

The Female Impressionists - A Study in a Gendered Art

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WOMEN AND IMPRESSIONISM

French Impressionism produced some of the most famous artists in western art history – painters such as Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir and Edgar Degas. However, many people would be surprised to learn that women were also very much a part of the Impressionist movement. Mary Cassatt, Berthe Morisot and Marie Bracquemond have received far less attention than their male counterparts. This would be understandable if these women had been merely considered “copyists” or “followers” to the male masters. But these artists were widely celebrated in their own time and decades beyond, so much so that in 1928, the famous art critic, Henri Focillon collectively named Cassatt, Morisot and Bracquemond, “Les Trois Grandes Dames” or “The Three Great Ladies” of Impressionism.¹ Though there have been some recent studies of these artists and their work, their successes are too often discussed in relation to the talent of their male peers rather than in their own right. Of course, late nineteenth century society was not conducive to gender equality in the art world, but even now in the twenty first century, the discussion of these women is often tinged with antiquated ideologies of gender. It is inaccurate to solely attribute the careers of these women to their interactions with the more prominent male Impressionists, as the men were their colleagues rather than their mentors, which is how they are so often portrayed. This paper analyzes the careers and impact of these three underappreciated artists within the context of their shared experience as female Impressionists. By looking at these women as artists in their own right and their artistic and personal relationships with one another, it becomes apparent that while the support of their fellow male artists helped to establish their careers, it ultimately undermined their own artistic abilities and hindered their continued legacies. The complexities of gender roles and the difficulties faced by women artists during this time are seen especially in the case of Marie Bracquemond, who of the three women has retained very little fame because because of her unfortunate marriage to a man, also an artist, who did not want her to practice professionally. On top of the obstacles she faced as a woman artist in Paris during this time, Bracquemond had to deal with her husband’s disapproval and sabotage of her art and success for years. Ultimately, the lack of support she received at home crippled her career, for a woman could

have very little upward mobility without the help of well-established male artists.

Impressionism as a “feminine art”

Impressionism was perhaps the first art movements to truly open the door to women artists. Although a long-standing social stigma attached to being a woman artist remained, the style’s status as a “revolutionary” mode of painting allowed for more freedoms than the traditional conventions of the medium. The Impressionist movement started with a few artists, whose works were consistently denied entry into the Salon because of their deviations from the standards set by France’s premier art academy, *Académie des Beaux-Arts*.² Where the conventional artistic training of the Academy focused on line and composition, the impressionists were more interested in color and ephemeral qualities; where the Academy championed high drama history paintings, this young collective preferred to paint landscapes and everyday life. Unsurprisingly, this created a rift between the old way of painting and a burgeoning progressive style which resisted the status quo. The importance of line versus color had been recurrently debated for decades and had ultimately resulted in the “gendering” of the two aspects of painting themselves; line was considered by many to evoke more masculine ideals whereas color had long been associated with the feminine.³ Part of the Impressionists’ interest in the use of color and image distortion was directly related to the gendering of art styles; many of them, particularly Claude Monet, rejected the idea that a certain type of painting could be feminine just because of its informal composition and vibrant coloring. Impressionism’s equation with a “feminine” aesthetic led many critics to condemn the movement for being an art form only appropriate for women. In 1896, years after the last of the impressionist exhibitions, the idea of femininity was still being used as a negative attack, as seen within the comments of the art critic Claude Roger-Marx, “the term Impressionism itself announces a matter of observation and notation which is well suited to the hypersensitivity

¹ Ingrid Pfeiffer. "Impressionism Is Feminine." *Women Impressionists*. Print.

² Charles S. Moffett. *The New Painting, Impressionism, 1874-1886: An Exhibition Organized by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco with the National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Geneva, Switzerland: R. Burton, 1986. Print.

³ Charles Blanc. *Grammaire des Arts du Dessin : Architecture, Sculpture, Peinture*. Paris, France.1870. Print

and nervousness of women.”⁴ Although this may have been intended as a compliment, opinions in this vein only reinforced inaccurate scientific discourse that cited female hysteria and mental weakness as the reason for the inferiority of the female intellect. These types of social perceptions of women made it even more difficult for them to have their artistic endeavors taken seriously and therefore most women at the time had to be content with painting as a hobby or limited clientele and critical acclaim. Ironically, The negative perceptions of Impressionism as a movement was what enabled Cassatt, Morisot and Bracquemond to take part in what was then considered an avant-garde movement and achieve greater artistic status for women than ever before.

