Tutor Notes for Berthe Morisot

Pronouncing Morisot's name:

Berthe Pauline Marie Morisot Manet

BHERT-eh Paul-EEN Ma-REE Mor-ee-SOH Man-EH

Berthe's parents were really quite interesting, and both parents were said to be descended from artists. Her mother in particular was either a descendent of, or grand niece of, the Rococo-era painter Jean Honore Fragonard (1732-1806). (You can see one of Fragonard's most famous works, "The Swing" on the Vocabulary page of Thomas Gainsborough's packet).

After Berthe's marriage to Eugene Manet, she went by Madame Manet socially, but still kept painting under her maiden name of Morisot. She almost lived two lives in a way. She mothered her daughter, hosted events for her neighbors, went to dinners she and her husband were invted to, like any Parisian housewife of her class at that time. When people called to visit, she put her paintings aside and played the part of hostess, as was polite.

Consequently, when she died, both her names, "Madame Manet" and "Berthe Morisot" were used in the obituary. It was almost like, depending on the name you knew her by, you could predict what part of her world you belonged to. "Madame Manet" was part of the neighborhood, the mothers who walked their children to various events, the adoring wife of a lawyer and manager, the lady attending church on Sundays. "Berthe Morisot" was the revolutionary painter, the woman who insisted on still painting whenever she could, and exhibiting with the most revolutionary, rebellious groups of art renegades in Paris.

And she filled both worlds with aplomb.

I have to say, I LIKE her.

The project:

Honestly, this is my second-most-hated project in this cycle. (Both of the Degas projects hold my #1 Loathing spot).

I want to make this clear: **BERTHE MORISOT NEVER ADDED THICKENERS TO PAINT!!!!!! NEVER!!!!**

The point to the thickeners in this project is to take a more liquid, viscous paint, like Tempera, and add things to it to make it behave like its thicker cousin, oil paint, which Morisot did use. (Acrylic paint would be a close second.) So the whole point to this project is to thicken a cheaper paint to make it act like the oil paint she used. That's it.

That being said, paint is a compound which has been carefully mixed to balance the needs of the paint to have a color, (the pigment), and be able to adhere to a surface (the binder.) Anything else is just filler, which, to be fair, you will have in student-grade paints.

However, anytime you mess with that balance of pigment to binder, you can create a host of potential problems. The paint might not adhere to the paper, falling off in the process of painting, or after it "dries". Thicker paints will also take time to dry. Depending on what you add, it can also upset the pH balance of the paint and/or paper, which will cause the project to chemically eat itself over time.

Additionally, some of the potential mixtures to thicken paint are rather strange: I've seen people add coffee grounds. The book suggests crushed eggshells…both of these things will make the paint gritty, not thick, which won't help anything look like Morisot's work.

Salt could be a problem: in watercolor, another water-soluble paint, like tempera, salt's dissolvable properties are used to drive water out and away from the salt crystal itself, creating a "salt effect." While the tempera is thicker, salt's reaction in water with whatever pigments and fillers in the paint may not create a stable solution. The salt may partially dissolve, and depending on what's in the paint itself, could re-form, pr "precipitate" later in the form of a film or crystallization on the paint's surface, depending on how much salt and what the paint was originally made out of.

To me, this project is full of more potential headaches than payoffs. I would rather just paint something in Morisot's style in the tempera paints. But since this is the project, here's some ideas:

Solution #1:

Purchase a student grade set of Acrylic Paints. These will come with the correct thickness akin to oil paints. (Eliminating the need to add anything to the Tempera to "thicken" it.

Even better, they are still water soluble, like Tempera, and will dry much faster than oil paints. This may be more expensive up front (keep an eye out for sales on Hobby Lobby and Michaels, or coupons!) but eliminates the need to mix anything into the paint. Student's won't need a ton of any color, so one set could serve 20 students, assuming you can squirt the paint onto individual "Palettes" for them (I like plastic coated paper plates.) Anyone who wants to keep painting at home can drape a damp paper towel over the plate, insert the plate into a plastic Ziploc-style bag, and paint again later!)

Or just paint with the tempera anyway. It is thicker than watercolor, and you can still get plenty of Morisot-style loose brushstrokes with tempera.

