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Minor Intimacies and the Art of Berthe Morisot: Impressionism, Female Friendship and Spectatorship

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the topic of minor intimacies or attachments in the work of Berthe Morisot (1841–95). By analysing three interconnected areas in Morisot, namely the absorbed self, female friendship and the material history of painting, and by comparing the works studied with other well-known Impressionist paintings by Manet and Renoir, and how each area impacts upon spectatorship, this article shows the importance of intimacy as a critical tool with which to gain a more complete understanding of modern life and art in late nineteenth-century France.

KEYWORDS

Impressionism; intimacy; friendship; spectatorship; modernity; relationships; Morisot

'Intimate' is a term that is frequently used by critics to describe the art of the Impressionists and painting the 'intimate moment' is an essential part of the modernity of Impressionist art. But what is intimacy, as conceived by the Impressionists? The critical interpretation of intimacy in Impressionism has largely focused on the depiction of scenes from private life.[1] There is an emphasis on the spectator's observation of a private scene, of a glimpse into someone else's life, of their inclusion in this intimate moment. Yet the term merits greater analysis because not every private moment that we see in Impressionism is actually an intimate one. Intimacy is about sharing. Intimacy differs from privacy in that it is meant to be shared whether with one person or with a larger audience. In this way, what is essentially private and internal (in the sphere of the self) becomes public and external (the sphere of others) through intimacy (Moran and Malevez 2021, 3). Intimacy is therefore a vehicle between these seemingly opposing but interconnected realms and herein lies its modernity. This article seeks to untangle some of presumptions and misconceptions about intimacy and Impressionism by focusing on the work of Berthe Morisot, a central figure in Impressionism.[2]

Revisiting Morisot from the perspective of intimacy allows an interrogation of ideas and concepts central to our understanding of modernity: the dichotomies and divisions between public and private, self and other, male and female, artist and subject, spectator and work of art. By focusing on close female heterosexual relationships and their representation in Morisot, I reveal how her art offers a new way of thinking about nineteenth-century lived experience and also how we look at Impressionist paintings of

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women, by women. I argue that by painting relationships, rather than portraits, Morisot challenges spectatorship in a way that is equally important as Manet, but one that has, until now, been obscured. By focusing on a series of female portraits by Morisot, I show how, for the painter, female intimacy becomes an aesthetic tool, one that offers a new way of thinking about Impressionist art.

This article focuses on 'minor intimacies' as understood by Berlant, in this case close relationships between heterosexual women, an area, which like other 'lesser' relationships that has been neglected in criticism, as they exist outside of the canon:

> Desires for intimacy that bypass the couple or the life narrative it generates have no alternative plots, let alone few laws and stable spaces of culture in which to clarify and to cultivate them. What happens to the energy of attachment when it has no designated place? To the glances, gestures, encounters, collaborations, or fantasies that have no canon? […] As with minor literatures, minor intimacies have been forced to develop an aesthetics of the extreme to push these spaces into being by way of small and grand gestures […]. (1998, 283)

By analysing three inter-connected areas of intimacy in Morisot, namely the absorbed self; female friendship and the material history of painting, and by comparing the works studied with other well-known Impressionist paintings, and how each area impacts upon spectatorship, this article shows the importance of intimacy as a critical tool with which to gain a new understanding of Morisot and of modernist aesthetics.

Morisot (1841–95) is today best known for her portrait in Manet's *The Balcony* (1868–69, Paris: Musée d'Orsay), where, seated, holding a fan, she casts a sultry gaze onto the modern world. The painting earned her the epithet of 'femme fatale', ironically endowed by herself, and sealed her relationship with Manet, with critics even recently either referring to her as Manet's pupil or his beautiful muse[3] rather than the central figure of Impressionism that she was. As Garb writes 'women in the nineteenth century were deemed more appropriate as subjects and inspirations of art than creators of it' (Garb 1986, 5) and Morisot in this sense was no exception. Born into the wealthy, cultured environment of the haut bourgeoise and a (claimed) descendant of the Rococo painter, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, painting for Morisot was originally part of her general education, along with piano lessons, reading and embroidery. What began, at her mother's insistence, as drawing lessons for her three daughters with the academic painter, Geoffroy Alphonse Chocarne, led to the enrolment at an art school for girls run by Joseph-Benoit Guichard and developed into a passion and extraordinary way of life. Guichard disapproved of Berthe and Edma's choice to paint out-of-doors and they left him, to work with the celebrated landscapist, Corot, before Berthe made the acquaintance of Manet in 1868 and it was under her influence that Manet first began to work 'en plein-air'. From the outset, then, Morisot was a serious professional painter, with excellent academic training and a talent which was recognized by teachers and fellow painters alike. However, as critics have observed, 'the institutional restraints on being a professional artist in the late nineteenth century were numerous' (Garb 1986, 6) and Morisot's achievement is also indebted to the unusual, unqualified support she received from her husband, Eugène Manet, the brother of the artist, to pursue her artistic career. While Morisot was one of the core members of the Impressionist group conceived in 1873,[4] regularly exhibited with them and was a highly respected member, because of her gender and social class she could not visit the cafés and studios where her fellow painters exchanged

ideas, nor was she included either in *The Batignolles Studio* by Fantin-Latour (1870, Paris: Musée d'Orsay), or Bazille's *The Artist's Studio* (1870, Paris: Musée d'Orsay), which show all her male counterparts (such as Zola, Renoir, and Monet). Instead, the regular salons held in upper-class circles served as a sort of bridge between the world of the home and that of business and professional life, and Morisot attended Mme Manet's Thursday salons and Alfred Steven's Wednesday parties, though usually chaperoned by her mother. She was at once insider and outsider, both at the heart of the most revolutionary art movement of the nineteenth century and marginalized because of her gender, a position which is summed up in the fact that she is the only Impressionist who is referred to by both public and critics alike, by her first name.