The Female Impressionists

Cassatt, Morisot and Bracquemond entered the Impressionist circle in different ways. The Impressionists initially formed under the name “The Société anonyme des artistes peintres, sculpteurs, graveurs” (Anonymous Association of Painters, Sculptors and Engravers) in 1873 and included Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, Paul Cézanne, Edgar Degas with Berthe Morisot, the only female member.⁵ Morisot had been friends with many of the artists prior to the group’s “official” foundation, but her decision to join the Impressionist movement was motivated by her interest in *peinture claire*, defined as “the expressing of light by a predominately luminous, blond tonality”, which differed greatly from the high-contrast dark chiaroscuro qualities of Academy paintings.⁶ Morisot was arguably the most active impressionist member of the three women and showed in all but one of their eight exhibitions (which she missed because of the birth of her daughter Julie).⁷

Even though they were not founding members, Cassatt and Bracquemond were equally passionate about the impressionist style. Cassatt ascribed to the “realist” side of Impressionism whereas Bracquemond was a “pleinairist”; “The realists” were more concerned with the figurative aspects of impressionist painting, while the “pleinairists” painted outdoors (*plein air*) and were more focused on the accurate depiction of light.⁸ Cassatt and Bracquemond did not show with the group until the Fourth Impressionist Exhibition in 1879 (ironically, this was the only exhibition Morisot did not participate in). Cassatt

again contributed her work to the 1880, 1881 and 1886 exhibitions with Bracquemond participating in the 1880 and 1886 exhibitions.⁹ Much like Morisot, their entrance into these shows was due to their circle of friends, most importantly perhaps Degas, who formally invited the women to exhibit with the group. A female artist’s success during this time relied heavily on her professional and personal connections; talent alone did not secure exhibition invitations or commissions. It is for this reason that Cassatt, Morisot and Bracquemond are even discussed today; had they not be connected to and promoted by their male peers, whom we now consider pioneers of modern painting, they would have never received critical acclaim and public support. However, a recurring error within modern scholarship on these women is the tendency to compare and even attribute their styles to the more famous male impressionists. The assumption that male artists were directly involved with the creative processes of these women robs Cassatt, Morisot and Bracquemond of their own artistic “genius” and falsely assumes a mentor-protégée dynamic, when there was in fact reciprocity in their relationships.

A New Type of Painting The extent to which these artists maintained creative control over their art can be seen within the types of artwork they chose to create. Although Impressionism did allow women artists more freedoms and creative control, there were still limits as to what was accepted subject matter for women to paint. The most successful works of Cassatt, Morisot and Bracquemond tended to draw from their own experiences as women and quotidian activities. While the male impressionists explored themes of nature and Parisian city life, the female impressionists carved out a niche that played to their own gender, by conforming to the norms imposed on them.¹⁰ The type of intimate domestic scenes that these women usually painted emphasized their own femininity and reinforced the stereotype that came to be associated with impressionism itself. They tended to portray women within the contexts of maternity, adolescence and social engagements. Their own gender made their works more marketable and insightful offered incites to critics, who saw the parallels between the artists’ own lives and their subjects. The women’s collective focus on the acceptable subject matter for women artists not only shaped their own practices, but also championed images of women in the art world. In this way these women were able to pioneer a new sub-genre of painting by taking advantage of the essentialist views of the day. One example of this can be seen with the case of Mary Cassatt, who is perhaps most

⁴ Tamar Garb. “Berthe Morisot and the Feminizing of Impressionism” *Perspectives on Morisot*. New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1990. Print.

⁵ Belinda Thomson. *Impressionism: Origins, Practice, Reception*. New York, N.Y: Thames & Hudson, 2000. Print.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Tamar Garb. *Women Impressionists*. New York: Rizzoli, 1986. Print.

⁸ Ingrid Pfeiffer. "Impressionism Is Feminine." *Women Impressionists*. Print.

⁹ Tamar Garb. *Women Impressionists*. New York: Rizzoli, 1986. Print.

¹⁰ Griselda Pollock. “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity.” *Vision and Difference- Feminism, femininity and the histories of art*. 1988. Print

famous for her mother and child paintings, a fact that is ironic since she herself never married nor had a child. However, as a female painter working with the Impressionists she was able to carve out a “brand” for herself and garner the praise of art critics.

A Closer Look at the Case of Marie Bracquemond

Despite the similarities between the subject matter and styles in the work of these three women as well as their inclusion in the same social circles, they did not all achieve the same level of fame and since their deaths have been disproportionately researched. Of the “Trois Grandes Dames”, Marie Bracquemond is by far the most unknown, with very little scholarship devoted solely to her work. Though there are many factors that contribute to the success of artists and their posthumous legacies, the ultimate cause of Bracquemond’s obscurity seems to be intrinsically tied to her sex. Like Cassatt and Morisot, she was hindered by the metaphorical “glass ceiling” so many women during the 19th century faced, but was at an even greater disadvantage because of her class and her marriage. The other two women came from upper middle class families that encouraged their daughter’s artistic abilities as a suitable pastime. Cassatt and Morisot received formal artistic training whereas Bracquemond’s lower-class upbringing did not afford her the same charmed childhood or famous mentors.¹¹ Consequently, Bracquemond’s foray into the elite art world and eventually the impressionist circle came from her marriage to another artist, Felix Bracquemond.

