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Looking Through Windows, Learning Compassion

In “Art is How we Justify Our Existence,” David Zwirner, a distinguished art dealer, explains how despite technology’s importance, only human made art can represent “the wisdom of the world.” Art appeals to our intellectual curiosity and makes us wonder about the experiences of others. In fact, it was Zwirner’s own mother, who said: “Art is how we justify our existence.” In other words, because of its power to communicate, art will always be embedded in our culture. Zwirner goes on to explain a pattern that he has seen throughout history: violent and extreme groups, from the ancient Neanderthals to the Nazis and Soviet Union, lacked education and compassion about other cultures—consequently, they lacked art. Ultimately, art must serve the purpose of opening our minds and making us curious about other people’s experiences. This is demonstrated in the art of French impressionist Berthe Morisot: *Julie Manet et son Lévrier Laerte* (1893), *Woman at her Toilette* (1875) and *Le Berceau* (1890). Morisot cultivates compassion by painting women in an expressive, humanizing way, unlike the blank women painted by other artists. Her subjects’ emotions and flaws allow the viewer to see themselves in these paintings. Just as Zwirner sees art as the vehicle of compassion, Morisot used her art to provide a window into the female experience—to cultivate understanding and compassion from those who are ignorant.

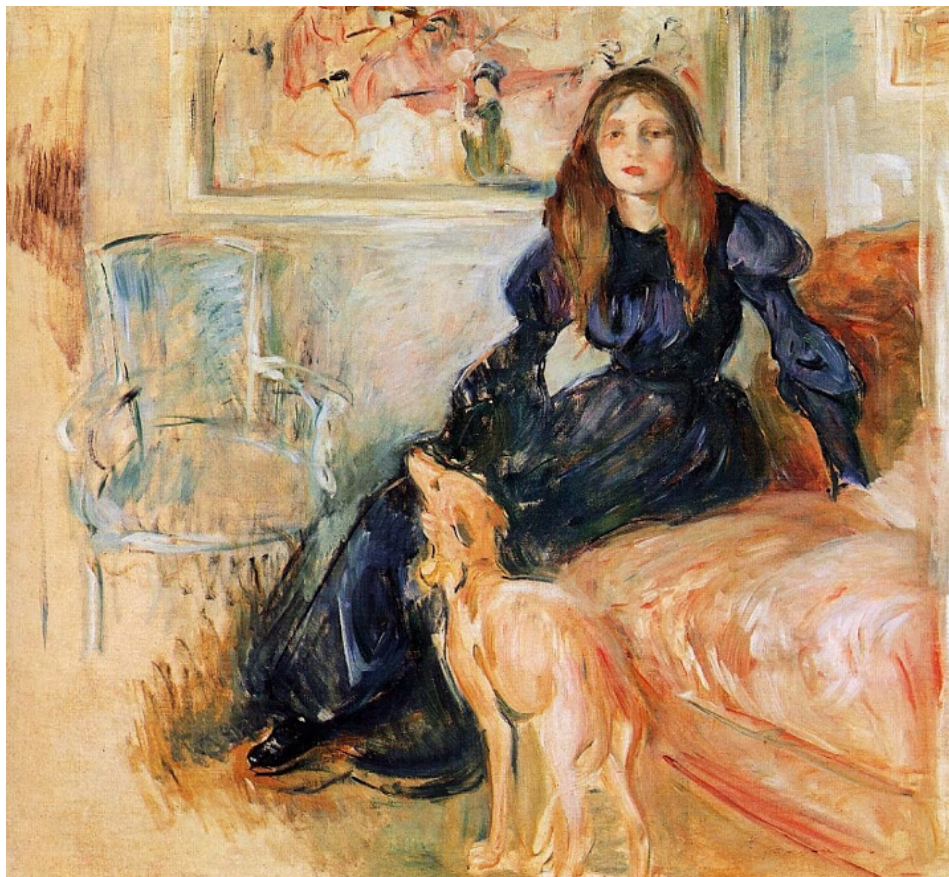


Fig.1. Morisot *Julie Manet et son Lévrier Laerte*. 1893. World History Encyclopedia, <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/15512/julie-manet-and-her-greyhound-laerte-by-morisot/>