Intimacy, as an analytical too, offers a new way of understanding Morisot and her art. The importance of intimacy as a category of historical analysis has been recognized by historians such as Morris, since it allows hidden stories to emerge and throws light upon figures and relationships, as well as events and periods that otherwise stand outside of more dominant accounts of the past. This is especially important in the late nineteenth century with its rapid and radical social change:

> [I]t is worth considering the ways in which intimacy was related to broader themes such as modernity. We should also consider what intimacy as a category of historical analysis does to our sense of periodization and chronology; how do we map the different stories of social change to be found in literature on love, family, sexuality, and friendship onto one another, and what is revealed in the process of doing so? (2020, 16)

Similarly, in literature, critics such as Berlant have seen the need for a new kind of analysis that takes into account the range of attachments that define the modern individual:

> How can we think about the ways attachments make people public, producing transpersonal identities and subjectivities, when those attachments come from within spaces as varied as those of domestic intimacy, state policy, and mass-mediated experiences of intensely disruptive crises? And what have these formative encounters to do with the effects of other, less institutionalized events, which might take place on the street, on the phone, in fantasy, at work, but rarely register as anything but residue? Intimacy names the enigma of this range of attachments, and more; and it poses a question of scale that links the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective. (1998, 283)

Mapping intimacy therefore allows a focus on human relationships, in their myriad and complex forms, to come to the fore. From the perspective of a history of intimacy, same sex heterosexual relationships have never attracted as much attention as their homosexual or romantic counterparts. As Morris has shown, 'much of the most significant literature on histories of friendship is concerned with women's same-sex friendships, the relationship of these friendships to same sex desire and lesbianism, and their significance to the broader culture' (2020, 5).[5] Critics such as Marcus and Vicinus have helpfully argued for a broader conception of intimate relationships and their cultural and historical significance.[6] In the late nineteenth century, friendship is especially important from multiple perspectives. It was at this time, that the modern individual, with his or her unique characteristics, was shaped. Critics have acknowledged that a defining feature of modernity is the historically unusual importance of friendship, rather than 'traditional' familial connections. For example, Peel argues that 'more than family, kin or faith, friendship was the social glue of modernity' (2009, 279). Having choices is central to

this reason for this shift, Peel believes since the modern individual is by essence autonomous and mobile, and capable of making and changing friendships. For nineteenth-century women, as Marcus writes, 'friendship was as important an aspect of femininity as being a daughter, wife and mother' (2007, 16). Marcus cites the importance of conduct literature, in particular the writings of Sarah Ellis, for whom friendship was very much a rule in women's lives, and refers to Carol Smith Rosenberg's defining 1875 study, *The Female World of Love and Ritual* which demonstrated that 'passionate friendship between women was not only accepted among a few female couples but was a norm for many women and an integral aspect of family life' (2007, 30). While much of the criticism on female-friendship has centred on Anglo-American examples,[7] Morisot's upper-middle class background in late nineteenth-century Paris, allowed her to mingle more and form more enriching personal relationships than for example, less wealthy women.

Similarly, close sibling relationships have attracted less critical attention than parent–child relationships. However, during the nineteenth century a woman's relationship with her sisters was especially important. As Kessler has observed, '[w]hen most women's lives centred around the domestic sphere, the friendship of a sister or another woman in the household provided one of the few viable means of social contact and emotional support' (1991, 24). Berthe Morisot's relationship with her sister Edma and the series of portraits which depict her stand out in the history of Impressionism, as do her portraits of her daughter, Julie, as well as her portraits of close female friends. This article focuses on peer-to-peer relationships, specifically friendship between women. My analysis of intimate relationships in Morisot discusses the representation of the relationships of sister and female friend, and I argue that it is via these less visible relationships that Morisot is most able to interrogate her own identity as woman and as artist. In turn, I show how the portraits analysed challenge spectatorship and that it is via female intimacy, seen as an aesthetic tool, that Morisot's contribution to modern art becomes clear.

In total, Morisot painted almost a dozen works of Edma, beginning in 1869, with *The Artist's Sister at a Window* (Figure 1) and concluding in 1873 with *Reading* (1873, Cleveland Museum of Art) (Figure 2). Most critics agree that the series offers not only a portrait of Edma, but indirectly of Berthe. For Kessler, for example:

> Edma begins to signify for Berthe her ideal of beauty, the domestic and the possibility for the maternal – all of which Berthe thinks she is not, and more specifically, that which she desires. Here, loss and desire converge. (1991, 25)

Personal aspects of Morisot's life (especially the conflict between her vocation and her gender[8]) are channelled through the figure of her sister, while their private relationship is also shared publicly. However, what is most interesting is that in doing this, they also challenge spectatorship, how paintings are viewed. Morisot creates an uncomfortable position for the spectator by expressing true female intimacy (both in Berthe and Edma's close relationship and in Edma's absorption and its effects).

The painting of Edma, *The Artist's Sister at a Window* was exhibited in the salon of 1870, where the *Revue internationale de l'art et de la curiosité* referred to 'the very luminous and limpid sketch of Mlle Berthe Morisot, a Woman at her Window'.[9] It was painted in the year that Edma, who had been Berthe's closest friend and painting-partner for twelve years, got married to Adolphe Pontillon and decided to give up painting. For Berthe, what had been a collective practice became quite suddenly a solitary one.

Figure 1. *The Artist's sister at a Window* (1869, Washington: National Gallery of Art).

