

A CLOSER LOOK

Berthe Morisot



Berthe Morisot (French, 1841-1895)

View of Paris from the Trocadéro, 1871-73

Oil on canvas

SBMA, Gift of Mrs. Hugh N. Kirkland, 1974.21.2.

About the Artist

Berthe Morisot was born to a middle-class French family in 1842. She studied under artist Camille Corot, learning how to paint *en plein air* (outside). She became friends with Édouard Manet and other Impressionist artists, and eventually married Eugène Manet, the artist's brother. Morisot is known for paintings that depict her daily experiences and observations, including domestic interiors, gardens, and portraits of family and friends.

Considered by critics to be her first masterpiece, this painting showcases her magnificent ability to render light and atmosphere. During the time that it was created, Morisot wrote, "I will obtain my independence only by showing openly that I mean to be free."

Themes

- The Modern City
- European History
- Women's History
- Public Space

Overview

Berthe Morisot lived near the Place du Trocadéro, a fashionable upper middle-class area of Paris, for most of her adult life. The scene depicted in this painting was one with which she was deeply familiar. With deft brushwork, applied in confident, quick strokes, Morisot firmly anchors the figures in the foreground. The wide, narrow format of the composition generates the sensation of an expanse seen from a distance through a simple division of space into horizontal bands.

The painting captures a unique view of Paris poised between past and future. On this site less than a year earlier, the city was under siege. First with the brief but violent Franco-Prussian War, then with the revolutionary Paris Commune. In Morisot's painting, no signs of such conflict remain, nor do we find ourselves in the urban swirl of the boulevards and cafes painted by Morisot's male counterparts. There is also no sign of the Eiffel Tower, a modern monument that will be erected directly in front of this scene just 17 years later.

Research: Morisot's Women

The writer Kathleen Adler wrote of Morisot: *“Morisot’s women exist in a protected space that is transitional, neither city nor country. The separation between the figures and the view of the city is not only physical space, it is social space. It is not so much no-man’s land as it is woman’s land, isolated from the world of business and of war.”*

Research this period of time in France. From your study, do you agree with Adler’s reading of the painting? How did the bourgeoisie and the suburbs relate to the city? What spaces were women included in, or excluded from, in 19th-century France? How did Morisot's status as a woman artist challenge these traditional views? By placing her women in the suburbs, does Morisot suggest that the faraway city—a symbol of the future—lies beyond their reach? Explain.

Taking it to the Streets: Baudelaire and the Modern City

“The life of our city is rich in poetic and marvelous subjects. We are enveloped and steeped as though in an atmosphere of the marvelous; but we do not notice it.”
- Charles Baudelaire

French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire saw the city as an endlessly exciting and stimulating environment. He said that the task of the artist is to depict “the pageant of fashionable life.” He believed that the city creates and demands a new mode of perception, a new mode of representation.

What do you think is the new mode of expression and representation for the 21st

century? What best captures the pace and scope of our time?

Reflect: Gender & Le Flâneur

Baudelaire called his city wanderer *le flâneur*. He wrote, *“The crowd is his domain just as the air is the bird’s, and water that of the fish. His passion and his profession is to merge with the crowd. For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate observer, it becomes an immense source of pleasure to choose to live among the throng, in the ebb and flow, the bustle, the floating and the infinite...the lover of life moves into the crowd as though into an enormous reservoir of electricity.”*

The concept of the flâneur has traditionally been associated with men. How does it change if we include women in the definition, both historically and now? On the next page, read what Lauren Elkin, author of *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London*, said in a 2017 interview about this idea:





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“The figure of the flâneur is so bound up in a certain configuration of gender, class, and leisure; I think of a film by Matthew Lancit on the flâneur which asks everyday people in Paris if they are flâneurs, and this one guy, a street-sweeper, says (and I’m paraphrasing), ‘that sounds like something for rich people.’ So I definitely wasn’t interested in recuperating the figure of the flâneur, but in proposing the flâneuse as a more interesting figure, someone to whom the city isn’t just readily available, or given, someone who has to fight for it, for her place in it. The politics of visibility in urban space are immensely complex and intersectional; we’re all out there navigating the streets as best

we can, and hoping to get something out of it. The flâneur, for me, is a figure of unexamined privilege. The flâneuse knows what she’s up against and sets out anyway. So I’d like to think flâneuserie is something that can be practiced no matter what your gender...”

Do you agree or disagree with her statement? How has your own experience figured into your response?

Activity: Le Flâneur

Try your hand at being a flâneur in Santa Barbara or wherever you live. Spend at least an hour walking through public areas, a mall, along the boardwalk, etc. Record your observations in a sketchbook, journal, or series of photographs. Choose one passage, sketch, or photo and then turn it into a more polished, finished piece.