

Young Girl with a Vase

Berthe Morisot

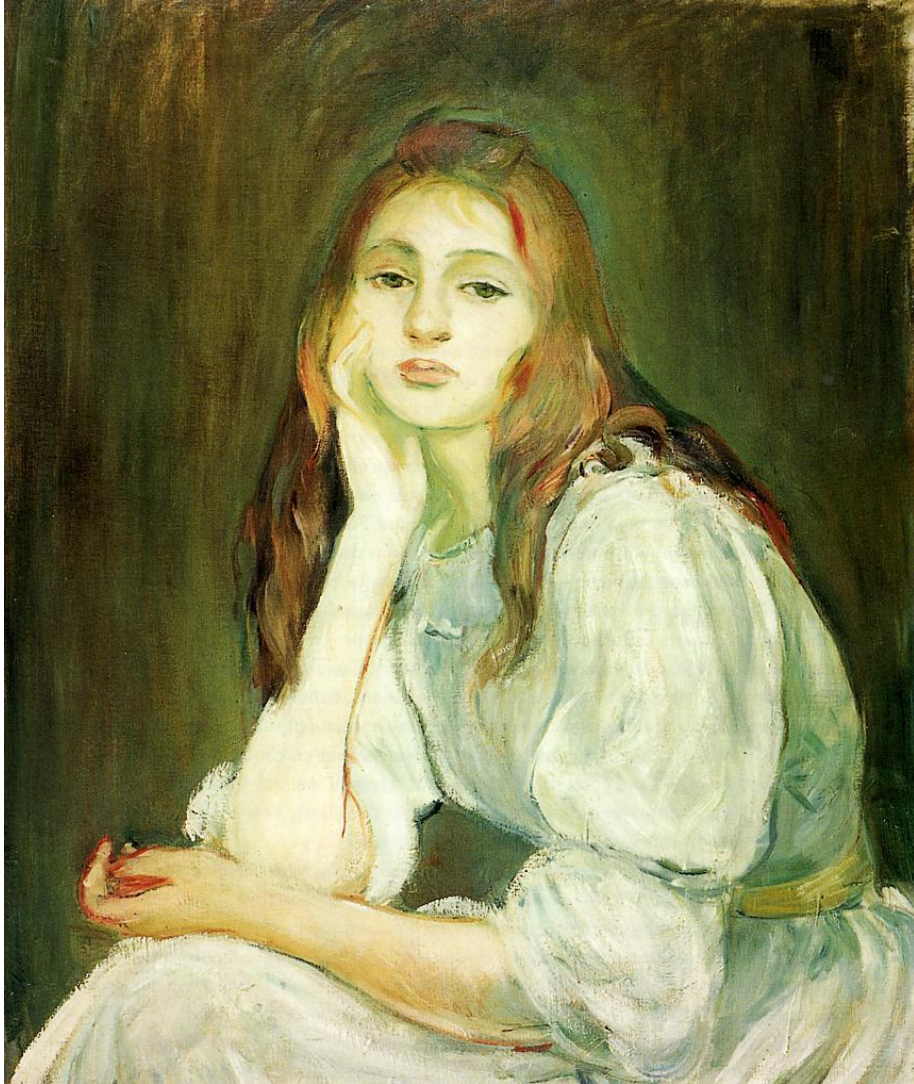
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Young Girl with a Vase
1889
Berthe Morisot
Oil on Canvas
31 7/8" X 39 3/8"
Apollo Magazine October 6, 2018



Woman at her Toilette
1875-80
Berthe Morisot
Oil on Canvas
23 3/4" x 31 5/8 "
Art Institute of Chicago



Julie Daydreaming

1894

Berthe Morisot

Oil on Linen

25.6" X 21.25"

Byron's Muse, Wordpress.com

What a charmed life, especially for a woman at that time. Rich, fulfilling, intellectually stimulating, a member of the Impressionists. At a time when women could not go out unchaperoned, she was amazing and had a great support system, first in her mother who had Berthe and her sisters take drawing lessons that eventually led up to her chaperoning her daughters to spend days at the Louvre copying the masters, and then her sister, Edma, also as chaperone on many occasions, but more importantly, as a critic, sounding board and provider of emotional encouragement to be the best she could. Some even said Edma was the more talented, but it takes more than talent to create a master and Berthe had the drive, intelligence and consuming passion to paint, paint and paint. She also had what we now call a strong feminist attitude that would not allow her to let go of a dream simply because she was a woman.

Her family was well off and lived in Paris where salons were the way to bring together a variety of like-minded intellectuals to share and discuss ideas. As the drawing lessons in youth moved into painting at the Louvre, an amazing collection of people started to gather at these salons. She had lessons with Corot where she acquired a grey palette with rich tones scattered throughout and later met the Manet brothers and Degas. The salons, including at the Manet's and Morisots, helped her and other illustrious artists coalesce into an energetic group that began Impressionism. Learning to paint Plein Air was also a very important step for Berthe and became the framework of many of her paintings. However, unmarried women in their 30s were not the norm. Sister Edma first felt the pressure which led to a marriage and no more painting. One of Berthe's most famous pictures is of Edma after the birth of her daughter – The Cradle¹. Sitting at the cradle gazing at her newborn, there is a subtle look on her face – gazing lovingly at her daughter and

protective, yet melancholy. Although she did give up her ambitions and talent, Edma never wavered in her support of Berthe to continue her pursuits. The letters exchanged between the two sisters over the years are enlightening on so many levels. Nobody writes to each other like that anymore!