The art has been seen as an echo of *The Balcony*, with its similar motifs of female figure with fan, ribbon, and white muslin dress, emblem of both the interior and of modernity.[10] However as Patry points out 'while Edma sits back from the window, in her apartment, wearing a tea dress (for wear indoors), her gaze downcast and sad, removed from the spectacle of the street, Berthe leans her elbows on the balcony rail, looking outwards' (2018, 25). Most critical interpretations focus on the tension between the inner absorption of the figure and the outer world, symbolized by the balcony. For Clayson, for example, the key dynamic in the picture is 'the conflict between the sister's determined focus upon her fan and the world outside that ostentatiously beckons from the apartment balcony' (2008, 17). Although Edma has pulled her chair up to the opened French windows, she wears inside clothing and her attention is focused downward on the fan,

Figure 2. *Reading* (1873, Cleveland Museum of Art).

rather than outward to the street, her gaze offering a rejection of narrative, unlike the popular genre paintings of Stevens and Tissot and anticipating the complex portrayal of subjectivity in the very similar treatment of a sibling in James Ensor's, *The Colorist* (1880, Brussels: Royal Museum of Fine Arts).[11] While her contemplative demeanour could be understood as an emphasis on creative interiority, the gilded wallpaper adds to the sense of her cage-like entrapment and points to a negative portrayal of her as wife, mother and subject, rather than creator of art. It is important to note that Edma was pregnant at the time of the portrait and was literally 'confined' in her mother's home. It may be argued that Edma is caught between two worlds with the painting staging 'a fascinating quarrel between the brightly-hued world of the street, on the one hand, and the threshold woman's access to it but simultaneous disregard for it, on the other' (Clayson 2008, 17). The painting can easily be interpreted in terms of the threshold experience and dichotomies between interior/exterior; private/public[12] but it is the relationship with the spectator that is of interest to us here. This aspect of the painting has already attracted critics. Kessler's interpretation of the painting, which she sees as 'a private dialogue' between Morisot and Edma, focused on Morisot's restructuring of the relationship between viewer and viewed:

> The connection between viewer and viewed has been redefined as Morisot constructs what could be labelled a reflexive image with Edma seated at a window but not looking out of it. Isolated from the voyeuristic, mastering gaze, she requires none of the distancing accoutrements and available poses so often found in male artists versions of similar themes, where woman exists at once as object of the male gaze and sign of her own oppression. […]. (1991, 25)

The reflexivity identified by Kessler is in fact the key to understanding the process. The intimate subject (the artist's relationship with Edma) leads to a depiction of the intimate

moment (the absorbed self), which creates an uncomfortable position for the spectator, unaccustomed to this type of viewing experience. Comparing Morisot's paintings with similar subjects during the same timeframe by other Impressionists highlight this difference. If we consider works such Degas's *Woman at a window* (1871–72, London: Courtauld), the emphasis is on technique and effects of light while Monet's *Portrait of Camille Monet at the Window* (1873, Virginia: Virginia Museum of Arts) links the female subject with the floral landscape around her. Morisot's picture is about something quite different: intimate experience, both as pictorial subject and as artistic effect.

Absorption was as Fried has shown, a central aspect of art between the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century art with 'intimate scenes' of absorbed figures serving neutralize the presence of the viewer. He writes: 'In French painting from the mid-eighteenth century on, the representation of absorption carried with it the implication that the figure or figures in question were unaware of the presence before the canvas of the beholder' (1996, 189). For Fried, Manet's contribution to modern art was his treatment of absorption:

> One decisive difference between Manet and the others, it seems clear, is that from the outset he tended overwhelmingly, as if instinctively to reject the representation of absorption […] although it's important to note - it's one more link between them all – that that rejection wasn't absolute. […] Instead, it seems fair to say that Manet in his most characteristic paintings of the 1860s pursued a strategy of denying or voiding absorptive effects while not quite purging his compositions of absorptive motifs; put the other way round, he made use of various motifs that, treated differently, could have yielded absorptive effects. (1996, 280–281)

Like Manet, Morisot uses absorptive motifs (reading, needlework, contemplation) but not to neutralize the viewer; instead, the participation of the viewer is paramount to the effect. However, where Morisot differs from Manet and his followers is in her treatment of her female subject, particularly when it is a close acquaintance, friend or family member. In *The Artist's Sister at a Window*, Edma is visibly absorbed, it is not simply a portrait made for the delectation of the viewer; what makes it different from the works of her contemporaries is that there is a type of empathy and that, as a spectator, we feel her pain, her sadness[13]; an artistic experience that is created through layers of intimacy between subject, artist and viewer.

A similar effect is created in *The Mother and Sister of the Artist,* also known as *Reading* (1869–70, Washington: National Gallery of Art) (Figure 3). This double portrait shows the mother figure, in black, who is reading and looks relaxed, in contrast to Edma's figure, in white, whose uneasiness and absence contrasts with the material comfort of her surroundings. The composition of the painting was modelled upon Henri Fantin-Latour's *Reading* (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation) and given as a gift to Edma who admired the painter.[14] The relationship between the figures is, as often in Morisot's works, and similar to Fantin-Latour, 'discretely ambiguous' (Higonnet 1992, 113), eschewing narrative, in favour of effect. Again, as in *The Artist's Sister at a Window*, Edma appears trapped, this time blocked in by a table, a number of domestic objects and the dominating figure of her mother occupying the entire right-hand-side of the painting. Edma's hands are crossed and she is looking pensively downwards, which visibly contrasts with Fantin-Latour's image. The painting is often remembered today for Manet's role in its completion. Morisot asked Manet to assess the piece and

Figure 3. *The Mother and Sister of the artist, also known as Reading* (1869–70, Washington: National Gallery of Art).

