Caroline Woods

(Berthe Morisot. *The Wet Nurse*, 1879. Private collection, Washington D.C.)

The Female Avant-Garde: Challenging Ideas of Gender in Morisot's *Wet Nurse* and Valadon's *The Blue Room*

Berthe Morisot and Suzanne Valadon have long been considered pioneering women artists whose lives and work coincided with the emergence of modernity. Each artist is representative of the *avant-garde* from a different generation – Berthe Morisot was born in the first half of the nineteenth century in 1841, while Suzanne Valadon was born in the second half in 1865. The two artists had very different lives, were very different people, and had very different class limitations. In addition, they come to maturity at transitional moments in socio-historical conditions for women and women professionals. In the following analysis, I compare Morisot's *The Wet Nurse* of 1879 with Valadon's *The Blue Room* of 1923 in order to analyze how the lives of these two women as individuals as well as gendered subjects play out in each of her works both formally and iconographically. By doing so, I hope to ascertain the terms by which each woman was revolutionary.

Berthe Morisot was born in Bourges, France on January 14, 1841. She had two older sisters, Yves, born in 1838, and Edma, born in 1839, and a younger brother Tiburce, born in 1848. Her family moved from one provincial capital to the next, for her father was a high ranking civil servant who frequently had to move posts. It was her father's job that allowed the family to live comfortably at the upper end of the bourgeois class, but would also limit Morisot's opportunity as an artist. In 1852, he finally settled his family in Passy, an area on the western outskirts of Paris.

In 1855, Morisot's father took a position at the national accounting office as senior council. He had studied to become an architect in his youth and as a result, aesthetic pursuits were a high priority for the family. At one point, Morisot's mother decided to surprise him on his birthday and have their daughters study painting under the tutelage of a private master, Geoffroy-Alphonse Chocarne, an advocate for the Neo-classical style of Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres.

However, the Morisot girls soon lost interest in their teacher's lessons, perhaps pointing to Berthe's preference for a less traditional style. Since the Ecole des Beaux-Arts would not accept women until 1897, the Morisots hired a new private teacher, Joseph Guichard.[1]

Guichard took his job as teacher very seriously. It was normal for the daughters of upper-class families to receive an art education, but only at an amateur level to produce a commonplace hobby.[2] Guichard, however, recognized the daughters' talent and potential early on.[3] According to Tiburce, Berthe's younger brother, Guichard approached Madame Morisot once realizing this potential and said,

> Given your daughters' natural gifts, it will not be petty drawing-room talents that my instruction will achieve; they will become painters. Are you fully aware of what that means? It will be revolutionary – I would almost say catastrophic – in your high bourgeois milieu. Are you sure you will never one day curse the art, once allowed into this household, now so respectably peaceful, that will become the sole master of the fate of two of your children?[4]

Berthe's mother was unaffected by the warning, and the girls continued to paint. Not long into their tutelage, they requested lessons in *plein air* painting, which introduced them to the famous landscape painter, Camille Corot.[5] He lent the sisters several of his own works to copy, and it was these paintings that inspired Morisot to utilize the same undisguised brushwork found in his work.

In 1864, Morisot and her sister Edma submitted paintings to the Salon de Paris, and all four of them were accepted.[6] They pursued other tactics to display and sell their artwork, such as placing paintings in a street-front window of a shop owned by Alfred Cadart, but this was largely in vain.[7] This type of behavior was very unusual for the time, as it was exceptional for a woman to pursue a professional career as a painter in the 1860s.[8] The Morisot parents were not yet worried, though, for Edma and Berthe's interest in painting still appeared to them as just a hobby. A successful career in painting produced commissions, medals, high-priced pieces, and memberships in state academies. In order to achieve these accomplishments, one had to study in the central school at the École des Beaux-Arts. It was only there that a young painter could find access to the full program of anatomy and learn to draw after classical art. More importantly, it was in that atmosphere that young painters found the support of peers and professional contacts that could lead to the advancement of careers.

