Sleep under a mother's protective gaze

Sleep in The Cradle is an expression of pure serenity, protection, and a mother's love. Simple from afar but complex in its detail, there is no debate among critics that this was Berthe Morisot (1841-1895) “at her most brilliant.”

Painted in 1872, The Cradle is a touching work, a portrait of a mother's love for her daughter. The artist’s sister, Edma, is gazing at her sleeping baby, who is resting behind the veil of a bassinet. Like much of Morisot’s work, the shapes are simple, but the lighting is complex and masterful. Although over time The Cradle proved to be the most famous of her paintings, it would not sell in one of the first impressionist exhibits in 1874, so she kept it in the family. The painting was kept out of sight until 1930, when it was bought by the Louvre. The painting gives the viewers a window into the private life of this woman, allowing us to step close to see the intimacy between her and her child.

Both Berthe and Edma took drawing classes as young girls. It was common at the time for young girls of European high society to take the occasional art class as a pastime and as a venue for higher learning and culture. When young women were married, however, drawing and painting were put aside in order that they could take care of the household, which became their primary purpose in society. Both Morisot daughters showed a remarkable talent in their drawing studies. Their art instructor wrote to their mother, “Considering the characters of your daughters, my teaching will not endow them with minor drawing room accomplishments, they will become painters. Do you realize what this means? In the upper-class milieu to which you belong, this will be revolutionary, I might say almost catastrophic.” Instead of listening to him and directing her daughters to learn more domestic duties, Madame Morisot simply sent them to classes with another art instructor, Joseph-Benoît Guichard. Edma married and was forced to stop painting, whereas Berthe still had not found a suitable husband and continued to paint on her own.

Along with Marie Cassatt, Berthe became one of the only women in her time to become a successful artist, and she was indeed successful by anyone's standards. The Impressionists welcomed her to their group—Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir all admired her greatly, some even admitting that she had a great impact on their own paintings. She was an integral part of the Impressionist group both in organizing events and in determining the aesthetic for which they strove. Their style departed from earlier, more realistic and exacting expectations, focusing more on the very core, or “impression,” of an image. Morisot painted with the very light and color of an image at the forefront of her mind. Whereas Cassatt paid more attention to form, Morisot was known for her mastery of light.

Vision itself was just as important to Morisot as the light itself. “Morisot was an artist devoted to the act of looking and seeing.” She played with the boundaries of the lines of sight within the figures of her paintings, from the artist to the subject and from the viewer to the very painting itself.

The Cradle brings to focus the very bond between a mother and her child. A painting by a woman was rare at the time and gave a
special insight to the lives of other women, which were focused entirely on raising their children. “The gaze is first set in motion in the mother-daughter relationship. But this is a mutual gazing, rather than the subject-object kind that reduces one of the parties to the place of submission,” writes Marni Kessler. The very act of looking itself is one that is tender and loving. There were many paintings of sleeping women or of men looking at sleeping women, which implied possessive and sexual feelings rather than caring and love. The “ethic of responsibility” or the female identity formation that flows from mother to daughter, a psychological archetype studied by Nancy Chodorow, has been associated with much of the work of Cassatt and Morisot.

Morisot shows a view of sleep that is different from the sensual and even different from the state of dreaming and instead introduces a framework of nurture and parental love.

Disclosures
Authors have declared that they have nothing to disclose.

References