Manet 'found it very good, except for the lower part of the dress'[15] prior to its Salon submission. Puvis de Chavannes was first to criticize the painting, which led to Morisot repainting the head of the mother. However, then Manet stepped in to heavily retouch the entire right-hand-side, particularly, the hands (Lucie-Smith 1997, 52). But it is the pregnant figure of Edma, at once absorbed and disconnected that captures our attention as spectator. It is likely that in *The Artist's Sister at a Window*, Edma is also pregnant, though this is more obscured by her left arm; in *The Mother and Sister of the artist,*

the gilded bracelet catches the spectator's eye and sits where the maternal bump would be, albeit obscured by the white fabric.

Maternity was a topical theme in the 1870s and had greater currency in France of the Third Republic after the enormous casualties of the Franco Prussian war. It is at this time that the classical virgin and child theme was remodelled for a modern France, as is visible in the mother–child portraits of Renoir and Mary Cassatt, in particular. Portraits of nursing mothers are an interesting case as the period of the second half of the century saw a decline in the practice. In the 1880s a series of laws were passed to create secular secondary schools and reform primary education, advancing equality of opportunity for girls. At the same time French scientists, like Louis Pasteur, campaigned for a safe milk supply for infants and involving mothers in their care from the outset. While, on the one hand this resulted in a decrease in wet nursing, in favour of better opportunities for women, it also saw profound change in the whole process of motherhood. Middle-class women, like Morisot were 'urged to create sanctuaries for their children within their homes and to take a new, involved interest in all aspects of their upbringing and education' (Todd 1995, 101). Morisot would also go on to develop this theme in the series of images of her daughter Julie, which constitute 'her most extensive pictorial project' (Higonnet 1992, 212)[16] yet it should be noted that wet-nursing features prominently, since it allowed her to work.

While modern-day Madonnas, embracing, dressing and feeding their children were popular in Impressionism,[17] pregnant women were not. Morisot is the only Impressionist to openly depict this topic, despite the movement's more radical agenda. The magnitude of Morisot's decision to paint her visibly pregnant sister is put into context when twenty-first-century exhibitions on pregnancy in art history highlight the transgressive nature of the topic.[18] But the physicality of Edma's condition is hidden beneath the layers of white fabric, frustrating 'the unintended viewer accustomed to more classical costume that paradoxically covered the body, only to emphasize it' (Kessler 1991, 26). Comparing Morisot's portraits of Edma with the absorbed women by male Impressionists highlights key differences. Renoir's *Woman in White Reading*, for example, uses a similar white *déshabillé*, but hints of flesh peep through and the viewer is also drawn to the model's dainty sandalled feet, while a series of works by the painter show women reading in sexualized poses, with the chemise casually slipping off their shoulders to expose skin (see *Woman Reading*, 1895 and *Reading Woman*, 1900). Similarly, in Monet, Degas and Whistler, we see many seemingly absorbed female figures, mainly reading, or sewing, but the emphasis is always on the visually tantalizing effect, created by either the clothes, the female body, or both. Manet's painting of Berthe Morisot, *Repose* (1871) also presents a contemplative female figure in white but she is also clearly visually attractive, the expansive white dress accentuating the tiny waist and delicate feet and contrasting with her dark features and hair. What we witness in these paintings is a false intimacy, staged for the male viewer. Morisot is doing something very different. Her *Reading* clarifies her position; Edma once again appears absorbed, this time alone and in an undefined landscape, the discarded fan, perhaps a symbol of the art world she had left behind. But it is not a false intimacy that we see here. As Higonnet notes, in Morisot's works there is '[n]o overt appeal, no need for sympathy, no invitation to intimacy' (1992, 111). Instead, it is a different kind of intimacy; that of observing a relationship. In *Reading*, it is not the female body, dress or landscape that comes to

Figure 4. *Portrait of Madame Edma Pontillon* (1871, Paris: Musée d'Orsay).

the fore, but the relationship with the artist, as Kessler writes: 'despite its natural setting, this painting is about the life of the mind and not woman in nature. It is a correspondence between the painter and her sister, and once again, ignores the possibility of a male viewer' (1991, 26).

One of Morisot's most intimate works is *Portrait of Madame Edma Pontillon* (1871, Paris: Musée d'Orsay) (Figure 4). In this pastel work, Morisot portrayed Edma during her second pregnancy, which came soon after her first, and the piece was shown at the Salon of 1872.[19] Much larger in size than Morisot's other works and striking in its use of contrast and gaze, the portrait demands our attention. It is reminiscent of the earlier

painting *Mother and Sister of the Artist*, where Edma is also pregnant, but importantly, Edma is alone here in black. There is a clear duality visible with her dark figure against the light background and the empty top-left side of the canvas contrasting with the patterned fabrics to the right. This duality is also seen in the opposition between the enveloping black of the sitter's dress and the floral decoration of the sofa and curtain. For Rey, a further duality appears in the face itself, which he sees as two-sided 'as if the right-hand side was a true likeness of the model and while the left consisted of a self-portrait' (2018, 94). Rey's comments echo those of earlier critics who have seen the series of portraits of Edma as indirect self-portraits, creating thus an unexpected type of intimacy.

