

# ***Compromise and Challenge: Morisot's Mother-Child Paintings in 19th-Century Paris***

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**Abstract:** For Paris, the 19th century is unique and precious. The changing regimes, the establishment of capitalism, and the progression of industrialization reshaped the city's landscape and society. As these changes led people into modern society, new challenges appeared accordingly, and the most significant one was the decline in birth rates. New lifestyles and issues altered people's thinking and focal points. Consequently, transformations in artistic expression emerged. In the vibrant tapestry of 19th-century French art, the new mother-child paintings, born to solve population problems of the industrialization process, witnessed the career paths of female artists and their feminine movements. Female artists like Berthe Morisot used this theme to gain professional recognition in the patriarchal society and to reflect and redefine their complex social roles as women in the transforming society, subtly challenging the conventional gender norms. This paper delves into how societal transformations influenced Berthe Morisot and the theme of her paintings, examining her works as a lens to explore her accomplishments.

**Keywords:** 19th Century, Paris, Art History, Impressionist, Female

## **1. Introduction**

Derived from traditional religious Madonna themes, the mother-child paintings in the 19th century were commonly used to display the warm relationships and bonds within families, promoting traditional female morals of motherhood and the beauty of family life to promote the birth rate. Morisot's mother-child paintings primarily featured her own family members as models, including her mother, sister, nephew, husband, and daughter. She depicted her daily scenes of parents and children, showing complex intimate interactions among family members. Research on Morisot's paintings often focuses on the solid familial affection portrayed, yet overlooks other aspects of thought and emotion the artist intended to express. Hence, this article aims to more comprehensively investigate the creative impulses and objectives behind the female artist's works in this genre, exploring broader expressions of the artist. This paper's exploration of Morisot's mother-child painting begins by examining Paris's socioeconomic and cultural transformations during this period on people's lives and art. It then discusses the challenges women and female artists faced in Paris at the time and the main reason mother-child or family themes were widely used, particularly by women artists. It later analyzes five specific works by Morisot, discussing the artist's creative motivations and purposes. The paper's significance lies in enhancing the understanding of the interplay between mother-child paintings, the artist, and the industrialized modern Parisian cityscape, illuminating

Morisot's motivations and her contributions to progressive thought, especially in the feminist movement. It emphasizes the contributions of female artists like Morisot in shaping societal and cultural perceptions.

## **2. Female Artists in 19th-Century Paris: Contradiction Between Being a Good Woman and a Great Artist**

As Marx puts it, the economic base determines superstructure. The creation of mother-child paintings by artists like Morisot originated from socioeconomic changes in France. With the progression of the Industrial Revolution in France in the mid-19th century, the country's socioeconomic conditions underwent significant changes. Paris, as the capital and largest city, experienced rapid economic development, attracting a large population influx. At this time, the city's infrastructure, built in the medieval era, increasingly struggled with its growing population, leading to extreme overcrowding and diseases. Simultaneously, the city's economic development also demanded higher standards for its various facilities. Against this backdrop, Paris, under the leadership of Baron Haussmann, underwent one of the most remarkable transformations in modern history. In the latter half of the 19th century, Paris gradually established wide boulevards, modern sanitation and drainage systems, and public water supply, alongside numerous extensive public facilities such as the Paris Opera and the Luxembourg Gardens, while also promoting the uniform neoclassical architectural style, like the famous Haussmann buildings. These drastic societal changes had a profound impact on the lives of Parisians. As Walter Benjamin claimed, Haussmann transformed the familiar environment into something new and strange that “Parisians... no longer felt at home in it [1].” People actively explored this unfamiliar and complex new environment, increasingly interacting with public spaces. Paris thus became “conspicuously for walking [1].” Stepping out of their homes, walking through the city, and visually representing their perception of the ongoing modernity became artists’ way of redefining the new relationship between people and the city, fostering the Impressionist movement. As the famous Impressionist painter Degas's motto went: “Bulare, postea laborare,” appreciating the city from an observer's perspective and interacting with modern society was a typical practice of 19th-century French Artists.

Despite the transformation of Paris, leading more people into modern life and more artists to create art in new ways, a segment of the population was continually excluded by society, maintaining their ancient roles that spanned thousands of years. In the mid-19th century, women in France, as in other places during the same period, were still primarily defined by their maternal capabilities. Male rulers’ expectations of French women remained at the level of homemaking and babysitting. Although the development of industrialization led to a growing mutual attraction between society and women, with more women appearing on the streets, women participating in public places was still considered inappropriate behavior. Women of the middle and upper classes could not go out alone, or they might be regarded as profligate. What they could do was sit on balconies, which became popular after the reconstruction of Paris, and watch the street scenes. Besides, “to the extent that education was advocated at all for women, it was justified, by liberals and conservatives alike, only as a tool that could better enable women to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers [2].”

