Berthe Morisot: capturing something of what goes by

Berthe Morisot 1841–1895
An exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille, France, showing until June 9, 2002, and then at the Fondation Pierre Gianadda, Martigny, Switzerland, from June 20 to Nov 19, 2002.

A year after her death in 1895, a posthumous exhibition of Berthe Morisot’s work was held at the Galerie Durand-Ruel in Paris, France. The hanging committee must certainly have been among the most illustrious in the history of art; it consisted of her fellow painters Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Edgar Degas, as well as the poet Stéphane Mallarmé. The latter wrote the preface for the catalogue. Renoir suggested that a day bed was placed in the middle of the exhibition space. All four were regular visitors to Morisot’s house, and the list of her other friends and acquaintances is extraordinary—they included fellow painters Gustave Caillebotte, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, James McNeill Whistler, Charles François Daubigny, and Honoré Daumier.

Yet, the figure with whom she is most closely associated is Edouard Manet. Morisot was introduced to him in 1868 by Henri Fantin-Latour and later became his sister-in-law (she married his brother Eugène in 1874). Over the years, Manet painted 14 portraits of Berthe, 12 of which are presented in the current show at Lille. In all, there are nearly 70 paintings on display, including many works that have not been seen in France since the 19th century. The presentation is wonderfully clear and concise, the explanations informative, and the lighting superlative. The event is also rather rare. The last large retrospective of Morisot’s oeuvre in France dates back more than 40 years.

This fact is indicative of the relative lack of regard that Morisot’s work has attracted since her death—rather surprising given her importance in the Impressionist movement. Indeed, she was the only woman artist who exhibited at the group’s first exhibition in 1874, and she took part in all but one of their subsequent shows. “Nobody represents Impressionism with a more refined talent and with more authority than not men. However, as women, they could serve the cause of painting by each marrying a member of the French Academy and sowing discord in the camp of those dotards.”

In many ways, Morisot was the most avant-garde of all Impressionists. She was the first to paint many of the new school’s favourite spots, such as the river between Pontoise and Auvers. Her style was avant-garde and extremely daring. She cherished the idea of spontaneity with the result that her brush strokes were bold, wild, and disordered. She scraped her canvases with dry brushes and scratched them with the handles. Indeed, she often deliberately left her paintings incomplete. At the 1876 exhibition, a critic compared her views of a port on the Isle of Wight to the inept scribblings of a schoolchild. Another surmised that she had simply rubbed her palette up against the canvas.

The daughter of a high-ranking civil servant, Morisot began painting lessons, together with Edma, when she was 16. It soon became clear that the sisters’ talents would not be confined to the domestic sphere, as one of their art teachers, Joseph Guichard, warned their mother: “Your daughters have such inclinations that my teaching will not give them the small talent of pleasing. They will become painters. Do you realise what that means? In your environment of the upper-middle class, this will be a revolution, I might also say a catastrophe.” Later, the Morisot sisters came into contact with Corot, who shared with them his vision of light and form. At the end of her career, Berthe came under the influence of Renoir. From 1888 onwards, her work underwent a radical change. The strokes became long and sinuous, and she developed a preoccupation with both line and

Le berceau (1872)
Musée d’Orsay, Paris/RMN RG Ojeda

Madame Morisot”, wrote Monet’s biographer, Gustave Geffroy, in 1881. Pissarro talked about her “superb talent”, and Mallarmé qualified her art as “particularly feminine”.

Yet, her status as an artist suffered because she was a woman. Even her close friends manifested a distinct dose of misogyny. In a letter to Fantin-Latour about Berthe and his sister Edma, Manet wrote: “The young Morisot girls are charming. It’s annoying that they are...
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The climate and geography of a medical innovator’s birthplace do not often explain the nature of their innovation, but in the case of Niels Ryberg Finsen (1860–1904), the link seems inescapable. Finsen was born in the Faeroe Islands, the son of Icelandic parents. Sickly for much of his childhood, he was dismissed from his Danish preparatory school for “small ability and total lack of energy”. Subsequently educated in Reykjavik, and then at the University of Copenhagen Medical School, Finsen won the Nobel Prize for physiology or medicine in 1903. Brought up in a land with unremitting winter months, he devoted his working life to studying the therapeutic potential of light. In 1896 Finsen established the first Medical Light Institute, in Copenhagen. His main innovation was the Finsen Light, designed to treat the disfiguring condition of lupus vulgaris. Ultraviolet light from a carbon arc was concentrated through four water-cooled tubes fitted with quartz lenses. At the distal end of each tube a double walled quartz applicator was pressed to the skin, dehaematising it and enhancing the effect of the rays. An hour’s treatment was needed for an area roughly 2.5 cm in diameter, but four patients could be treated simultaneously.

The Finsen Light

In 1901, Finsen donated a light to the Princess of Wales, soon to become Queen Alexandra and herself a Dane. She gave it to the London Hospital. In the era before antituberculous drugs, ultraviolet light was the only effective weapon against tubercle bacilli in the skin. Patients came to the London Hospital for light treatment from all over the world, sometimes working their passage or using their life savings. Tragically, on arrival some proved to have been wrongly diagnosed. But of those with cutaneous tuberculosis, hundreds returned home cured and grateful to Finsen, who chose to freely share his discoveries rather than develop a lucrative private practice.

On hearing that he was to receive a Nobel prize in 1903, Finsen remarked that that was because “they knew 1904 would be too late”. He was right. He died, aged only 44 years in 1904. Much of his adult life had been spent in a wheelchair, at the mercy of a mysterious condition that he had attempted to control by stringent monitoring of his salt and fluid balance. Only at autopsy was this disease diagnosed as constrictive pericarditis. Many today would have little hesitation in applying another diagnosis to Finsen—that of seasonal affective disorder. “Let [the sunlight] break through suddenly on a cloudy day and see the change”, he wrote, “we ourselves feel as if a burden were lifted”. He later observed, “All that I have accomplished in my experiments with light, and all that I have learned about its therapeutic value has come because I needed the light so much myself, I longed for it so.”

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