In many respects, the self-portrait is the most intimate of genres, created by oneself of oneself, to share with others. Unlike other Impressionists, Morisot rarely turned to this genre. While Manet painted a total of eleven portraits of Morisot, many of which were exhibited publicly her own few self-images date to the 1880s and were not made public until 1961. This is in stark contrast to the late nineteenth-century predilection for serial self-portraiture and its use as a marketing and aesthetic tool.[20]

For Higonnet, discussing Morisot, the self-portrait was about reconciliation between public and private, a concept that was impossible for Morisot as painter and mother:

> A codification of self, the self-portrait obeys the parameters within which privacy may, in a given time and place, manifest itself publicly. It functions as both an act of self-revelation and an act of professional advertisement (hence the great number of self-portraits with emblems of the trade). If the tension between the two imperatives can be great, the self-portrait seductively promises to release that tension, to reconcile or at least assemble disparate selves: inner and outer, private and professional. (1992, 200)

While Higonnet convincingly argues that this reconciliation takes place only in 1885 in the creation of the small pastel *Self-portrait with Julie Manet* (Private Collection) which echoes the larger oil painted *Self-portrait* of the same year (1885, Private Collection), I argue here that Morisot's *Portrait de Madame Edma Pontillon* is also an oblique self-portrait and this is where its complexity lies, in terms of spectatorship.

When compared with other portraits of Edma, such as the *Portrait of Edma* from the previous year (1870, London: Courtauld Institute Galleries), or *The Mother and Sister of the Artist* (1869–70, Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art), where Edma is also shown pregnant. There is no doubt that Edma resembles her sister more than herself. This sense of duplication is consolidated by the 1869 painting *Two Sisters on a Couch* (Washington: National Gallery of Art) (Figure 5), which critics agree is a portrait of Edma and Berthe and of their double or shared identity.[21] This doubling – we must remember the uncanny here – in *Portrait of Mme Pontillon*, combined with the visible pregnant sitter, the close-up format and direct gaze leads to an unsettling viewer experience, one that must have been accentuated for nineteenth-century audience. However, it must be noted that, like almost all of Morisot's works, it was not made for the Salon, but instead was to be shared within close family and friendship circles.

This leads to another distinct difference between Morisot's paintings of Edma and female portraits by the other Impressionists. This lies in their material history. Firstly, most of these works were small in size and created in and destined for domestic interiors. Morisot chose to work from home, in living-rooms, verandas and parlours. Before her marriage, she shared a studio with Edma, built by her father in the garden of their

Figure 5. *Two Sisters on a Couch* (1869, Washington: National Gallery of Art).

home, however in her successive homes, she did not even set a room apart for her painting, keeping her art materials in a closet that was fitted into a recess in one of the living-room walls. This behaviour was not unlike other nineteenth-century female writers and artists and was not simply because of not having a separate space to work; it was a choice 'not to isolate her work from domesticity' (Higonnet 1992, 80).[22] Blanche's description of a visit to Morisot's studio in rue Guichard in the 1870s is telling:

> A middle-class apartment, but in that apartment, the bedroom of a young girl is the studio of a great artist. Antimacassars, white curtains, portfolios, rustic straw hats, a green gauze bag for gathering butterflies, a cage with parakeets, a litter of fragile accessories; no bric-a-brac, no art objects, except some studies, [and] in a splendid location on the wall, hung with a striped gray moiré paper, a silver-flecked landscape by Corot (1920, 21)

The size of the works was also related to the confines of this working arrangement, smaller works were easier to manage and store. The consequence, whether intended or not, is that smaller artistic works are by essence 'intimate', creating a very different effect upon a viewer, than for example, the expansive canvases of Monet's *Waterlilies* (1920–26, Paris: Musée de l'orangerie). Secondly, Morisot's works were not destined for public display and 'home was where she wanted her work to remain' (Higonnet 1992, 81). Her pictures were intended to be shared but with select audiences, friends and family members and occasionally trusted collectors. Many paintings were kept in her own home, both for emotional and legacy reasons.[23] There is a relationship to the art works, an inherently personal one that continued via Julie and the friends and family of the Morisots, as Higonnet has observed:

> In family homes, Morisot's pictures were hung where they fit, up to the ceiling, or along staircases, in a dense mosaic alongside other family pictures: pictures by Morisot's sister, daughter, nieces, husband, brother-in-law, son-in-law, father-in-law, pictures made by

> friends and given as gifts, […] In a private world they hang among images unified less by style or period than by family meaning: images of a grandmother, testimonials to a mother's relationship with her daughter, tributes from one friend to another, carriers of family history. (1992, 83)

Among these images which were shared with friends and family were the *Portrait of Mme Boursier and Her Daughter* (1874, New York: Brooklyn Museum) and the *Portrait of Marie Hubbard* (1874, Copenhagen: Ordrupgaardsamlingen) (Figures 6 and 7). Both women

Figure 6. *Portrait of Mme Boursier and Her Daughter* (1874, New York: Brooklyn Museum).

Figure 7. *Portrait of Marie Hubbard* (1874, Copenhagen: Ordrupgaardsamlingen).

were close acquaintances of Morisot's. Mme Boursier was Morisot's first cousin and the portrait of her and her daughter echoes the maternity theme prevalent in France at the time, offering a bourgeois modern-day image of the virgin in child, similar in style and theme to paintings by Renoir, particularly commissioned works such as the well-known, *Mme Charpentier and her children* (1978, London: National Gallery of Art). The composition of *Portrait of Mme Boursier and Her Daughter* is more traditional than contemporary works by Morisot with the two figures occupying the foreground and centre of the painting, against a sketchily portrayed background, showing the same patterned upholstery as in *The Mother and Sister of the Artist* on the left and what appears to be a piano and mirror to the right. Dressed in black silk, elegant but informal, Mme Boursier is evidently visiting friends. The portrait could easily be categorized among the Impressionist portraits made by Renoir and Pissaro of bourgeois families such as les Cahen d'Anvers or les Vellay Estruc. Where Morisot's work differs from her male contemporaries however is in the treatment of the gaze; this frontal, intimate gaze sets her work apart and offers a counterpoint to the destabilizing gaze in Manet.