Acquiring a social status through work participation was even more difficult for women. Female artists, led by Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt, were not welcomed by society and male colleagues though they were economically independent due to relatively affluent families and able to paint without relying on sales. Female artists were severely restricted in receiving art education, especially in using nudes and models [3]; male artists could not accept female artists achieving the same accomplishments; “The perception of women as the gentler sex was linked to that of their being physiologically incapable of artistic genius [4];” and 19th-century scientific opinion even held that “women were physiologically less capable of rational and creative thought than men were [2].”

meaning female artists could only excel and be suitable for imitating male artists. In addition to facing prejudice within the industry, female artists had to constantly maintain their elegance as women of the middle and upper classes [5], yet participation in social work itself was already in contradiction with traditional female virtues. Morisot's second teacher, Guichard, once warned her that "becoming an artist might be a catastrophe for her daughter." Cassatt's father even claimed if she "insisted on an artistic career, I would almost rather see you dead [6]." The obstacles female artists faced stemmed from their opposition to the singular social identity as birth machines in seeking the multifaceted nature of modern society people. As pointed out by Silcock in *Genius and Gender*, "The aspiring female artist was torn between being a good woman or a great artist – the two being deemed mutually exclusive [4]."

### 3. Mother-Child Paintings: A Way to Balance the Identity as a Woman and a Painter

Female artists had to find ways to balance their identities as women and as painters. Berthe Morisot, the artist discussed in this article, eventually chose to marry Eugene, the brother of her mentor and fellow artist Édouard Manet, and they had children. Another subject of this article is mother-child paintings, or more broadly, family paintings, becoming a commonly chosen theme for female artists. Through mother-child paintings, female artists created works that catered to mainstream societal ideologies and gained recognition from their male counterparts.

Mother and child paintings became a popular theme in France due to their contemporary relevance. With the political equality brought about by the French Revolution and the continued development of industrialization, the quality of life for the general populace rapidly improved. The middle class, gaining the ability to transcend social classes, inevitably chose quality of life over raising offspring, leading to a decline in birth rates. Faced with this social issue, emerging feminist ideas, stemming from the same root as the population problem, were taken seriously. The new woman's desire for independence and education was seen as a threat to the family structure and publicly blamed for the decline in birth rates [2]. In response to the significant decline in birth rates, 19th-century French society emphasized moral education on female virtues. The ruling class widely spread traditional marriage and values, linking female virtue to patriotism and reinforcing the conventional social identity of women as the pivot of middle-class family life [2]. Originating from the Renaissance portrayal of the Madonna and the Child, mother-child paintings illustrating the joys and rewards of family life thus successfully merged with the era's demands, becoming a form of expression that promoted traditional maternity on both aesthetic and political levels. Against this backdrop, female artists like Cassatt and Morisot seized the opportunity to be accepted by mainstream values, using their gender as their advantage to depict motherhood and familial love, thereby gaining widespread social and industry recognition.

Unlike Cassatt who did not marry, Morisot, a daughter, sister, aunt, and mother in her family, primarily used her family members as models, creating various paintings depicting parent-child relationships. While satisfying the societal demand for the promotion of familial love, she cleverly challenged traditional female virtues in these works, expressing her own thoughts on women's identity. Morisot's exploration of this theme began with her 1869 work *The Mother and Sister of the Artist* (see Figure 1) [7]. In this painting, Berthe's sister Edma is seated on a sofa, looking distractedly towards their mother, who is absorbed in reading a book. Unlike conventional mother-child paintings, such as portraits of the Madonna holding Jesus, the mother and child in this painting are physically distant. They are engaged in different activities — one seemingly lost in thought, while the other is reading — showcasing a socially-expected relaxed everyday family moment.