Solution #2:

The "Loose Brush Stroke" is sometimes called "Impasto." Technically, "Impasto" is where the paint is laid down so thick, it can stand up from the painting. I avoided this term for Morisot for two reasons: first, she has some Impasto techniques, but she is not really known for it. And secondly, next week, we will "meet" Van Gogh, who IS known for it!

That being said, the Great Artists book has a SPECIFIC RECIPE to turn a tempera into an Impasto Style Paint on page 46. (This is what we are doing in Morisot, thickening our paint so it could work like an

oil—both Morisot and Van Gogh (and Degas, and Monet…) used oil paints.) This does mean there is a LOT of overlap between Morisot and Van Gogh (They did live during the same time period, after all), but if you were planning on doing the Starry Night project, "borrow" the Impasto formula for Morisot. At least borrow the quantities:

1T thickening agent to ½ c. paint

1.5 t thickening agent to ¼ paint.

When in doubt, less is more. If you thicken the paint too much, ditch the whole batch and start over. When you over-thicken paint, you will have to add far more paint than you may think to try to get it back to a usable viscosity—and it still may not work. It is cheaper in the long run to dump the mistake and try again.

Solution #3:

I found an art teacher who pre-makes a thickener to get her tempera paints to stiffen up. Her recipe is here:

https://www.schoolpaints.com/2012/07/how-to-thicken-school-tempera-paint.html

But it goes like this:

1. Add 4 level teaspoons of cornstarch to a pot. Add 3 c water. Mix to combine.
2. Heat mixture over low heat, stirring until cornstarch dissolves and mixture is smooth and thick.
3. Allow to cool completely, and store in a sealed container.
4. When needed for paint, stir the thickening solution, then to tempera paint until you have desired consistency. (Add thickener little by little, it is more economical to add more thickener than have to add extra paint or throw the batch out and start over.)
5. Keep thickener in sealed jar until needed again.

But like any chemical, you cannot always just "double it" and get double the amount of product. The first comment on the page mentioned the fact that doubling the quantities meant she was stuck over her stove for over an hour and the solution had not yet thickened.

I prefer using starches to thicken things over some of the other "suggestions". Reason #1 is starches are often used in the cooking world to thicken things. The Thickening Solution appears similar to the cornstarch slurry used in Chinese cooking. Cooking the starch in water allows the starch molecules to absorb water then burst, creating a matrix which acts as a kind of structure the paint can cling to.

Secondly, cornstarch has a pH of 7.0, meaning it is neutral, so whatever the pH or the paint is, the cornstarch won't upset it. Flour, another source of starch (think of thickening a gravy), has a pH of 6.0 – 6.8, so slightly acidic.

Like I said, I'm not a fan of this project, there's a lot to balance to make sure the paint behaves and survives the technique. Each child and class are different in temperaments and abilities, but I'd rather help get everyone to the "finish line" with as few frustrations as possible.

Extra Visual Sources:

Morisot is known for her paintings of people, but she did a few still life subjects as well. I've included some here as additional reference images. Many of the parents in my chapter mentioned about how much easier their children found the Monet landscapes rather than the Degas dancers. The human body can be difficult to master.

If your students are like that, or you want something other than people to draw, here are a few extra Morisot pictures.

I hope they help, but since most of her work included human subjects, seeing those works was more representative of Morisot's style.

Notice too the number of diagonal and swirling brushstrokes in Morisot's work. Connect this to Degas: By leaving her brushstrokes loose and visible, Morisot also manages to give a sense of movement to this stationary objects, which automatically make them more interesting to look at. Had she finished her piece to the traditional "licked" surface, the still life probably wouldn't look as interesting as these do. (Many people state that Morisot's technique gives her paintings a sense of movement when viewed peripherally.)

Encourage your students to daub, swirl, and dash away on their paper!

Peonies; 1869

Berthe Morisot

Daises; c. 1885

Berthe Morisot
Oil on Canvas
The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

The Blue Vase

1888
Berthe Morisot
Oil on Canvas

Still Life with a Cut Apple

Berthe Morisot
1876
Oil on Canvas