Mme Boursier looks directly at the artist; it is a knowing look, a private exchange. There is no challenge to the artist/viewer but instead there is a sense of a close relationship that is characterized by gently tilted face, half-closed eyes and gentle smile. The focus of the gaze merits closer inspection; unlike other works by Manet, such as his *Portrait of Berthe Morisot*, the sitter is not looking directly at the viewer. Instead, it is as if she is looking diagonally to her left at the painter, while the spectator finds his or herself under the direct gaze of the child. What appears as a conventional portrait is thus more complex. Morisot is painting a relationship, rather than a portrait, and as artist is implicated in the picture. What we observe then is a very different type of portrait than that made by her male counterparts, in which usually the identity of the sitter and/or the aesthetic effect is foregrounded.

We see a similar process of foregrounding relationships at work in *Portrait of Marie Hubbard*, another close friend of Morisot's. In 1874, she painted the extraordinary full--length reclining portrait of her friend. The painting stands in opposition to the many sexualized dressed and undressed women in the reclining portraits by her male peers, of which the most famous is of course Manet's *Olympia* (Paris: Musée d'Orsay, 1863). As Higonnet writes 'Morisot turned eroticism into an empty spectacle by refusing to provide the sexual content a viewer could expect' (1992, 159). Mme Hubbard wears the same type of diaphanous white gown that appears in Renoir's and Whistler's paintings and, as in *Olympia*, her slippers are falling from her feet, but this is not a portrait made for the male spectator. Instead, as in *Portrait of Mme Boursier and her daughter,* the background is sketched and the dress is formless in order to accentuate the figure's face and expression. There are clear links with Boucher's *Lady on her Day Bed* (1743) of the previous century and it is important to note that Morisot and her peers were inspired by the supposedly accurate genre scenes portrayed by Rococo art. Our attention is drawn to her carefully and realistically painted face and her direct level gaze. There is no doubt here of the intimacy of the portrait; the same soft smile and trusting eyes meet the viewer – it is a portrait of two women's close friendship. It is disappointing that while some present-day critics recognize the importance of this work, 'easily identifiable as one of the supreme works of Berthe Morisot's oeuvre, and the period as a whole', the intimacy it evokes can only be understood as 'feminine charm':

> The picture shows a blend of charm and sensuality to which only a woman artist can aspire, depending as it does on a powerful identification with womankind, and a deep knowledge of the female state, which too often escape the male painter. And it is here in this canvas, that we sense the true difference between Morisot and Manet. The unquestionably modern subject is bent here to a perfect osmosis with the model, a quite new phenomenon in painting […]. And perhaps only a woman could have taken it so far. (Rey 2018, 71)

This type of back-handed compliment is echoed throughout Rey's monograph and also in the criticism of other male art historians, such as Lucie-Smith.[24] This type of criticism characterized the reception of Morisot's work in the nineteenth century,[25] which is perhaps not surprising, but its reiteration in the twenty-first century is problematic, particularly in the context of a revival of interest in the artist. By labelling the most original aspect (the expression of intimacy) of Morisot's work 'feminine charm', it denies its universality and relevance. The modernity of the *Portrait of Marie Hubbard* is its representation of a form of intimacy, that had no name and while critics could recognize its brilliance, they were unable to rationalize it, hence the explanation as something 'only a woman' could do, conveniently setting it aside. This interpretation corroborates what Berlant sees as the necessity to reframe intimacy and the discourses which surround it:

> A related aim of this reframing of intimacy is thus to engage and disable a prevalent discourse on the proper relation between public and private, spaces traditionally associated with the gendered division of labor. These categories are considered by many scholars to be archaic formations, legacies of a Victorian fantasy that the world can be divided into a controllable space (the private-affective) and an uncontrollable one (the public-instrumental). Fantasy, however, may underdescribe the continuing attraction of the attachment to this division because the discourse world described by the public and the private has, historically, organized and justified other legally and conventionally based forms of social division (male

> and female, work and family, colonizer and colonized, friend and lover, hetero and homo, 'unmarked' personhood versus racial-, ethnic, and class-marked identities). (1998, 283)

Mme Hubbard's striking fan may be seen as a recognition of this need to reframe intimacy and relationships more broadly. Held up like a flag, it contrasts with the passive fan of *The Artist's Sister at a Window* and also avoids the eroticized undertones associated with fans at the time, in favour of another kind of intimacy. In *L'Eventail*, from 1882, Octave Uzanne wrote:

> Est-il bijou plus coquet que cet éventail, hochet plus charmant, ornement plus expressif, dans les mains d'une reine de l'esprit telle que vous? Lorsque vous maniez le vôtre dans les coquetteries des receptions intimes, il devient tour à tour l'interprète des sentiments cachés, la baguette magique des surprises féeriques, l'arme défensive des entreprises amoureuses, le paravent des pudeurs soudaines, le sceptre, en un mot, de votre troublante beauté. (1882, 10–11)

For nineteenth-century middle-class women, whose movements and gestures were restricted, the fan was a kind of language. While most artists interpreted this language in terms of erotic exchange, Morisot here conveys a heterosexual exchange between women, who were intimate friends. We can only guess as to the meaning of the fan and to the context of this most unusual portrait, but we can attest to the effect it creates, which is of one of uneasy spectatorship, as we see into a relationship that we do not expect, one for which our ideological, artistic and cultural presumptions have not prepared us. Strangely, then, Mme Hubbard, while she does not shock in the way that Olympia does, rattles our position as spectator and could easily earn the description of the destabilizing of the viewing experience, as expressed by Brooks, writing on Manet:

> [S]he has evicted us from the comfortable place of spectatorship, or perhaps, more accurately, taken the comfort from that place. (2005, 178)

More accustomed to assuming the position of male viewer, we are now required to shift positions and assume a different type of consideration. In this, Morisot's *Hubbard* is as modernist as Manet's *Olympia* and deserves critical attention.

