

Berthe Morisot

(*BHERT* or *BHERT-eh More-ee-SOH*)

Impressionist Painter

Impressionist Period of the Visual Arts

B 14 January 1841, Bourges France

D 2 March 1895, Paris, France

Berthe Morisot was the youngest of three daughters of a prosperous French government official. Her parents were wealthy enough to privately tutor their daughters, with the intent of securing wealthy husbands for them. Part of a well-rounded gentlewoman's education included the playing of music and an introduction to art. The point of the art training was to have a thorough knowledge of art history and culture, and to be able to decorate one's home and paint details on furniture.

When the three girls wanted to draw a picture for their father for his birthday, their mother hired tutors to formally begin training. Oldest sister Yves soon tired of drawing and quit, but middle sister Edme and Berthe loved painting above all other subjects.

But being a professional female artist was unheard of. Women could not enter art school: it was forbidden. Women could not copy paintings in the Louvre like art students unless they were chaperoned by an older person. If Berthe and Edma didn't marry in by their mid-20s, they may never marry, and risk social ridicule.

Despite the difficulties and social risk, Berthe and Edma pursued art for many years together. Their work was accepted by the official French Salon, which caused a sensation ("Women exhibiting! And they're actually good!") but they soon joined the Impressionist group of artists, including Degas, Monet, Renoir, but especially Edouard Manet Manet, (Man-EY) who became Morisot's mentor. He encouraged Berthe to keep painting, regardless of what people said.

While both Berthe and Edma's paintings were well reviewed (critics often liked them better than many male painters!), Edma eventually married a naval officer and left painting behind her. Berthe continued, but she still was restricted by being a woman. Women could not go to the races, of cabarets, or backstage in the theater, like Degas. Women could not go unchaperoned around the countryside, like Monet. As a result, Morisot took her limitations and turned it to a strength. If she couldn't go where the men could, she could paint a world they didn't get to see: the private lives of women and their children.

Most of Morisot's paintings featured mothers and young children, and her favorite models were her beloved sister Edma and her daughter Blanche. Morisot's preferred palette of bright whites paired with bold colors seemed to bring a shimmering light to these paintings of motherly love and affection.

Morisot did eventually marry Eugene Morisot, the younger brother of her mentor, and had one child, her beloved daughter Julie. Julie became her mother's favorite model, as well as a favorite of many Impressionist artists. Sadly, Eugene Manet died when Julie was 13, and Morisot died when Julie was 16. The Impressionist community and Morisot's cousins took Julie in, and supported her. The diary Julie kept is now published and provides a number of unique details about the Impressionist community.



Berthe Morisot

Morisot Quotes:

“It is important to express oneself...provided those feelings are real and are taken from your own experiences.”

“I don’t think there has ever been a man who treated a woman as his equal and that I all I would have asked for, for I now I am worth as much as they.” -From Morisot’s journal in 1890

Morisot’s husband was one of the few men in Morisot’s life who treated her as his equal. He believed her paintings were better than his own and become her manager and business partner. They loved each other deeply, and Morisot painted Eugene many times throughout her career (a husband posing for a wife was unheard of at the time!) . But by most other men, including the men in the art world, Morisot was considered to “unusual” or “a revolutionary” but they did not treat her as an equal.

Julie and Eugene Manet; 1883



Oil on Canvas
73 cm x 60 cm
Private Collection

Vocabulary:

Loose Brush Strokes / Tight Brush Strokes [licked surface]

In a finished piece, “**loose brush strokes**” mean the naked eye can easily see individual brush strokes. Before the Impressionists debuted their new style, the French Art Salon stated that true professional painters held to **tight brushstrokes**, which limited the visibility of the artist’s hand. The best artists should be able to finish their painting so well that no brushstrokes were visible; such a surface was called a “**licked surface**.” Impressionists, like Morisot, Manet, Monet, Degas, and later, Van Gogh, completely rejected the tight brushstrokes and polished, licked surface in favor of the spontaneous loose brushstrokes which captured a moment in time. Today, as we study Morisot, note the brushstrokes in her paintings—some thick, some thin, but all easily visible.



To the left, a detail of the painting, “Summer’s Day” (1879) by Berthe Morisot. To the right, a detail of the portrait of Madame Moitessier (completed 1856) by Neoclassical artist Dominique Ingres (1780- 1867). One is full of loose, energetic, spontaneous brushstrokes. The other is very tight, carefully planned and created, with a “licked” surface.



En Plein Air /Au Plein Air



“Blanche Hoschede Monet at Her Easel with Suzanne Hoschede Reading” By Claude Monet, 1887. Morisot would have looked very similar to Blanche Monet as she painted outside.

A French art term translating to “in the open air,” otherwise known as “outside.” Prior to the Impressionist movement, most artists had to paint in their studios because they had to mix their paints (pigments and oils) just before using them. They may have sketched outside, but all final paintings were done indoors in a studio. The invention of the commercially pre-mixed paints, as well as the paint tube with re-closable cap, meant artists could go outside and paint their subject directly. This “En Plein Air” technique and loose brushstroke style were two markers of the Impressionist Style.