Although a key player of the Impressionist movement, Berthe is not as well-known as her contemporaries mostly because her works were kept in private hands and not shown. Although she had paintings in all but one of the Impressionists' shows, some felt her subjects were lightweight and therefore, did not take her seriously. Images of women and domesticity, motherhood, children, gardens, life of the bourgeoisie... all traditional feminine roles and thereby not as revelatory or relevant - no enlightening or angst-filled moments on the grittier side of life existential crisis. However, there is much more there than meets the eye initially, especially in her interiors and especially with women. A lot of them tend to be pensive, melancholy and alone. Many are poised at threshold points – windows, doorways, balconies, mirrors. There is a lot of tension between private and public, inside and outside and, later in life, finished and unfinished. Women on the verge of going beyond the confines of home boundaries just as she was trying to do in real life.

One of my favorite pictures by Berthe is *Woman at Toilette*. It is just amazing the way incandescent light plays around in the soft grey. The perfect Impressionist painting with the light dancing over the surface. It is rich, luxurious, jewel-like. The satin dress, the creamy flesh tones and the way the woman almost dissolves into the background screams elegance and beauty. The subject is a charmed life of wealth being pampered and having leisure that no longer

exists. As Berthe later noticed, “Today, young girls take 5 or 6 courses a week, later they come out into society, then they marry and devote themselves to their husbands. So no more models, no more of those lovely moments of leisure, of that picturesque languor; everyone is restless and fidgety, no one understands that there's nothing like 2 hours reclining on a chaise lounge — life is a dream — and the dream is more real than reality; in dreams one is oneself, truly oneself — if one has a soul it's there.”² But even though her public life appeared rich and leisurely, her private inner world was hard at work on moving toward a vision she had that was much deeper than fashion or domesticity. She wanted her art to go beyond gender roles, “I don't think there has ever been a man who treated a woman as an equal, and that's all I would have asked for — I know I am worth as much as they are.”³

The other key element of support for Berthe were the Manet brothers. Edouard frequently used her as a subject and some of his most famous paintings are of her. I feel like they spurred each other on to greater heights and inspiration. However, it is the brother Eugene that Bertha married at 34 and was instrumental in her continuing journey. He was selfless and devoted and managed the business and domestic side of their marriage and her career. Eugene and their daughter Julie were also constant subjects over the years. It's amazing to see Julie grow up in the pictures and how lovingly Berthe portrayed them both.

All these many wonderful connections led to a more mature Berthe and her later pictures began to have more weight and substance and not be quite so dreamy or luxurious. Her daughter still an avid subject, *Julie Daydreaming* has a smoother brushstroke, earth tones and an expressive use of red. The face is so pensive and the mind so far off, while the background is earthy,

lustrous and full of depth. There is a solidness of the figure to the background. And she used dark browns and green as the dominant hues in the background! Those colors block out the light and we are left with the pure image of Julie who clearly is somewhere else. An interior visually as well as emotionally and this a true portrait.

Young Girl with a Vase is a wonderful picture that to me brings together all the elements that Berthe loved in a mature way – even though some would say it looks unfinished. There is still shimmeriness and wonderful use of white and brushstroke, but instead of light sparkling all over, the ungessoed canvas is visible and used instead for the images to dissolve into especially as they approach canvas edges. It's like coming in from the sunshine where it was so bright, details were hard to capture and now inside nuances and color begin to be revealed. Rather than many visible brushstrokes, the more important elements of figure and flowers, are more solid and smooth with fewer brushstrokes but still not fully realized. I see elements of the solidness of Julie Dreaming, yet the sparkle of Woman at Toilette. The canvas and shorthand of objects like the vase on the left are impressionistic, but more expressive as well. It's like she is distilling down to the essence of things, the soul she spoke of that is in dreams. It's an everyday interior, yet somehow the emphasis on figure and flowers conveys what is important and left at the end of the day when all the clutter is removed. The part of ourselves that is outside of the ordinary day to day, the inner spirit and ... dare I say, the sublime! While not as overt as say Monk by the Sea, I feel that same idea of touching god in a way or the godliness within us because of her reverence for the things she paints.

What a woman! What a painter! Which one should come first? I think they are both equally as important. Berthe painted the stuff of life, a woman's life, distilled down to the things that really matter – family, the maintenance of life, fulfillment, love. These things are not lightweight and should not be dismissed!

As she reflected at the end of her life, “I mean age which has thought, which has suffered, which has eaten little and drunk little, which glimpses the beyond, and which becomes strange in the eyes of the vulgar because of its contempt for ordinary life”⁴ I see that in her later paintings.

“In a last series of works, she reincorporated into her paintings her favorite portrait of herself by Édouard Manet; another of his paintings; Degas's portrait of Eugène Manet; a photograph of herself, Eugène, and Julie at Bougival; earlier pictures of her own. Folding the past into the present, leaving a heritage to the future, she recapitulated her artistic career and settled all her accounts.”⁵ These are what she held dear her whole life. How lucky to understand that and live
A charmed life, well-lived.

¹ Berthe Morisot, *The Cradle*, Musée d'Orsay, accessed 11/25/20, https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/painting/commentaire_id/the-cradle-8953.html?tx_commentaire_pi1%5BpidLi%5D=509&tx_commentaire_pi1%5Bfrom%5D=841&cHash=26c27dd211

² Anne Higonnet. *Berthe Morisot*. University of California Press, 1995, 219.

³ Rachel Cohen, "Berthe Morisot Comes into Her Own," *Apollo Magazine*, October 6, 2018, <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/berthe-morisot-comes-into-her-own/>

⁴ Anne Higonnet. *Berthe Morisot*. University of California Press, 1995, 220.

⁵ Anne Higonnet. *Berthe Morisot*. University of California Press, 1995, 220.