These studios did not accept female students, and therefore Berthe and Edma were excluded.[9]

In 1865, the Morisot family had a studio built in the garden of their home.[10] This studio was not just a building, but also a place of independence. Set apart from the house, it was there where the sisters could escape from domestic obligations to concentrate on painting. After a year of this, their mother finally began to worry. Berthe was twenty-six and Edma was twenty-eight, and their mother began to complain that they were neglecting their family obligations and unappreciative of the marriage prospects she was seeking for them.[11]

Morisot continued to show her work in the Salon regularly until 1873.[12] In 1868, she became friends with the future Impressionist, Edouard Manet. Manet's style was very inspirational for Morisot, and he influenced her in many ways. Their relationship, however, was reciprocal. For example, Morisot convinced Manet to attempt *plein air* painting.[13] While Manet held himself somewhat apart from the circle of painters who later became known as the Impressionists, Morisot exhibited her work with them from 1874 on. In 1874, she married Manet's brother, Eugène, and they had a daughter, Julie. Morisot missed only one exhibition with the Impressionists in 1878, the year that Julie was born.[14]

Morisot's subject matter in her paintings consisted of scenes she experienced in her day-to-day life. Her paintings show the restrictions placed upon nineteenth-century artists of her class and gender. She was unable to paint in public unchaperoned, so she avoided painting city and street scenes. She rarely painted the nude figure for she did not have access to figure painting classes and it would have been inappropriate, to say the least, for her to paint her own body. Instead, she turned to scenes of domestic life and portraits, for she could use her family and friends as models. She also painted landscapes and garden scenes in the privacy of her home in the countryside, away from urban Paris.[15]

Morisot's *The Wet Nurse*, 1879 is an example of an ordinary event she experienced in her everyday life (Fig. 1). This painting, however, is anything but ordinary, in terms of both style and iconography. The central focus of the painting is of two figures, a mother and a child. They are hard to make out, as they melt into the rhythmic green background.

This painting could easily be mistaken as a Madonna and Child, updated and secularized, as the other prominent female Impressionist, Mary Cassatt, was doing. Morisot's rendition is different in that the woman holding the child is actually not her mother, but a *seconde mère*, or a wet nurse. She is feeding the child for wages, not out of maternal obligation. The subject matter of this painting is even more curious in that Morisot is not painting just any wet nurse and child, but her daughter, Julie, feeding from her *seconde mère*.[16]

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the *industrie nourriciére*, or wet nursing, was a large-scale industry in France. Families of the urban artisan and shop-keeping class would send their babies out to be nursed by women in the country, allowing the wives to be free to work. This industry had many issues, however, including unsanitary practices, high mortality rates for the infants, and financial arrangements that were often unstable.

These issues caused the government to step in and regulate the industry in 1874, supervising wet nurses and their clients across the nation. Morisot was a member of the upper bourgeoisie, however, so she was not tied to this regulated industry. Instead, members of this class would hire a *nourrice sur lieu*, a live-in wet nurse. Her main purpose was to provide the infant with milk, but she would also take the child to the park, comfort her, etc. Although this was a way for a poor countrywoman with few skills to make a considerable amount of money, it did involve her own personal sacrifices. The wet nurse's diet was strictly monitored, as was her sex life, although the biggest sacrifice was leaving her own infant at home in the country in the care of another family member.[17]

(Figure 1: Berthe Morisot. *The Wet Nurse*, 1879. Private collection, Washington D.C.)

Morisot's choice of utilizing a *nourrice sur lieu* was the norm for someone of her class. It would not have been considered careless or neglectful, for it was within the appropriate cultural constructs of her time. Morisot turning to a wet nurse as subject matter for a painting was not unheard of either. In Degas' *At the Races in the Countryside*, 1869, he depicts a husband and wife who are accompanied by a wet nurse in the act of feeding an infant (Fig. 2). While representing French society in his *A Sunday on La Grande-Jatte*, 1884, Georges Seurat also includes a depiction of a wet nurse, although heavily geometricized and barely recognizable (Fig. 3). As in the case of Morisot's painting, the wet nurse is identifiable by her uniform, which consists of a white dress, red scarf, and a white bonnet.

