

Breaking Convention

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October 4th, 2006

**Art History 366
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Breaking convention is something we often associate with those people who challenge the system, no longer wanting to conform to the standards and traditions of the day. The avant-garde French artists of the 19th century which began the modernist movement certainly were such a group of people. Not only were they breaking away from the conventions of traditional art trainings of the French Art Academies but their paintings also contained, albeit often in very subtle undertones, a more radical, revolutionary social element. During this time in order to exhibit one's paintings one's works were subjected to a very non-democratic judging process of the Art Academies in order to have them displayed at the annual Salon in Paris. For us today, it is hard to understand how such beautiful and often complex works painted by a group of such renowned artists like Courbet, Manet, Cezanne, Degas, Monet and Renoir were not widely accepted at that time. Imagine then if it was so difficult for the male artists during this period to be accepted how difficult it must have been for the female artists during the 19th century. Not only were they challenged by the artistic establishment for being women but how could they possibly break convention from the traditional art of the day. This short paper will look at two such female artists during the avant-garde movement comparing both the artistic elements and subject of a painting from each of them.

The first painting we will look at is a painting by the Dutch female artist, Thérèse Schwartze. In her painting, *Mother and Her Children at Church*, (see Figure 1) painted in 1886 we see a very traditional setting of a mother looking after her children either in the hallway or at the back of a church. This a young woman with her oldest child, a boy standing at her side, probably 8 to

10 years old, her daughter, probably 5 to 6 years of age, resting on her right side while sitting on a church bench and finally a baby that she cradles in her left arm. We know this is a young Dutch family for several reasons. They are of Dutch decent due to their fair skin complexion, blond hair and blue eyes. They are also wearing traditional Dutch clothing. The mother and daughter are wearing a traditional Dutch female hat and we can see the daughter's wooden shoes or "klompen" in Dutch. The scene is set in a church. As was stated earlier, it appears we are either at the back of the church or perhaps in the hallway. The floor looks to be made of slate squares and the walls of granite stone blocks which would have been typical of church construction. The wood bench that the daughter and mother are sitting on has arching legs giving it a church like feeling and there appears to be a church bulletin hanging on the wall just above the daughter's right shoulder.



Figure 1
Thérèse Schwartze
Mother and Her Children at Church, 1886
Oil on canvas, 5' x 7',
Musée des Beaux Arts, Montréal

The painting is painted with oil paint using warm earthy colours. All the colours flow nicely from one to another as if they are just another tone from the same palette. The one exception perhaps, the shawl, is an earthy red that along with its apparent material thickness gives it a warm feeling that works with the warm blues, browns and greys that are prominent throughout the painting. Even the whites in the painting are inviting and warm versus cold, bold and overpowering. Closer examination of the painting reveals that it was painted in a traditional fashion

most likely beginning with a drawing, a grey under-painting and then layers of translucent glazing and in some cases more opaque colours. This is particularly evident in the grey tones of the skin. The brush strokes for the most part are even and non apparent, especially in the faces and the hands. They are perfect and warm. The detail at which everything has been rendered gives it a photographic quality. The artist is not revealed to the viewer at all with perhaps the exception to the more painterly fashion that the block wall and the shawl have been painted.

The light is coming from the upper left of the painting as if coming from the heavens and spotlights ever so subtly the four members of the family which are in close proximity of each other in the center of the painting. The composition is very symmetric and harmonious with a child on each side at almost equal heights of each other and with the mother as the central figure. This is an intimate setting of a traditional family and although we are obviously close to these almost life size figures a space has been created between us and them by the floor space that has been painted before us. There is also an obvious depth to the painting as it recesses into the shadows in behind the son. We are practically at the same level with the family and the perspective is virtually perfect. What is important to note are some of the conventions and perhaps some of the messages that we may get from this painting. The mothers gaze is away from the viewer in a very non confrontational manner. She tenderly holds her daughter's hand and cradles the baby that suggests her traditional role as the protector, the person who nurtures and rears the children of the family. The very stereotypical female role as the maternal figure has been represented here. The mother-child bond is clear, the daughter and infant are still very much dependant on her which is evident by the composition and they way they are sleeping in her arms. Although her gaze and perhaps the symbolism of the daughter and baby sleeping represent her tiredness of her role, she accepts her place in life and puts on a brave face of

strength. Her first born, importantly a son, is strong and standing upright to her side reading what looks to be a bible. He will be a fine upstanding citizen one day and is already a testament to proper upbringing. His independence is indicated by his standing posture and his separation from the rest of the family as represented by the mother's shawl that separates her and the rest of the family from him. As if to say, he will be ok on his own but the others still need the mother's attention and love. This painting by Thérèse Schwartze is all about tradition, the conventions of the day, what was seen as a socially acceptable role for woman and also traditional artistic elements.

In comparison, let's now look at the painting, *On the Balcony*, (see Figure 2) by the female French artist, Berthe Morisot, painted in 1872. This painting, while arguably similar in conventional subject matter, differs from Schwartze's *Mother and Her Children at Church* in



Figure 2
Berthe Morisot
On the Balcony, 1872
Oil on canvas, 20" x 24",
Private Collection

some very important ways. This is again a traditional mother-child setting. The daughter stands near her mother; both of them are leaning on a wrought-iron railing, sharing a view of the Paris skyline. They have been out for a leisurely stroll and have stopped for a moment to take in the sights. This is a personal, intimate scene between a mother and daughter. The mother is dressed in a very socially acceptable *Parisienne* manner. Both dresses are delicate and feminine. Her gaze appears to be attentive, like it should be and at the same time she is slightly turned

away to preserve her modesty. The two figures are central in the painting and similarly from before, we are close but not too close to them. The perspective is strong and there is a feeling of depth from the hazy grey-blue tones that have been used to paint the background. Like the Schwartze's painting, the medium is oil and the use of soft blues, browns and grays are predominant throughout.

At this point, the painting begins to display its differences. This painting is much smaller than the other painting, perhaps in an attempt to conceal some of the other messages. The central figures are therefore not life-size. The colours, while similar have more light to them and there is a much more delicate feeling to the painting as a whole. At this period in time it would have been a compliment to say Morisot was painting like the other traditional male artists but she was obviously being influenced by her contemporary, avant-garde circle of artists. The use of light and painterly brush strokes that are broad, free and loose places her amongst the impressionist group of artists. There is also something non-conventional about the composition and the subtle messages one may get when thinking about the social changes that were occurring in France during this period. Women outside of the traditional setting were considered a threat to Parisian way of life. The mother is not holding her daughters hand and there is sense that she is giving her some guarded freedom and independence. The scene of the Paris skyline includes the Pantheon which we learned in class represents a symbol of the old and the new, imperialism versus the republic, the struggle between the ruling class and the working class. What is the mother really thinking? Will her daughter be able to break away from the conventions that were forced on her when she was growing up? The mother is dressed in black; the daughter is dressed in white. I get a sense of sadness and perhaps hope at the same time. Her daughter is standing

behind the wrought-iron railing as if she is prison, yet because of women like her mother, there is a chance for her in this male dominated world. What will be her future?

Although not yet a mother herself at the time of this painting, Morisot and other female avant-garde artists like Mary Cassatt were very much interested in the realities of the mother-child relationship. It was important to them, as it was their contemporary male counterparts to re-examine the Realism of their time. They were fascinated not only with the bonding relationship that had been painted over and over again throughout art history but in particular they were interested in how that mother-child relationship develops over time and the pursuing separation.

Few stereotypes have been as persistent as the image of a young woman holding a baby, of the physical bond between mother and infant, which we understand to mean “maternity”. The image is just that – an image. All children grow up and their relationship to their mothers do not remain dependant. The child has to change, has to leave the mother, even as the mother still nurtures the child and steers it into childhood. No one, though, had ever tried to represent those maternal experiences.¹

As we can see in the painting we are examining here, Morisot is trying to represent this changing relationship between the mother and daughter. Versus showing the mother and daughter as “one” as we saw in Schwartze’s painting, she has shown the daughter as both with the mother and as a separate identity. As her daughter grows, this awareness of separation will continue and is necessary for her to gain her independence. This beautiful scene tenderly demonstrates the mothers enduring love and her acceptance that change and independence are a reality. Morisot is painting the following:

In the eyes of this mother, the relationship is both intimate and respectful, one in which mother and daughter respond to each other but learn from their differences, one in which a daughter grows up. Paradoxically, perhaps, these paintings brought mother and daughter still closer together. For as Morisot relinquished the joys of physical union with her child, she discovered new and more durable ones: the pleasures of intellectual communion and shared values.²

¹ *Berthe Morisot*, Anne Higonnet, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995, Page 159

As was mentioned at the beginning of this paper, it was hard enough to be a female artist at this time, but it was quite another thing to break from convention not only artistically but in the way the subject was presented. Both paintings analyzed were painted by female artists living and working during the same period; one from Holland, the other from France. Similar conventional mother-child subject matter was used along with similar composition and colours. While Schwartz's painting is steeped in tradition however, Morisot breaks from this tradition, albeit ever so subtle in message, and shows us something different through the use of her impressionistic style. In the more traditional painting we saw a very stereotypical bond between a mother and her young family whereas in Morisot's painting the scene is equally as beautiful and intimate yet it breaks from tradition and shows a very realistic depiction of that changing mother-child relationship as the daughter develops self-awareness and independence from her mother. In *Mother and Her children at Church* there is a two-way relationship between us and the family we are viewing with very little feeling that there is even an artist involved. In *On the Balcony*, on the other hand, we are drawn into this intimate setting with the mother and daughter by the artist. The artist, the viewer and the subject are "all" involved. Morisot wants us to know this is a painting. She wants to engage in a discussion with us. She wants us to see this changing relationship. Like many other artist of her time, Morisot challenged the public with her paintings by breaking from convention.

² *Berthe Morisot*, Anne Higonnet, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995, Page 160