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A Glimpse of Domesticity in Berthe Morisot’s *In the Dining Room*

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Berthe Morisot’s *In the Dining Room* is an 1886 impressionist painting. This oil on canvas piece is 24 1/8 x 19 11/16 in. and features a woman as its central figure.¹ Morisot paints a female figure in a dining room against a wall composed of blue, pink, brown, purple and gray brushstrokes.² She is dressed in an ankle-length black dress with grey sleeves. A white apron is tied around her waist, signifying her role in an interior, domestic sphere. Her collar is buttoned to her chin and her hair is up, in a bun. The window to her right is formed of white, green, yellow and gray strokes and shows a red house in the distance. Looking out at the viewer, the figure appears hazy and washed out due to Morisot’s loose, foggy brushwork. Her hands appear occupied with something, though the figure’s blurred style leaves her activity undistinguishable. She likely holds a kitchen object, such as a cup or bowl, as the open china cabinet indicates. On the figure’s right, a table sits with a still life of fruit. Further down the canvas, a small, white dog stands at the woman’s feet. This dog further emphasizes the domesticity of this interior space. Around the figure’s base, the floor is painted with brushstrokes of brown and blue. More blended than the rest of the composition, the floor seems fluid and reflective with vivid white, yellow and light blue coloring contrasted with a dark valued surface.

The space to the left of this figure is more muddled, due to scattered brushwork. Nonetheless, this half of the canvas is incredibly complex. A china cabinet stands taller than the woman in the middle plane of space. Morisot paints the glass of the doors with diluted, light brushstrokes. Glints of green and white reflect off the door to imply a sense of glass and transparency. The cabinet appears full of glass and china objects. However, the blurred strokes


² See Figure 1
and muddled colors lose the clarity of the specific items.\(^3\) To the figure’s left, a light-valued sphere is shown. It looks as if it is hanging from the back wall, but is standing on a post in the background. The brushwork becomes so ambiguous and dark in this corner, that most specificity is lost within the objects. Morisot uses painterly lines to create a vibrate texture and sense of urgency and movement. For instance, a group of yellow, black, gray and red brushstrokes evokes a feeling of floral, lush plants. Besides flowers, Morisot hints to other domestic objects such as the picture shown hanging in the top left corner of the canvas. Nonetheless, her blurred style creates a hazy film over the subject, and makes interpretation of these objects vague and indistinguishable.

It is interesting to note that the closer one views this canvas, the looser the work becomes. At a distance, the items to the figure’s left become clearer and more distinct. Specifically, the light sphere to the figure’s left and the dishes and objects within the china cabinet become understandable and make sense in their designated spaces.

Part 2

Loose paint strokes, vivid colors, and erratic movement capture the viewer in Berthe Morisot’s 1886 painting, *In the Dining Room*. Morisot was an influential and significant nineteenth century impressionist painter. Born in January in Bourges, Morisot lived in France for most of her early life and moved to live permanently in Paris around 1852.\(^4\) In 1857, she began formally studying art; she continued to travel around France intermittently throughout her life.\(^5\) Morisot first showcased her work in the Paris Salon in 1864, and later presented numerous works

\(^3\) Refer to Figure 2
in all but the fourth impressionist group exhibitions. She is most well known for her impressionist paintings.

Like her colleagues’ work, sketchy, loose brush strokes were often criticized as being overwhelming and even frightening. Art critic Arthur Baignères scoffed that the work of impressionists looked unfinished and had “the presence of monstrous beings…” Paintings like Morisot’s In the Dining Room were innovative and challenging in the late 19th century, and this piece remains complicated and fascinating to absorb. From the time of its creation in 1886, it was exhibited at the Eighth Impressionist Exhibition, and since 1965 has been shown at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., with tours to traveling showings.