(Figure 2: Edgar Degas. *At the Races in the Countryside*, 1869. Musuem of Fine Arts, Boston.)

(Figure 3: Georges Seurat. *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*, 1884. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.)

Morisot's case was particularly special because she was a female painter. Not only does the viewer get to see this depiction through the lens of a woman, something unusual for the time, but through the lens of the infant's mother. This image is now no longer a simple mother and daughter scene, but one with many more complications. Morisot, while working, watches another woman work. The crux of this painting is two women workers from different social classes, with very different lives, coming together over something they share in common yet also do not share: motherhood of this particular infant. The women confront each other over a child with whom they do not share the same connection. This tension reflects an unavoidable conflict: Morisot was, in fact, a professional painter and a mother at a place and time in history when the two things were mutually exclusive.[19] She must watch, as she works, another woman perform an act of motherhood upon her daughter.

This tension becomes apparent when looking at the formal aspects of the painting. At first glance, the viewer is confronted with a triangular whitish lump that seems to be dissolving into a chaotic yet rhythmic green backdrop. Under further inspection, the viewer begins to make out a bonnet-wearing head on top of the lump and the rosy-cheeked, red-headed child in its center, and begins to realize that it is a seated woman with a child in her lap. Morisot's broken and visible brushwork is so heavily applied, that if she had gone any further, the viewer might not be able to distinguish the imagery at all. Just as the woman blends into the surrounding landscape, the child seems to melt into the woman's lap, almost as if they are one being. Morisot gives the woman two brown dashes for eyes and a red smudge for lips, but that is the extent of her facial features. The only spot of relative clarity is the face of the infant suckling at the woman's breast.

It is temping to suggest that Morisot's handling of this figure's body is reflective of the tension she must have felt in the paradox of creating this work. She was a mother, but also a worker. She was a woman, but also a painter. She took pleasure from painting, but also may have felt conflict watching another woman perform an act of motherhood on her own child. This tension seems to manifest in the openness of the facture, the disembodiment and erasure of the woman's form, and the lack of outline that begs the question of identity and dissolution.

Morisot's take on this classical idea of mother and child gives way to her reality and experience living as a woman artist in the mid nineteenth century. Unlike Renoir's *Mother Nursing Her Child*, 1886, which depicts the artist's wife Aline breastfeeding their child, both of them content and happy in their mother and child relationship, Morisot's depiction of motherhood is not idealized (Fig. 4). She does not ignore, but confronts the tension she feels by almost erasing the identity of the wet nurse altogether. Even her brushstrokes seem to emphasize a contradiction, as they are chaotic yet purposeful, turbulent yet calming.

Of course, as an Impressionist-identified artist, Morisot may very well have been exploring open facture for its own sake, according to the premises of that movement.

However, Morisot deviates from the Impressionist agenda by choosing to paint figures, subject matter that some of the other Impressionists avoided because of its inherent emotional implications. Moreover, Morisot has given us other images of mothers and children, such as *The Cradle*, 1872, that are emotionally realistic and unidealized views of the challenges of motherhood (Fig 5). It is difficult to imagine that, consciously and/or subconsciously, Morisot managed to paint an entirely objective image of this charged subject matter that is so relevant to her own life. Another revolutionary female painter who focused on gender-based issues was Suzanne Valadon. Marie-Clémentine Valadon, was born on September 23, 1865, in Bessines-sur-Gartempe, a small town located in central France.

(Figure 4: Pierre-Auguste Renoir. *Mother Nursing Her Child*, 1886. Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg.)

(Figure 5: Berthe Morisot. *The Cradle*, 1872. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.)

Her mother, Madeleine Valadon, would never disclose Marie-Clémentine’s father. Madeleine worked as a maid in a bourgeois household in the small town, and had been married to Leon Coulaud, with whom she had two older daughters. He worked as a blacksmith, but was arrested for forgery in 1859, and died later that year. With the death of her husband, and the birth of the illegitimate child who would become Suzanne Valadon, Madeleine fled to Paris, leaving her two other daughters in the care of relatives.[20]

Madeleine settled in Montmartre, an inexpensive bohemian neighborhood perched on top of a hill known for its working mills and the large number of musicians and artists who lived there. This place would be an important aspect of inspiration in Valadon’s career.