Reframing intimacy in art history allows us a new way of looking at and thinking about the figures we see, their relationships and our role as spectator. In this article, I focused on one area of minor intimacy as seen in Morisot: the female friend.[26] Through an analysis of portraits of Edma, Mme Boursier and Mme Hubbard, against the social and historical backdrop of nineteenth-century France, together with a comparison with similar subjects in Impressionism, I have shown how her intimate portraits not only reveal the lived reality of bourgeois women, but also forge a radical new viewing experience, that has I believe until now been obscured in the history of modern art. It is in this way that the study of minor intimacies has the potential to teach us much about the past, as well as challenging our systems of interpretation. In the case of Morisot alone, we see relationships between family, friends, spouses, pets, children and servants which reveal attachments, rather than separations and where hierarchies and divisions are dissolved; yet the stories of these relationships remain largely unwritten. Intimacy as a method of analysis allows us to cast light upon a broader field of enquiry, than that encompassed by the canon and it is in this sense, that work in this and related conceptual areas, such as the history of the

emotions, is needed to gain better insights into the complexities of nineteenth-century artistic production and our relationship with it.

Notes

1. For a discussion of the cross-over between private life, domestic space and Impressionism see Impressionist Interiors (2008), edited by Janet McLean and, in particular, the chapters by Hollis Clayson (2008) and Suzanne Singletary (2008), as well as the introduction and chapters by Sinéad Furlong-Clancy and Jill Owen, in Domestic Space in France and Belgium, edited by Moran (forthcoming 2021). Furlong-Clancy's chapter 'Impressionist Interiors and Modern Womanhood: The representation of domestic space in the art of Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt' (forthcoming 2021) offers a formal analysis of some of the paintings discussed here, focusing on the domestic interior. The topic of intimacy and Impressionism has attracted much attention recently in the age of social media, as is seen in the recent exhibition Seattle showed 'glimpses into the personal lives of the artists, depicting their homes, favourite scenes, pets, gardens, pastimes, friends, and family […]. An intimate view into the lives of others is not a novel concept, but modern technology has evolved to make it easier and faster than ever. The Impressionists honed in on the same universal desire that individuals cling to in the 21st century: to share the everyday moments of our lives'. https://www.seattleartmuseum.org/impressionism (accessed 1/12/2020).
2. For most of the twentieth century, Morisot was considered peripheral by critics and, at best, given 'a noticeably modest place' (Patry, 2018). After a peak of critical interest in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Morisot is again attracting both criticism and public interest, as evidenced by the 2019 International retrospective of her work organized by the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, the Barnes Foundation (Philadelphia), the Dallas Museum of Art, and the Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
3. While Lucie-Smith, for example refers to Manet as 'her mentor' (1997, 52) and other critics refer to the possibility of a romantic relationship between Morisot and the painter, the reality was more complex, with Morisot serving as muse, friend and artistic influence. Whereas Morisot's relationship with Manet has gained most attention, probably due to the series of aesthetically pleasing and subtly erotic portraits he made of her, (including *Repose: Portrait of Berthe Morisot* (1870, Rhode Island: Museum of Art) and *Berthe Morisot with a Portrait of Violets* (1872, Paris: Musée d'Orsay)), it was Auguste Renoir who was her closest male friend and whose artistic style is most similar to her own.
4. For Garb, Morisot 'was […] one of the moving spirits behind Impressionism, instrumental in formulating its aesthetic, and faithful to the idea of organizing and exhibiting in independent salons' (1986, 12) and she cites Paul Manz who, in 1877 wrote that she was the 'only impressionist in the whole revolutionary group' (12).
5. Scholars of French literature have also been drawn recently to nineteenth-century friendships, for example Knight's *Balzac and the Model of Painting* (2007), Martin's *Napoleonic Friendship* (2011) and Counter and White's special issue *The Art of Friendship in France* (2019).
6. Marcus seeks to contextualize women's same-sex feelings and attractions within the broadest possible context in order to highlight that within a single class or generation, there were many different kinds of relationships between women and explains that, in particular the importance of female friendship in the nineteenth century for middle-class women (2007). Vicinus, meanwhile, is willing to situate intimate friendships within the history of sexuality even if the relationships were celibate. For Vicinus, thinking about 'intimacy' offers a way in which to think about relationships that cannot easily be pinned down by any particular term; her title, *Intimate friends*, for her 'embodies the indeterminacy inherent in any study of sexual behaviors and beliefs' (2004, xxiv).
7. Marcus reveals how middle-class Victorians treated friendship and family life as complementary and how female friendship emerges in Victorian life writing as a fundamental component of middle-class femininity and women's life stories (2007, 39).