In *Julie Manet et son Lévrier Laerte* (*Julie Manet and her Greyhound Laerte*) (see fig. 1) Morisot, portrays a girl sitting on a sofa petting her dog. The background is light and faint and encourages the viewer to look at the girl in her highly contrasting dark blue dress. Most of the shapes in this painting are rounded, which gives the painting a soft, comfy domestic feel. That feeling is further accentuated by the warm orange color palate. But by far, the most interesting thing about this painting, and what connects it to Zwirners thesis, are the relationships. The girl, Julie Manet pets her greyhound and he leans into her hand. Julie's eyes on the other hand, gaze directly at Berthe then, and now you. In the painting she looks relaxed and mildly amused, the sort of look you would share with a friend. This connection you can still feel whenever you look at this painting, you can almost imagine yourself being friends with this woman. This friendly

goodwill you feel toward her can be extended then to all women, and suddenly the art has encouraged a change within you. This painting proves that art can be used to create compassion for people different from yourself.



Fig.2. Morisot *Woman at her toilette*. 1875. World History Encyclopedia,

<https://www.worldhistory.org/image/15512/julie-manet-and-her-greyhound-laerte-by-morisot/>

Similarly to the painting of Julie Manet, this painting demands compassion towards women. But instead of doing this by invoking friendship, it does this by underlining the struggles of conforming to standards of beauty. Morisot uses color, patterns and lines to hint at the grating degradation of constantly maintaining a public appearance that doesn't represent your inner self. In this painting we see a woman dressed up in a ball gown, doing her hair in front of a mirror. The gray colors of the entire painting, along with the choppy pattern of brush strokes that make up the wall, give the painting a feeling of discomfort. The line of the mirror, her arm and her back all seem slumped and resigned. The emotions communicated tell a story. She is resigned to

the fact that she will have to go to some fancy social event in an uncomfortable dress, surrounded by ruffles and flowers but she isn't happy. The collar at her neck is a shackle of black amid the torrent of grays and pinks. This illustrates how her life will always be controlled by another, first her father and later her husband. No matter how beautiful of a life you live, it doesn't matter if it's not yours by choice. Overall, the techniques used in this painting create negative emotions that will confuse the viewer because they are juxtaposed with the pretty subject of the girl in the dress. This makes the viewer think more critically about women's experiences and feelings, inviting empathy and compassion.



Fig.3. Morisot *Le Berceau*. 1872. World History Encyclopedia

<https://www.worldhistory.org/image/15504/the-cradle-by-morisot/>

In this painting by Morisot, *Le Berceau* (the cradle) we see a woman watching her baby sleep in a cradle. Similarly to the last painting, the colors tend towards neutral grays. But unlike the last painting this one communicates a more peaceful feeling. This feeling is created by the light half moon shape of the cradle, which compositionally is balanced out by the pale blue curtain behind the mother. Additionally the folds of the cradle canopy create lines that flow in harmony, unlike the contradicting strokes of *Woman at her Toilette*. These colors and composition make you feel the peace that a tired mother experiences when her child has finally fallen asleep. In this moment, the mother can remember that it is all worth it, because she loves this kid's adorable little face. Perhaps someone looking at this painting will be lulled by the peaceful mood into thinking more about the important role that mothers play in our society. They might begin to see how rewarding yet draining it can be. This might encourage the viewer to be more grateful and conscientious of the mothers in their life.

Morisot's loose expressionistic style allows for a very raw communication of an experience, emotions and all. Through her paintings we are able to see what she saw and feel what she felt. Though we know in theory that society was more patriarchal during her time, her paintings do a more effective job of educating us about the struggles of women. This is because her art conveys emotions in addition to situations, and we can apply these emotions to situations in our real life which helps us empathize and understand at a deeper level. This is exactly what the purpose of art is, to express the situation and emotions of someone else. Thereby delivering compassion directly into our hearts; overwhelming us with grief, passion or joy, in such a way that we want to do it again and again.

Works Cited

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