Before using her daughter Julie as her model, Berthe Morisot created works featuring her sister Edma and her nieces. In her portrait of Edma with Edma's daughter Jeanne in 1872 (see Figure 2), Edma is seated on a sofa, gazing distractedly at her little daughter, who stares straight ahead, creating

a casual atmosphere. Berthe's depictions of Edma and Jeanne continued to present a relaxed and beautiful image of family life. Another notable portrait of Edma is *Portrait of Edma Pontillon 1871* (see Figure 3). According to 19th-century female morality, women were not supposed to display themselves in public when visibly pregnant [8]. However, in this portrait, Morisot subtly captured her pregnant sister through subtle adjustments to the darker areas, intricately patterned curtains, and realistic sofas to draw the viewer's attention. Morisot's portrait allows us to appreciate the art readily and, upon closer observation, notice the implicit details, namely the nature of the painting as a "mother-child." In this way, she cleverly challenged traditional female morality.



Figure 1: The Mother and Sister of the Artist [9].

Figure 2: Artist's Sister Edma with her Daughter Jeanne [10].

Figure 3: Portrait of Edma Pontillon [11].

Morisot also integrated her subjectivity and contradictory social identities into mother-child paintings. In her 1885 creation *Self-portrait with Julie* (see Figure 4), Morisot used dry and scratchy brushstrokes to outline the forms of herself and her daughter quickly. Morisot's elegant posture and the thick brushstrokes depicting her body convey surface confidence, but her figure is not fully formed by color, with unpainted parts becoming blanks in her body. Her patchy and disordered portrait declares an internal struggle. Morisot's face is the most complete part of the painting, with bright white spots in her eyes enhancing her gaze towards the viewer. Yet, she also blurs the edges of her eyes, making them asymmetrical and disconnected, implying doubt within the firmness of her gaze. Her daughter Julie's face is a simple contour, irregularly filled with white and brown colors, and Julie's body and clothes are also outlined with quick brushstrokes. Despite the hasty portrayal of Julie, her visual perspective in the composition forces people's gaze towards Morisot, reminding people that the protagonist of this mother-child painting is the mother and the female artist Morisot. In this mother-child painting, Morisot displays her contradictory identity and her contemplation. As Kessler says in *Unmasking Manet's Morisot*, "By choosing to marry and have a child, Morisot was finally able to reconcile her art with certain cultural imperatives [12]."

Besides depicting moments with her daughter, Morisot painted scenes of her husband and their daughter outdoors. In her painting *Eugene Manet and His Daughter at Bougival* (see Figure 5) created in 1881, Morisot used long and loosely applied brushstrokes to depict the beautiful family scene of her daughter playing a board game on her husband Eugene's lap. While mother-child paintings are quite common in Western traditional art, father-child, especially father and daughter, are much less frequent themes [2]. In this painting, Morisot's husband perfectly replaces the mother figure commonly seen in mother-child paintings. He casually leans against the chair with his hands in his pockets, intently watching his daughter focus on the toy on his lap. The precise outlines of his eye, with the white in it, make his gaze brighter and tender. By portraying the gentle side of a father caring



for his daughter, Morisot's family painting blurs the gender division of social identity set by patriarchal society, giving a new meaning to the relationships among family members in modern society, thereby challenging societal restrictions on women.



Figure 4: Self-portrait with Julie by Morisot [13].



Figure 5: Eugene Manet and His Daughter at Bougival [14].

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper explores the mother-child paintings of Berthe Morisot, a 19th-century Parisian female artist, uncovering deeper meanings in her work by contextualizing it within its historical period. The discussion of this paper is based on the background of the urbanization of Paris during industrialization and its impact on Parisian life and art. The paper discusses the challenges faced by women, especially female artists, outlining how upper-class women were still restricted by outdated notions in thoughts and actions during times of change. Despite urbanization encouraging women to leave their homes, they were expected to adhere to traditional morals. The paper further connects these issues to the rise of mother-child paintings, showing how mainstream thought promoting female morality and domestic bliss aimed to counter new women's movements and increase birth rates. It discusses Morisot's five mother-child paintings depicting different family members in various settings to illustrate her artistic intent. The analysis of Morisot's artistic techniques reveals the cultural and social significance of her work in the context of 19th-century Parisian Impressionism, uncovering her challenges to gender roles and reflection on her social identity as a female artist. Despite challenging circumstances, Morisot found a unique path for female artists, subtly challenging traditional virtues within the limits of mainstream values. The paper acknowledges its limitations in analyzing Morisot's influence on later female artists and the lack of comparative studies. Future research could offer a broader comparison, such as contrasting Morisot's mother-child paintings with those of Mary Cassatt, who also extensively explored the mother-child theme. Further studies could examine Morisot's impact on future female artists and her place in art history, delving into her contributions to the feminine movement. In summary, Morisot's works continue to inspire subsequent generations of female artists, and her efforts towards gender equality are noteworthy and commendable.

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