

## A Celerity of Surface

by Kathryn Allan

***Berthe Morisot, c.1869-73***  
**Édouard Manet (1832-1883)**  
**Oil on fabric, 74 x 60cm**  
**Cleveland Museum of Art**  
<https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1958.34>

There is a hurriedness about this portrait of the painter Berthe Morisot, a celerity both in application and impression. What is this momentariness that tells us this is a modern work of art, and what does this new tempo in material reveal about modernity?

### *Form*

The composition of the painting is pyramidal – a visual technique that was not new. But where before the triangle was employed for its stabilising and harmonising qualities with its tricorn space occupied, in the Renaissance for example, by sculpture-like bodies of undeniable flesh and form, here Manet gives us a scrubby cascade of a figure that quickly disintegrates in front of us. Beginning at Morisot's headwear and passing through a more traditional rendering of hair and face, her body – or the coat standing in for a body – soon splinters into vigorous, stout brush marks, with Manet's application of paint in places more canvas than pigment. Flesh in its briefest flash gives us hands. The blur and scuff of Manet's brush warms us with clothing incongruously ephemeral. We can *see* the brevity of application, the speed of description. Woman as waterfall, a moving current? Or, looking at it another way – literally, from bottom to top – female as mountainous form of intellectual and artistic summits. This is a real woman, un-mythological. Modern life was quickening. Paintings, technologically, could be made more swiftly and portably than before, and an impression, a moment, was to be caught. In this painting of Morisot, where the poesis of the work renews itself with each apprehension of its surface, we have this speed: material acceleration across the picture plane, and the sideways glance pinned down in pigment but swift as a photographic headshot.

### *Colour*

This is a muddy work – browns, greys, dirty whites, the sullied cream of the canvas, near-black blues. Even the whites of the eyes don't escape. There is some harking back to the murkiness of the Old Masters, but there is a freshness of flesh as well. Morisot's complexion is bright, her face a beacon amidst a dim, painterly mire. Male gaze-weary, hers is a face that looks to the future: a gaze – singular, her own – that asks *What is to come?*

### *Subject matter*

This is a painting of the Impressionist artist Berthe Morisot. In portraying one of his contemporaries, Manet gives something of his present – *this is now*, it says. More, here we have a woman not only *on* fabric but *within* fabric: clothed. Morisot's body is unavailable to the spectator concealed as it is under a stack of tactile daubs and dashes, soft, swirling feathers painted hurriedly atop her head, the only apertures on offer those of the face – the helix of the ear says *listen*, the wide eyes stare, the rosebud lips just parted. Is this a painting of the senses, perhaps?

### *Theme of modern life*

Whilst art history tells us that Manet's sitters endured painstakingly long sessions, on the literal surface of this work we have speed and time: the frenetic lines, the quick stretch from head to hands, the contemporaneous artist (and female, in threads!) This, despite Berthe's stillness and quietude – and, dialectically, maybe more so because of these qualities – is a portrait of movement and of the faculties. And in its facture – fragmented here, continuous there – it is a modern work.

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*Berthe Morisot, c.1869-73*

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