In 1867, while working in the Louvre as a copyist, Marie (né Quivoron) met Félix Bracquemond¹². At the time, Félix Bracquemond was a prolific and relatively successful artist, who worked in printmaking, painting and ceramics.¹³ He was one of France’s foremost engravers and was connected to many artists, who ranged from Jean-François Millet and Jean-Batiste-Camille Corot to Claude Monet and Camille Pissarro.¹⁴ His connections and similar love of art should have made him the perfect match for Marie Quivoron, but already during the pair’s two yearlong engagement, Marie had become aware of Félix’s abrasive and temperamental personality that easily overpowered the reserved and appeasing Marie. This bothersome dynamic between the two made Marie’s mother and her sister, Louise, uneasy, but despite their warnings, Marie and Félix married in 1869 and a year later their first and only child,

Pierre was born.¹⁵ One would think that Marie’s marriage to a fellow artist, who was friends with numerous other artists including most of the impressionists, would have benefitted her career. However, Félix was thoroughly against the impressionist movement because he believed that tone, value and composition should be worked out entirely before the execution of the final painting.¹⁶ His formal inclinations and preference for the realism he tried to capture within his engravings, echoed many of the Academy’s sentiments. And so, unlike Cassatt and Morisot, who only faced opposition from adversaries of impressionism as an art form, Marie felt additional pressures and disapproval from her spouse.



Figure 1. Marie Bracquemond, *The Umbrellas*, 1879

Despite the marital friction it caused, Marie continued to work with the Impressionists, honing her craft and developed her style under the guidance of Monet and Renoir. Felix allowed her to paint and even to show in three of the Impressionist exhibits to which Degas invited her, but he never encouraged her works and would not allow his artist friends to see them at their home.¹⁷ Felix tried to steer his wife away from the impressionist circle many times and even insisted that his wife try her hand at engraving, at her husband’s behest she completed four engravings, all of which lack the painterly qualities of the impressionist movement. Of these *The Umbrellas*, which she showed in 1879 at the fourth impressionist exhibition is

¹¹ Jean-Paul Bouillon. "Marie Bracquemond: The Lady with the Parasol." *Women Impressionists*. Print.

¹² Jean-Paul Bouillon and Elizabeth Kane. "Marie Bracquemond." *Woman's Art Journal* 5.2 (1984-1985): n. pag. 21 *JSTOR*. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

¹³ Elizabeth Kane. "Marie Bracquemond: The Artist Time Forgot." *Apollo* 117.252 (1983): 118-121

¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵ Jean-Paul Bouillon and Elizabeth Kane. "Marie Bracquemond." *Woman's Art Journal* 5.2 (1984-1985): n. pag. 21 *JSTOR*. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

¹⁶ Tamar Garb. *Women Impressionists*. New York: Rizzoli, 1986. Print.

¹⁷ Jean-Paul Bouillon and Elizabeth Kane. "Marie Bracquemond." *Woman's Art Journal* 5.2 (1984-1985): n. pag. 21 *JSTOR*. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

a particularly interesting piece that is a detailed scene of a bustling city street on a rainy day.¹⁸ (Figure 1)

The work shows Marie's burgeoning talent- her line work is precise, the facial features of her figures are carefully precise and the work has been expertly shaded to reflect both value and the scene's dreary weather. *The Umbrellas* and her other engravings show that she had a clear knack for the medium, but Marie was still infatuated with *plein air* painting and so she worked towards incorporating even more whites and light fragmentation into her pieces. As she spent more time with the Impressionists she began to experiment more with her own style; though she drew inspiration from her colleagues Monet, Renoir and Seurat, her choices in subject matter began to embody the themes of female strength and independence that are found in the work of Morisot and Cassatt.



Figure 2. Marie Bracquemond, *The Three Graces*, 1880

A good example of Bracquemond's increased determination in honing her impressionist style can be seen with her 1880 painting *The Three Graces*, which was first shown to the public at the fifth impressionist exhibition.¹⁹ This painting and the others she chose marked a definitive move away from the more conventional style of the pieces she had presented just one year earlier, and undoubtedly, the preferences of her husband. *The Three Graces* is a beautiful painting that draws attention to Bracquemond's knowledge of history painting and classical themes; its title and subject references the three graces from Greek mythology, who were the heavenly embodiments of beauty, mirth and elegance. (Figure 2)

¹⁸ Jean-Paul Bouillon. "Marie Bracquemond: The Lady with the Parasol." *Women Impressionists*. Print.

