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BERTHE MORISOT COMES INTO HER OWN

Young Girl with a Vase.

A landmark exhibition puts the painter back where she belongs – at the heart of the Impressionist movement

FEATURES

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In her lifetime, Berthe Morisot (1841–95) was considered by her close friends Renoir, Monet, and Degas to be as central as anyone to the Impressionist movement. She showed at seven of the historic Impressionist shows (only Pissarro showed at all eight) and left behind a relentlessly experimental body of work that develops next to Manet's through the 1870s, blooms in the great garden paintings of the 1880s, and anticipates the next century by taking a turn toward inward-seeking Expressionism in the 1890s. When she died in 1895, Pissarro paid tribute in a letter to his son: 'Still in Paris, because I want to attend the funeral of our old comrade Berthe Morisot, who died after an attack of influenza. You can hardly conceive how surprised we all were and how moved, too, by the disappearance of this distinguished woman, who had such a splendid feminine talent and who brought honour to our Impressionist group which is vanishing – like all things. Poor Madame Morisot, the public hardly knows her!'

The public was given few chances to know her in the century and more after her untimely death. Morisot was the greatest Impressionist painter whose works you had hardly seen, unless you went, 31 years ago, to the show organised by the National Gallery in Washington and Mount Holyoke College Art Museum in 1987. Signs of possible change came with the new millennium and exhibitions in regional France, Japan, Denmark, and Spain. In Paris, an exhibition at the Musée Marmottan Monet in 2012 was the first monographic show of her work in the city

in more than 50 years. French curators credit feminist scholars in North America with helping to draw attention to Morisot over the decades, but she has hardly been prominent in North America, either. In her lifetime, Morisot paid attention to sales and shows; she was strategic about what subjects she painted; the most important collectors of the day bought her works. But she was also fairly well-off and did not need to sell in the way that Renoir and Monet had to. Dealers were slower to press a woman for shows or sales, and she died just as Impressionist works began to be more widely

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