8. Morisot's extensive correspondence with Edma details her frustrations at being limited, because of her gender, for example in 1871, she writes 'j'aimerais bien me créer une sorte d'indépendence, j'ai parfois des lueurs d'espérence, mais qui se dissipent très vite' (cited in Anon. 2019, 38.).
9. 'La très lumineuse et limpide esquisse de Mlle Berthe Morisot, une *Femme à sa fenêtre*' (Quoted in Patry, Wilhelm, and Patin 2002, 112).
10. Jacques-Émile Blanche wrote how 'muslim was very modern at the time' (*Mes Modèles*, Paris, 1984 (1928), 213) while the white *déshabillé*, a recurrent motif in Morisot, was the interior dress of the time, both accessory and metaphor of the private world depicted. It was was loose and white, consisting of a floor-length jacket over a white skirt, fastened at the neck with ruffles or lace and sometimes worn with a silk belt. It was worn with stockings, mules (light shoes or slippers) and often jewellery. The dress was often worn with a bonnet, also with lace and ribbons. This dress was also worn to receive close friends or family, as well as to organize the household, have meals and potter around the house. In every respect, it was the clothing of the interior, as dictated by conduct literature. (see Violette, *L'art de la toilette*, 1885, 94).
11. Susan Canning discusses the figure of the artist's sister 'absorbed with her fan and unaware of the observer's gaze' (2018, 224).
12. For a discussion of the threshold in Impressionism, See Moran, Claire (2016b).
13. For a discussion of empathy in nineteenth-century France, see Maria Scott (2020).
14. See Stuckey, Scott, and Lindsay (1987, 36). Morisot clearly reverses the figures, moving the daughter from left to right and bathing her in light but keeps the frontal facing and absorbed motifs.
15. In a letter to Edma, Morisot reported the incident in detail, a fact that is telling in that it reveals the real intimacy between the sisters, rather than between Berthe and Manet or Berthe and Mme Morisot: 'He took the brushes and put in a few accents that looked very well; mother was in ecstasies. That was where my misfortunes began. Once started, nothing could stop him; from the skirt he went to the bust, from the bust to the head, from the head to the background. He cracked a thousand jokes, laughed like a madman, handed me the palette, took it back; finally, by five o' clock in the afternoon, we had the prettiest caricature that was ever seen. […] And now I am left confounded. My only hope is that I shall be rejected. My mother thinks this episode funny and I find it agonizing. (Roauart 1950, 37).
16. Morisot created between 125 and 150 images of her daughter in the sixteen years following Julie's birth in 1878, a project that was cut short by the artist's untimely death, aged 54.
17. Morisot's *The Cradle* (Paris: Musée d'Orsay) is one of the best-known Impressionist paintings and was one of the rare images by women to be acquired by the Louvre because of the recognition its maternity theme; it also offers insights into intimacy, the female gaze and spectatorship and Higonnet convincingly links it to the print media, specifically an image from *Le Moniteur de la mode* (1992, 118–122).
18. Karen Hearn's exhibition, 'Portraying Pregnancy', at the Foundling Museum, London, in April 2020, traced 500 years of pregnancy portraits—including for example, Erizku's Beyoncé portrait. According to Hearn, it is only in the last twenty years, as women have begun to interrogate their own pregnant bodies and represent them in art and visual culture, that the taboo around the topic has started to shift.
19. This is the first pastel Morisot is known to have exhibited; its finesse suggests that earlier works in this medium were destroyed, along with other work – Blanche wrote already in the 1870s: 'She destroys everything she makes' (1920, 21). The fact that few studies of artworks have survived has hampered critical interest in and understanding of Morisot.
20. See Moran, Claire (2016a).
21. See Matthew Rohn (1995).
22. Morisot's studio within her home contrasts with the very public studios of many late nineteeth-century male artists, designed for self-promotion (See Moran 2018; Brogniez 2018)

and is redolent of what Bauer and Moran see as the uniqueness of nineteenth-century domestic space 'in that it brought together a very strong sense of subjectivity, authenticity and intimacy with its seeming contrary modes of theatricality, staging, performance and representation' (2018, 158–159).

23. The vast majority of Morisot's paintings were in her own possession at the time of her death and had been bequeathed to her daughter Julie (See Higonnet 1992, 82).
24. Relating how 'Morisot did not always find it easy to make her way as a woman artist', Lucie-Smith concedes that she nonetheless had influence, although 'it cannot be said that Berthe's influence was entirely due to talent and character; it owed something to her marriage' (1997, 51).
25. A host of nineteenth-century critics sought to explain Morisot's manner of working by the fact of her femininity. These included Paul de Charry who wrote in 1880: 'with this talent, why does she not take the trouble to finish? Morisot is a woman and therefore capricious. Unfortunately, she is like Eve who bites the apple and then gives up on it too soon. Too bad, since she bites so well' (cited in Adler and Garb 1995, 64) and Téodor de Wyzewa, one of her greatest supporters, who penned 'only a woman has the right to rigorously practice the Impressionist system, she alone can limit her effort to the translation of impressions' and her greatest talent was in showing 'an original vision, which is entirely feminine' (cited in Adler and Garb 1995, 64), as well as Mallarmé who wrote of her 'feminine vision' (cited in Mathieu 2018, 89). Adjectives such as 'charming', 'delicate', 'feminine' and 'sensitive' recur in the criticism. The absurd irony of this approach, which has perpetuated in art historical criticism is that the works which most closely resemble her 'femininity' as seen in terms of lightness of touch, degree of tonal clarity and use of visible brushstrokes, belong to Monet, who was never seen as 'feminine'. This approach could also have accounted for the link to Fragonard, since the Rococo style was understood as feminine in its lightness of touch and tone. Morisot's 'feminine' style is in fact redolent of a 'gendered binary which pitted feminine colour against masculine line' (Mathieu 2018, 93).
26. Beyond the scope of this article are other intimate portraits of female friends, such as Marguerite and Valentine Carré, as seen in *The Pink Dress* (1873, New York: The Metropolitan Museum) and the many portraits that reside in private collections, and which have received less attention, such as *Young Woman in Grey reclining* (1879, Private Collection).

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This article was originally published with errors, which have now been corrected in the online version.

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