Her mother enrolled her in a day school at a convent nearby, where she studied until about the age of eleven. She was not a good student, and would often skip school altogether to explore the streets of Montmartre, for she was not interested in her classes. She was finally removed from school at the age of eleven in order to help provide for herself and her mother. She started and abandoned various jobs, and it was not until 1880 that she joined the circus, fulfilling a childhood dream. She only stayed with the circus until she was fifteen, when a serious injury in the ring left her with impaired agility.[21]

At this time Valadon began modeling for artists. She became Maria, and her patrons included artists such as Puvis de Chavannes, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. During this period, it was assumed that many models were sexually available to their artists. There is some speculation that these men may have become her lovers, although some biographers disagree.[22]

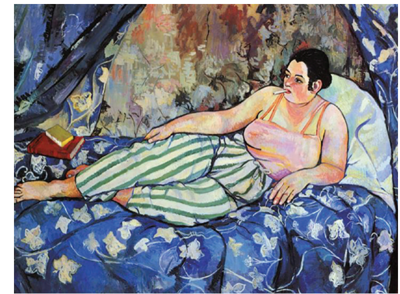
On December 26, 1883, Valadon gave birth to her son, Maurice. He was illegitimate, and although the identity of his real father is unclear, one of Valadon’s lovers, Spanish journalist Miguel Utrillo, signed papers recognizing paternity. After the birth of her son, Valadon’s mother took care of the baby while she returned to modeling. In 1896, Valadon married stock broker Paul Mousis, thus ushering in a new era in the Valadon family’s financial affairs. They became a bourgeois family, and no longer had to worry about money in the way they had.[23]

Valadon had started drawing at the age of six, and began painting at the age of fourteen. However, she destroyed most of her early attempts. For guidance, she turned to the many artists who surrounded her in the Montmartre neighborhood. Through these artists she was eventually introduced to Degas, although she never modeled for him. He saw enormous talent in her, and even bought one of her first drawings. They would continue to be friends throughout her career.[24]

In 1909, Valadon met André Utter, a painter and one of her son's contemporaries. Although she was twenty-one years his senior, she began a love affair with him. She asked Mousis for a divorce and she and her family left Pierrefitte, where she had moved with Mousis, and returned to Montmartre.At the suggestion of her new lover, she began to turn from drawing to painting. In 1912, the couple visited Corsica, and Utter posed nude for Valadon's *Casting of the Net*, 1914, which was revolutionary for its use of a nude male model by a female artist (Fig. 6).[25]

(Figure 6: Suzanne Valadon. *Casting the Net*, 1914. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris.)

Valadon's *The Blue Room* of 1923 is perhaps her most well-known work (Fig. 7). In the painting, Valadon depicts a curvaceous woman dressed in loose, striped pants and a camisole. She reclines on a day bed and has a cigarette in her mouth. At her feet, atop a richly decorated blue blanket is a pile of books. She is the new, modern woman of Paris in the 1920s.[26] With the closing of World War I, women's roles in society began to change in Paris and elsewhere. Women no longer had to be accompanied by a chaperone in public, they were fighting for the right to vote, and they had different kinds of jobs, such as blue collar work. These changes in roles were reflected in appearance. Women no longer wore the constricting corsets and modest dresses of the nineteenth century. Instead, they wore loose, shorter dresses that allowed movement and wore shorter, bobbed hair.



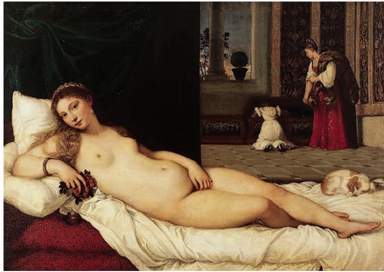
(Figure 7: Suzanne Valadon. *The Blue Room*, 1923. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris.)