Berthe Morisot was introduced to “en plein air” painting by one of her early colleagues, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, (1796 – 1875). He was a landscape painter who liked to paint on site, a technique which Morisot loved. She, in turn, introduced “En Plein Air” to Manet, who began to use it in his paintings (though never as much as Morisot did)

Julie Studying the Violin; 1893-1894



*Oil on Canvas
Private Collection*

This painting was one of the last few Morisot completed during her lifetime. Her daughter Julie is nearly 16, and is seen here practicing her violin. Julie is dressed in black because her father, Eugene Manet, died a few months previously.

Morisot and her mentor, Eduard Manet, were unusual in the Impressionist communities because they used black in their works, sometimes lavishly. Because black is such a visually strong color, it forces Julie to be the focal point in this painting, a dark patch against a brighter background.

Sadly, Morisot herself would pass away late in 1894, leaving Julie an orphan, but not abandoned. Julie would be “adopted” by the Impressionist community. She lived with a cousin, but took painting lessons from Monet and Renoir, and visited many of the people her mother used to paint with.

Julie married another painter and engraver, Ernest Rouart, and had three children. She died in 1966, and her grandchildren are still alive, making Berthe Morisot the first artist in Cycle 2 to have living descendants.

The Mother and Sister of the Artist; 1869 - 1870



Oil on Canvas
81.8 cm x 101 cm
National Gallery of Art,
Washington D.C., USA

This oil painting depicts Berthe's mother Marie-Josephine, and her artist sister Edma, now married and known as Madame Pontillon. Edma is pregnant with her first child, a daughter, who will be named Blanche.

IN the spring of 1870, Berthe began this painting in the hopes it would be accepted into the French Salon, the top art exhibition in France. Berthe and Edma had both frequently exhibited at the Salon from 1864 until Edma's marriage the previous year. This would be the first year Berthe would exhibit on her own.

At one point, she asked Edouard Manet, who was a family friend in addition to Berthe's mentor, for his opinion on the painting, and he started to point out places where he thought Berthe could change a few details. Then he "borrowed" her paintbrush and started to add a touch here and there...and there and here...and in the end, he'd completely repainted several large sections of the painting—including the mother's face! Berthe's mother thought he was hilarious, but Berthe was furious. Another painter had painted over her work for an exhibition!

It took her a lot of time, but she finished the painting just before the Salon's jury chose the works for the 1870 show—and Berthe was in. Berthe would continue to paint works for Salon shows until 1874, when she chose to risk her professional reputation and join with Manet and several other artist friends at another show—a show which ended up launching the movement now known as Impressionism.

Berthe Morisot (1841 – 1895)
Impressionist Painter

19th century, France

Femme et enfant au balcon; (Woman and young girl on a Balcony) 1872



Oil on Canvas;
61 cm x 50 cm

Ittleson Foundation, New York, USA

Study for Woman and Child on a Balcony; 1872



Watercolor on Paper
Private Collection

Watercolors are an ancient medium with a mixed heritage. During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, artists used watercolors for finished works. Albrecht Durer, the printmaker, produced many beautiful watercolors with a high degree of realism. By Morisot's time, England and America had a strong watercolor tradition lead by artists like John Jay Audubon and Joseph Turner. Even Queen Victoria frequently painted in watercolors.

But in France, watercolors were not seen as a "legitimate" type of painting. They were commonly used to do on-site sketches for finished

paintings later. Artists could use watercolors to quickly test color combinations, paint locations, or any reference sketches which they might use later. But all "serious" or "professional" artist only produced finished works in oils.

This pair of paintings, the initial watercolor sketch and the finished oil painting, show Morisot's creative process. The model is likely her sister Edma again, with her daughter Blanche. Compare this quick watercolor sketch against the finished oil painting. What did Morisot keep, and what did she change or refine?

Edme Morisot Pontillon

(“Ed-MA More-ee-SOH Pon-tee-ON”)

1839 – 1921

Edma was the middle of the Morisot sisters. She, like Berthe, loved painting, and pursued it enthusiastically. Her parents, despite the social risk of having two professional women in an upper-middle class family, encouraged both Edma and Berthe, and even built them a studio in the house where they could paint.

As unmarried women, Edma and Berthe both faced difficulties to their art. They could not join the art schools of the time and they needed to be chaperoned to anywhere outside their home. Their mother often joined them, and they could also chaperone each other in public arenas.

Family friends included the Manet family, whose son, Edouard, was a failed sailor turned artist. Edouard encouraged both Morisot girls and introduced them to many other professional artists. Barred from art school, the Morisot sisters used these connections to help them learn about various styles of art.



