubens. Introduced to Corot, they took lessons together for six years from the aging artist. They became familiar with current debates on naturalism and began to work en plein air.

Morisot exhibited in the Salon from 1864-1868 and received encouraging reviews. In 1868 she was introduced to Edouard Manet for whom she modeled. They became friends and colleagues. They both took a conservative approach to the burgeoning optical experiments with color by using a naturalistic framework. Manet taught her the free manipulation of the brush while Berthe encouraged Manet to paint out of doors and to drop his somber colors. In December 1874 she married Edouard’s brother, Eugene. They were devoted to one another and he supported her artistic endeavors.

In the same year she submitted nine works to the first Impressionist Exhibition –at the invitation of Degas-and never returned to the Salon. She showed in seven of the eight exhibitions (1874, 76, 77, 80, 81, 82 and 86), missing the exhibition of 1879 due to illness following the birth of her only daughter Julie in 1878. As her biographer Anne Higonnet said, this birth was the single most important event of Morisot’s life. She was thirty-seven years old, an advanced age to become a mother back then. After Julie’s birth, Morisot’s letters, diaries, drawings and paintings revolve around her daughter.

Morisot met Mary Cassatt through the Impressionist exhibitions. “Cassatt and Morisot, each in her own way, both as professionals and in their art, were making new claims for women. By the very persistence of their endeavors, as well as by their high pictorial standards, they demonstrated that women could participate fully and continuously in the most rigorous avant-garde art movements. Morisot showed that such a career could be reconciled with marriage and maternity, Cassatt that women need not necessarily be married or mothers in order to be fulfilled. While Morisot’s dual life implicitly contradicted the conventions of femininity, Cassatt

more overtly contested gender roles by supporting women's rights. What is important about Cassatt's and Morisot's examples is precisely that they were not alike; These two women proved that no one model could all explain women's aspirations and achievements any more than one model could explain all men's" (Higonnet, p 154).

Morisot wanted to paint her child from her earliest days. This wasn't easy. Centuries of Madonna images with their sacred aura dominated the theme. The center of the iconography for centuries had been the Christ child. No one, though, had ever tried to represent the maternal experiences. For one thing, virtually no mothers ever became painters. Madonnas were images made by men. Morisot experienced maternity itself and what she knew demanded a different kind of image. With the pictures Morisot displayed in 1881 begins "the most extensive and profound visual exploration we have of a mother-daughter relationship. In the eyes of this mother, the relationship is both intimate and respectful, one in which mother and daughter respond to each other but learn from their differences" (Ibid, p. 160). Indeed her autobiographical scenes are like an album of family snapshots. Berthe also painted her sister Edma and her child.

The dealer Paul Durand-Ruel handled her work, although she was never financially dependent on sales. Her home was a meeting place for intellectuals and artists, including Renoir, Degas, Mary Cassatt and Stephane Mallarme. Several contemporary art critics regarded her as a quintessential impressionist- meaning that she was capable of achieving an 'impression' of nature that was unmediated and sincere.

The first paintings the editor of the Paris Gazette, Charles Ephrussi, bought were by Berthe Morisot. He loved her work: 'She grinds flower petals onto her palette, in order to spread them later on her canvas with airy witty touches, thrown down a little haphazardly. These harmonize, blend, and finish by producing something vital, fine and charming that you do not so much see as intuit'. (DeWaal, p. 74).

Morisot 's husband Eugene Manet died in 1892. Berthe died four years later at age 54 from typhoid fever, leaving Julie an orphan at age 16. Julie went to live with her cousins. Renoir and the poet Mallarme served as Julie's unofficial guardians. Degas introduced Julie to Ernest Rouart whose father had assembled one of the largest and best collections of late 19th century French art. Julie was the sole heir to Morisot's pictorial estate and one of several heirs to her uncle Manet's estate. Julie and Ernest generously gave the Louvre several of both Morisot's and Manet's works.

MIA Painting : The Artist's Daughter, Julie, with her Nanny

This is one of several pictures that Morisot did with Julie and her Irish nanny, Pasie. In this case they are seen at the spacious home the family built in one of the new Paris suburbs in 1883. Julie is engrossed in watching Pasie's sewing. Julie's face is a construct of boldly juxtaposed and overlapped strokes. The sewing basket and the flowers in the vase at the left appear primarily as exuberant brushwork, and only

secondarily as recognizable objects. This kind of brushwork is generally done only in pastel or watercolor for preparatory studies and was seldom equaled by any artist in the early 1880's. The MIA's former curator of paintings Charles Stuckey said of this work "As a young girl, Julie regularly worked with colored pencils alongside her mother. Comparing five year old Julie's surviving artworks with those of her mother suggests a close dialogue that stimulated Morisot to work in ever more adventurous fashion". When seen at close range, Morisot's feathery brush strokes often appear arbitrary, even disjointed....but observed from a few feet away, they coalesce as if by magic and describe light-saturated atmospheres with accuracy. Through the window the figure with his back turned is Julie's father Eugene.

Questions/suggestions

1. First stand close to the painting and then back up until the picture coalesces for each viewer. Ask the usual VTS questions.
2. The term naturalistic describes art in which the subject is depicted as closely as possible to the way it truly appears. What looks naturalistic....what does not?
3. The artist organized the painting into three sections. Who is in the foreground? What is in the middle ground? What is in the background?
4. What is the mood of this picture? What has the artist done to create this?

Sources:

Art Adventure Set: Family, Friends and Foes

"Berthe Morisot" by Anne Higonnet. Harper Perennial, New York, 1991

MIA library file

Oxford Art Online

"The Hare with Amber Eyes" by Edmund DeWaal

Possible Tours:

Women in Art

Modern Art to 1950

Mostly Modern

Family Friends and Foes

Everyday Art