Many more were educated and even smoked cigarettes, a mostly male habit. After the men came back from War, however, there was growing anxiety about this role shift. There were contradictions about this seemingly newfound freedom, for women had access to more opportunities, such as education, yet were still not equal to men in many ways, such as the right to vote. Valadon's painting reflects and celebrates this new woman.[27]

Although the formal aspects of this painting are not quite as revolutionary as the iconography she depicts, they are on par with her *avant-garde* contemporaries and contribute to her radical subject matter. The composition shows the culmination of Valadon's mature style and balances a careful harmony between the woman's figure and the décor that surrounds it. She deliberately paints contrasting geometric and floral patterns, but unifies them subtly with the blue that covers the scene. Valadon may have been looking to Matisse in the curvilinear arabesque shapes that cover the blue fabric and contrasting patterns, as well as the poses and heavily proportioned bodies of his odalisques, showing that she is well aware of the leading contemporaneous male artists. The fabric's cool values enhance the model's warm accents in her shirt and books.The blue hue also alleviates the visual discomfort the viewer might have felt from the complexity of differing patterned surfaces. Valadon uses the model's striped pants to stretch the composition laterally and to calm the claustrophobia of the heavily patterned fabric. The design on the wall behind the model shows Valadon's skill at "painterly painting" and also echoes the tones found in the model's skin and shirt, unifying the composition yet again.[28]

Valadon's depiction of this reclining woman is a direct response to an earlier depiction of a reclining woman: *Olympia*, 1863, by Manet (Fig. 8). Manet's depiction was itself a response to a painting known as the *Venus of Urbino*, 1538, by Titian (Fig. 9). Titian's depiction of a reclining woman serves as a model of ideal womanhood in the 16th century.

(Figure 8: Edouard Manet. *Olympia*, 1863. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.)



(Figure 9: Titian. *Venus of Urbino*, 1538. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.)

The woman is called a "Venus," the goddess of love, and she reclines across the bed with her hand curled in between her legs, apparently masturbating. She looks out at the viewer with an alluring and seductive gaze. Curled up at the end of the bed near her feet lays a dog, a reference to the fidelity a woman must have within her marriage. In the background, a maid watches over a young girl who looks through a chest, symbolizing matrimony and motherhood.[29]

In his *Olympia*, Manet reinvents this scene, and instead of depicting a model of ideal womanhood, he creates a controversial scene that comments on Parisian society. In his painting, rather than the goddess of love reclining on the bed, he paints a young prostitute. Prostitution was a major industry in France in the nineteenth century. However widespread it was, people were still shocked when they saw Manet's depiction displayed at the Salon de Paris of 1865. Rather than enticing the viewer, she hides her genitals, waiting for her next client. Instead of a dog lying at her feet, a black cat arches its back, alluding to female promiscuity. Her gaze stares directly at the viewer, confronting her audience head-on, while her maid approaches her with a bouquet of flowers, a gift from one of her customers.

Valadon's reinvention of this scene takes Manet's depiction of a working class woman and turns her into an image of the new modern woman. This woman, like Titian and Manet's, reclines upon a bed. She, however, is not naked. Not only is she clothed, but she also wears pants. This would have been a very charged and radical image, as pants were still seen as men's clothing. She also smokes a cigarette, an activity in which men typically engaged. Instead of a cat at the end of her bed, this modern woman has books, a reference to her intelligence, or at least, literacy. Unlike Olympia's thin girlish figure, Valadon's figure is full-bodied and solid. She also appears to be sunburned with red cheeks and a red "v" mark on her chest, possibly a result of work she performs outdoors.

Her bare feet also appear to be large and rough-looking. These aspects mark her as working class, and combined with her intellectualism and distinct modernity, show Valadon's awareness of the new emerging woman.[30]

In both Morisot's *The Wet Nurse* and Valadon's *The Blue Room*, there is an aspect of truth surrounding the way these women represent other women. In Morisot's case, she is unidealized about the paradoxes of motherhood and how she represents the woman nursing her child. In Valadon's case, she is truthful in the way she represents the modern woman emerging in Paris. Both of these images are depictions of their perception of the world around them, and the women in it.