Both Edma and Berthe first submitted for the official French Salon in 1864, when Edma was 25 and Berthe was 23. It was a young age to attempt a Salon submission, but both girls got in and received rave reviews. Edma would submit work for the Salon alongside her sister every year until 1869.

While Berthe began to paint more human figures, including the intimate domestic lives of women and children, Edma preferred painting landscapes en plein air. Most of her known works are landscapes, but Edma’s best-known work is an 1865 portrait of Berthe, standing before her easel, contemplatively holding her brush. (See left)

Their older sister, Yves, (the one who didn’t like art) married early, and had children, which was expected of women in their station. Berthe and Edma, however, turned down several suitors in pursuit of their art. They painted side-by-side, exhibited side-by-side, and were each other’s best friends.

Then, one friend of the Manet family, Captain Adolphe Pontillon (1832 – 1894), caught Edma’s

eye. In 1869, at 30 years old, Edma was socially considered an old maid when Capt. Pontillon proposed. The marriage meant security for Edma: she would never have to live with her brother or extended relatives after their parents died, never have to ask for money to purchase clothes and things, never be at risk of being the elderly aunt shuffled from place to place. But it also meant moving far away from Paris and Berthe, and giving up painting professionally and exhibiting publicly. She chose marriage and soon had three children, which Berthe loved to dote upon.

But despite the joys of family life, Edma struggled with giving up painting. She often wrote to Berthe, admitting in her moments of peace she liked to imagine herself back in their shared studio, painting side-by-side with her sister. She visited as often as she could, and allowed Berthe to paint herself and her children in new compositions. As a married woman, moreover, Edma could act as Berthe's official chaperone to public engagements!

When Berthe married and continued to paint professionally (defying convention with her husband's support and blessing) Edma supported Berthe's ambition.

Edma's husband died in 1894, and Berthe passed away in the spring of 1895. Edma moved back to Paris, where she likely took a role in the raising of Julie Manet, as well as her sister Yves three children. (Yves had also died by then.) Edma lived through WWI, and died in 1921.



Edma Morisot's Spring Landscape with a Peasant on a Pond

Date Unknown; Oil on Canvas; Private Collection

Take Home:

Videos:

YouTube: **“Art with Mati and Dada Berthe Morisot”** Another in the series from Mati and Dada, this shows Berthe Morisot in her garden getting ready for a party.

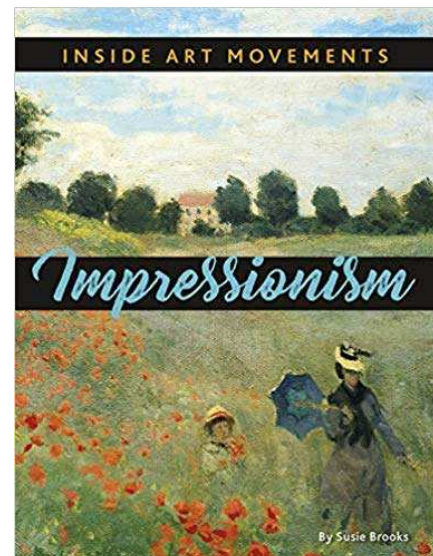
YouTube: **“Berthe Morisot: Inventing Impressionism”** by YouTube Channel “Art Fund UK” I recommend this with reservations. At the 1:15 mark, as the narrator discusses the difficulties of being a professional female painter while still being a respectable woman (by 19th century Parisian standards), the camera pans down over a painting of a naked woman. As an artist I see it as a classic painting, but I know that it may not be for everyone, especially as up-close as it is. The video is short: only 2:46, so pre-watch if you have any concerns. Otherwise, I think it’s a great introduction to Morisot.

Books:

“Inside Art Movements: Impressionism” By Susie Brooks. This new (Copyright 2020!) series of books is a wonderful overview of many art periods or movements, including Renaissance, Romanticism, Impressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, and Pop Art. Berthe Morisot is mentioned in this book, as well as Mary Cassatt, another Impressionist Artist who happened to be female.

ONE NOTE: One page 13, a very famous painting by Edouard Manet (who featured in this packet) is shown: “Dejeuner sur l’herbe,” or “Luncheon on the Grass.” This painting is extremely important in the story of Impressionism’s development, but it does depict a naked lady in the foreground. No private areas are shown, thanks to the model’s pose, but she is obviously naked. If this not something you wish to expose your students or children to, just skip that spread—the book will still make sense, and the students will be able to see many Impressionists paintings and learn about many artists in the Impressionist movement.

Surprisingly, there are no children’s books focused on Morisot which I could find.



Online Resources:

Article: “Into the Frame: Six Intriguing Facts About Berthe Morisot” published 20 Jun 2019 by The Arts Society (artsociety.com) And interesting article about Morisot’s life and the people around her.

Website: Berthe Morisot’s entry on “The Art Story” theartstory.com. in addition to a biography, the page includes some of Morisot’s famous works, as well as some of the stories or art ideas behind them. Morisot never painted anything risqué, so her work is easily searchable.