Nineteenth century Paris was a time of transformation and change. Streets and cities were morphing from medieval to contemporary, and industrialization was creating a time of urbanization and modernity. While male artists began to venture to the streets, cafes, brothels, and gardens, female artists were contained in interior, domestic spaces. Thus, Morisot’s inspiration to create works such as In the Dining Room likely comes from the availability women had regarding models and settings. Using family members as models was a commonality and the insides of homes were a primary subject for women painters such as Cassatt and Modersohn-Becker.

When Morisot exhibited In the Dining Room in 1886, critics remarked about the sketchiness of her style. At this final impressionist exhibition, critic Jules Castagnary


commented, “Bethe Morisot has wit to the tips of her fingers, especially at her fingertips. What fine artistic feeling!”\(^{10}\) It was also noted that Morisot’s paintings are not overly concerned with details, but with expressing ideas through the implementation of the work. Before completing In the Dining Room, Morisot’s works were less sketchy and more formalized. For instance, Morisot’s better-known work The Mother and Sister of the Artist from 1869-70 hints to her emerging, unclear style in the dresses, hands of the figures, and furniture of the room.\(^ {11}\) One can see the evolution of Morisot’s style through later works like Summer (Young Woman by a Window)\(^ {12}\) and The Wet Nurse Angele Feeding Julie Manet\(^ {13}, {14}\) Especially in the latter, the environment is jumbled with scattered paint strokes in a middle-tone valued color scheme. The generalized brushwork seen here is highly reminiscent of the work Morisot puts into the window, china cabinet, and apron in In the Dining Room.

Berthe Morisot holds onto a traditional, domestic scene in this work, yet plays with her style to give a sense of momentary and fleetingness. The woman shown does not appear posed, but relaxed in her comfortable environment. Her dining room seems “lived-in” and warm as there is a dog in the room and the doors to the china cabinet are open. The figure’s bright face looks welcoming; she wears a slight grin, and she acknowledges the viewer as a guest entering the space. Likewise, the house in the distance shows the viewer that this is a neighborhood scene, creating a friendly atmosphere. While the paint on the canvas is acknowledged through its brushy style and haziness, the subject matter is accepted and customary in the context of a nineteenth century, woman’s painting.

\(^{10}\) Kathleen Adler and Tamar Garb, Berthe Morisot (New York: Cornell, 1987), 57.
\(^{11}\) Kathleen Adler and Tamar Garb, Berthe Morisot, 38.
\(^{12}\) Refer to Figure 3.
\(^{13}\) Refer to Figure 4.
\(^{14}\) Kathleen Adler and Tamar Garb, Berthe Morisot, 66-71.
The material paint on the surface of the canvas fits into the impressionistic movement yet begins to break from Morisot’s personal style conventions. As stated in *Berthe Morisot*, “Women had long specialized in the portrayal of everyday life, particularly domestic events.”\(^{15}\) While Morisot worked within the Impressionist technique, free of classical and photographic representations of figures, her approach possess a unique character. *In the Dining Room*, especially, has spontaneity of motion, yet feels uniform and flat. The repetition of brushstrokes and the middle-toned color palette flattens the surface out, and the woman figure becomes one with the background. Specifically, in the spaces around her apron against the background, the viewer cannot easily perceive a certain amount of depth.\(^{16}\)

Berthe Morisot’s *In the Dining Room* holds onto a traditional, Impressionistic style, while playing with line, movement, and uniformity of color. The artist creates a rhythm of diagonals as she moves across the canvas. This painting approaches the viewer and invites them to glimpse into a nineteenth century interior space, creating an intensely personal and fascinating experience. After viewing this piece, one feels curious about the life of the figure shown. As with any great work, Morisot pulls the viewer in and keeps them thinking through her lively and interactive use of media, subject matter, and technique. *In the Dining Room* is a work about domesticity, and compels one to consider the emotions and connotations associated with this theme.

\(^{15}\) Kathleen Adler and Tamar Garb, *Berthe Morisot*, 85.

\(^{16}\) Refer to Figure 1.
Bibliography


http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/art-object-page.46660.html.