The two paintings, although created by women from different generations, both challenge ideas of gender in their respective time periods. In Morisot's case, her depiction of her wet nurse and child counters the idealized, happy, mother-baby relationship that was expected at the time. A woman's duty was to be a mother, and although a woman of Morisot's class was not expected to nurse an infant herself, she was only excused from doing so because doctors thought a healthy country wet nurse was a better alternative to a nervous new mother. Everything a mother did was for the benefit of her child, which is why her world was confined to her home. Morisot challenged this notion in her depiction, for she acknowledges the tensions that surrounded motherhood with her use of psychologically charged subject matter and formal style. The tension that she possibly felt may have been the factor that pushed Morisot to be even more daring in her technique. It is possible that the facture is so open and free because she felt liberated from some of the burdens of motherhood, and was free to explore more radical technique. Her wet nurse may have not only been a source of discomfort and tension for Morisot, but also a conduit that allowed her to be daring and revolutionary in her work.

Valadon challenges ideas regarding gender by representing the new woman as her model. Unlike the woman of the nineteenth century, this new woman works, is educated, and has agency, which is reflected in her solidly outlined body and books, both of which give her a sense of identity.

She casts off her corset and instead turns to loose-fitting, male-identified pants. Although Valadon paints her indoors, she challenges the idea of separate spheres in the way she depicts her model as the new woman likely to have made the choice to remain on her bed, rather than confined to it, literally and figuratively.

Although both of these paintings are radical, the artists achieve this radicalness in different ways. Where Morisot's work is perhaps most profound in regard to its formal aspects, Valadon's is revolutionary in terms of its iconography. Both artists are signaling a new era for women. Iconographically, Morisot's challenging of gender assumptions was perhaps less intentional, almost accidental, even as she was living a revolution in gender expectations. She was depicted what she had access to in her everyday life. Her wet nurse was there, and therefore, Morisot uses her as a tool in which she creates a radically innovative painting. Valadon, on the other hand, was from a generation earlier than Morisot, and with the emergence of the new woman in Paris, her challenging of ideas regarding gender is more self-conscious. She knows that although her formal style is in stride with her contemporaries, she is aware that her subject matter is a groundbreaking innovation. Although these artists were revolutionary in different ways, Morisot and Valadon were both representatives of the *avant-garde.* They were very different people and lived very different lives, but the experiences of these two women as individuals as well as gendered subjects plays out in each of her works, creating innovative and revolutionary pieces.

Notes

[1] Charles F. Stuckey, William P. Scott, and Suzanne G. Lindsay, Berthe Morisot, Impressionist (New York: Hudson Hills, 1987), 16.
[2] Anne Higonnet, Berthe Morisot (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 13.
[3] Stuckey, Scott, and Lindsay, Berthe Morisot, Impressionist, 17.
[4] Ibid, 18.
[5] Ibid, 19.
6 Higonnet, Berthe Morisot, 27.
7 Ibid, 29.
8 Ibid, 30.
9 Ibid, 31.
[10] Ibid, 34.
[11] Ibid, 35.
[12] Ibid, 102.
[13] Jane Turner, The Grove Dictionary of Art. Late 19th-century French Artists (New York: St. Martin's, 2000) 319.
[14] Higgonet, Berthe Morisot, 27.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Linda Nochlin, Morisot's "Wet Nurse": The Construction of Work and Leisure in Impressionist Painting (New York: Harper & Row, 1988) 231.
[17] Ibid, 236-7.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid, 241.
[20] Thérèse Diamand Rosinsky, Suzanne Valadon (New York: Universe, 1994) 16.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid, 17.
[24] Ibid, 18.
[25] Ibid.

[26] Paula Birnbaum, Women Artists in Interwar France: Framing Femininities (Farnham, Surrey, UK, England: Ashgate, 2011) 1-3.
[27] Whitney Chadwick, Women, Art, and Society (5th ed. London: Thames & Hudson, 2012) 253.
[28] Rosinsky, Suzanne Valadon, 72.
[29] "Venus of Urbino by Titian." Uffizi.org. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Oct. 2016.
[30] Birnbaum, Women Artists in Interwar France: Framing Femininities, 196-7.