¹⁹ *Ibid*

This piece emphasizes the feminine allure as three beautiful and richly dressed women peer out at the viewer, holding their parasols and fans. Although presented as modern women, the contrast Bracquemond created between the background shadows, brightly colored dresses and strong backlighting, gives the women an ethereal halo of light. Bracquemond's imagination of this frequently depicted trio elevates the idea of the modern woman to similarly possess beauty, mirth and elegance. The painting's large size also shows Bracquemond's growing artistic confidence and a desire to prove herself as an equally talented member at the impressionist exhibitions. It is also possible that the three figures she depicted were not purely imaginative, but instead inspired by the "Trois Grandes Dames" themselves. Bracquemond would have known and socialized with Cassatt and Morisot before making this painting and then would have shown in 1880²⁰. Since the three women were uniquely situated as the only major female impressionists, it would make sense for Bracquemond to use her fellow artists as models for a painting that celebrated the modern woman and female camaraderie. This theory is supported by the attributes of the middle and most prominent figure whose facial features and hair styling are extremely similar to that of Marie's 1870 self-portrait. (Figure 3)



Figure 3. Marie Bracquemond, *self-portrait*, 1870

If this work was meant to be a subtle rendering of the three women, then it further exemplifies an interest with female representation. These types of works by and about women helped these artists establish their careers while also providing a refreshing perspective for the growing art scene. It would also suggest a stronger bond between these three women than has been previously discussed in art historical discourse. Seeing as Marie was at

²⁰ Jean-Paul Bouillon. "Marie Bracquemond: The Lady with the Parasol." *Women Impressionists*. Print.

the apex of her “impressionist period” when this work was completed, it is likely that her passive defiance against Felix’s wishes was encouraged by Morisot and Cassatt, who could have inspired Marie to prioritize her art.

Looking at *The Three Graces* in relation to *The Umbrellas* engraving, one can see Bracquemond’s artistic shift from more realistic “line-oriented” renderings to more emotive and color-oriented painting. In a broader sense these two artworks could be seen as metaphorically representing the two halves of Marie Bracquemond herself- Marie the artist and Marie the wife of Felix. Over the next years, Bracquemond continued to struggle with reconciling the two parts of her life, she painted in this same vein for a couple of years, but grew more and more distant from the other impressionists. Although it is unclear the extent to which Felix Bracquemond was responsible for Marie’s eventual disappearance from the art scene, it is safe to say from the writings of their son Pierre that at the very least his disapproval greatly impacted her spirit. Eventually, Marie’s passion for Impressionism gave way to Félix’s short temper and disagreeable attitude. In 1890, to keep the peace and focus on her family, Marie all but completely gave up art, only producing a few small works over the next twenty-five years.²¹

Their son Pierre would later write a memoir about his mother and father’s complex relationship, entitled “La Vie de Félix et Marie Bracquemond” in which describe his mother’s abandonment of her work, “Despite her gifts, despite her striving, despite her enthusiasm, the day came when, with an obscure feeling of grief, she had to confess herself beaten. None of her hopes had ever been realized; always there was disappointment, and yearning, for she felt a victim of injustice and her despair brought her nothing.”²² Today, the impact that Félix’s negativity had on Marie is seen clearly by the lack of recognition for her art. In 1919, three years after Marie’s death, her son Pierre arranged an exhibition that included all 156 of Marie’s pieces in hope of bolstering support and acclaim for his recently deceased mother.²³ Though many sold, they most often went to private collections and have since been lost in history; when a retrospective show on Bracquemond was held in 1962, only thirty-one of the original 156 works could be located.²⁴ Her few works that are still on public display are dispersed between small museums in France.

Conclusion

In summation, the artists Mary Cassatt, Berthe Morisot and Marie Bracquemond were extremely important to the impressionist movement, not only because

their success at the time opened the door for future generations of women artists, but because the type of art they made championed female representation in the arts. Although Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt have received more recognition in the past couple of decades, Marie Bracquemond’s legacy continues to suffer. Even though the reasons as to why Marie Bracquemond faded into obscurity are now more clear, there have yet to be amendments to her exclusion in art history. She remains an unsung hero of the Impressionist era, despite her talent and close association with leading artists. Further research into the lives and work of these women needs to be conducted and circulated so that their contributions to modern art are as well-known as those of the male impressionists.

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²¹ Elizabeth Kane. "Marie Bracquemond: The Artist Time Forgot." *Apollo* 117.252 (1983): 118-121

²² Pierre Bracquemond. *La Vie de Felix et Marie Bracquemond*.

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid