



**NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPEAN PAINTINGS
AT THE STERLING AND FRANCINE CLARK ART INSTITUTE**

VOLUME TWO

Edited by Sarah Lees

With an essay by Richard Rand
and technical reports by Sandra L. Webber

With contributions by Katharine J. Albert, Philippe Bordes, Dan Cohen,
Kathryn Calley Galitz, Alexis Goodin, Marc Gotlieb, John House,
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Kelly Pask, Elizabeth A. Pergam, Kathryn A. Price, Mark A. Roglán,
James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, and Fronia E. Wissman

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Berthe Morisot

French, 1841–1895

234 | Dahlias 1876

Oil on canvas, 45.7 x 55.9 cm

Lower right: Berthe Morisot [stamp]

1974.28

Though a number of circumstances might have encouraged Berthe Morisot to paint still lifes, the subject featured remarkably little in her formative years. Pictures based on flowers, fruit, and decorative objects, such as *Dahlias*, were still widely associated with female artists, who typically found themselves restricted by propriety in their choice of themes. In a letter of 1869, Morisot complained that she was “reduced to doing the same things over and over again” and described how she had “arranged a bouquet of poppies and snowballs” but lacked “the courage to begin it.”¹ As a liberal-minded young woman in the Impressionist milieu, Morisot clearly offered some resistance to convention, even as she became aware of the changing significance of still life among her friends and mentors. Manet, one of the closest advisers of her early career, made several such works in the 1860s and gave a rather somber, vertical canvas of a *Bouquet of Peonies* to Morisot’s sister, Yves.² Both Monet and Renoir, colleagues of Morisot at the Impressionist shows and supportive throughout this period, painted inventive flower pieces as young men and continued to add to the genre on occasion. Surprisingly, *Dahlias* appears to be among the first of Morisot’s experiments of this kind to have survived, alongside a lightly brushed sketch of an apple and a jug, and a rather Manet-like study entitled *Peonies*.³

Against this modest background, the lush colors and sensuous brushwork of *Dahlias*, completed about 1876, herald a new confidence in Morisot’s art.⁴ Rejecting the symmetrical compositions of Manet’s peony pictures, she boldly placed the vase to the left of center, a device also used by Monet in his 1878 *Chrysanthemums*.⁵ More audaciously still, Morisot allowed the patterned, tureen-like container to dominate the scene at the expense of the flowers, almost pushing her display of blooms beyond the edge of the canvas. The effect is fresh and tantalizing, adding to the suggestion that the bouquet was casually arranged and that the picture itself represents an assertive act. Even

the arrangement of subsidiary objects is a little anarchic: a shadowy form at lower left can be deciphered as a fan, but it lies there unexplained, while a tiny portrait in an oval frame is almost lost behind the flowers at top right. The effect of a random moment that is not necessarily legible is characteristic of many of Morisot’s domestic scenes, which Paul Valéry associated with “the very particular charm of a close and almost indissoluble relationship between the artist’s ideals and the intimate details of her life.”⁶

For an artist who often applied her paint sparingly, *Dahlias* is unusually sumptuous in touch and surface, especially at its center. Much of the color was evidently applied wet-into-wet, after an initial brushing-in process with thinned paint that is still visible at the periphery of the composition.⁷ Elsewhere, the partial blending of one hue into another in successive, loaded strokes has left a pattern of shimmering forms and marks, especially in the flowers themselves and on the patterned vase. The suggestion that the vase was the true subject of the picture is endorsed by Morisot’s attention to its radiance and texture, built up in dense white paint where the glaze reflected the sunlight until it achieved a relief-like prominence on the canvas. Color and light, not line, are the defining qualities of this image, along with the implicit palpability of ceramic, marble, leaves, and petals.

Left unsigned by Morisot and never shown by her in public, *Dahlias* nevertheless occupies a significant place in her history. She painted the same vase again a decade later, though the Clark variant was chosen by Morisot’s admirers for the memorial exhibition that followed her untimely death in 1895.⁸ The selection of works was made by the distinguished quartet of Degas, Monet, Renoir, and Mallarmé, who signaled Morisot’s achievement as a still-life painter by including more than twenty additional examples in this historic display.⁹ Subsequently inherited by her daughter, Julie, who was to marry Ernest Rouart, *Dahlias* was lent over the next half-century to at least sixteen exhibitions devoted to Morisot or to the subject of still life. These took place in Paris, London, Geneva, Rotterdam, Manchester, and a number of provincial cities, before the picture was finally sold by her descendants and purchased by the Clark in 1974. RK

PROVENANCE Julie Manet (Mme Ernest Rouart), the artist’s daughter (until d. 1966); Denis Rouart, her son, Neuilly-sur-Seine, by descent (from 1966, sold or consigned to Daber); [Galerie Daber, Paris, sold to the Clark, 1974]; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1974.



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EXHIBITIONS Paris 1896, no. 163; Paris 1902a, no. 2; Paris 1907, no. 53; Manchester 1907–8, no. 88, lent by Mme Rouart; Paris 1922b, no. 20; London 1930a, no. 43; Paris 1931d, no. 41, lent by Ernest Rouart;¹⁰ Paris 1941, no. 23; Paris 1942–43, no. 111; Geneva 1951, no. 7; Paris 1952, no. 92; Rotterdam 1954, no. 91, pl. 45, as *Nature morte avec vase de dahlia's [sic] et éventail sur table*; Saint-Étienne 1955, no. 20, fig. 12; Dieppe 1957, no. 14; Albi 1958, no. 12, lent by Mme E[rnest]. R[ouart]; Paris [1961], no. 23; Vevey 1961, no. 16; Aix-en-Provence 1962, no. 11, ill.; Paris 1974b, no. 31, pl. 13; Williamstown 1975, no cat.; Williamstown 1978, no cat.; London–Amsterdam–Williamstown 2000–2001, not in cat. (exhibited in Williamstown only); Washington–Boston 2001–2, pp. 110–11, 214, pl. 42.

REFERENCES Angoulvent 1933, p. 121, no. 87; Rouart 1941, p. 19, ill.; Bataille and Wildenstein 1961, p. 28, no. 66, pl. 27; Mitchell 1973, p. 181, fig. 251; GBA Suppl. 1976, p. 49, no. 202, ill.; Mukherjee 1982, pp. 42–43, ill.; Claret et al. 1997, p. 146, no. 66, ill.; Whelan 1998, p. 64, ill.; Thompson 2001, pp. 44–45, 80, ill.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a fine-weave canvas (28 threads/cm), and the five-member mortise-and-tenon stretcher appears to be original. In 2005, a very old, brittle, and coarse lining fabric (19 threads/cm) was removed. During the relining, an old tear (8.9 cm long) was revealed on the lower left side of the painting. A new lightweight linen and Beva 371 lining was done, and the old stretcher was repaired and retained. A number of damages were corrected, including a deep gouge in the upper right quadrant, old losses, and lifted flakes of paint in several flowers and the decorative edge and body of the furniture, where upper layers had chipped away. The red glaze color, with its own crackle system, may have been responsible for some of the flaking. There are traction cracks and shrinkage problems in the brown and black paint on the furniture, and some of the gray paint in the upper left corner is crizzled. The thin varnish layer removed in 2005 was not old, and it is possible that the picture was originally left unvarnished. The varnish was replaced with a synthetic resin coating.

The commercially applied ground is comprised of two ivory-colored layers, visible in the background and along the

unfinished right edge. There may also be a thin gray wash between the ground and paint. Pinholes in some corners, together with paint extending onto parts of the tacking margins, suggest the image was painted off the stretcher. No underdrawing was found. The vehicular paste-consistency brushwork is very pronounced, and was applied wet-into-wet in a direct manner with very little blending. Old losses and oozing color in the bright red flowers point to paint applied over lower strokes that were still wet. The wall color was added around the flowers at the top. The signature stamp in thick brownish black ink was applied after the ground had cracked and suffered surface abrasion.

1. Berthe Morisot to Edma Pontillon, 11 May 1869; translation from Rouart 1987, p. 38.
2. RW vol. 1, 89.
3. Clairet et al. 1997, nos. 65 and 44 bis. In a letter of 1867, Morisot also mentions a "Pot de Fleurs" she had painted; see Rouart 1987, p. 26.
4. Not dated by Morisot herself, the canvas was designated "1876" in the catalogue of the 1896 memorial exhibition; see Paris 1896, no.163. At this period, Morisot was living and painting in the rue Guichard, where *Dahlias* was presumably executed.
5. W 492.
6. Valéry 1960, p. 119.
7. This is particularly evident at the right of the canvas, where this background wash was not subsequently painted over and barely reaches the edge.
8. The second version, *La Cheminée*, was painted in 1885; see Clairet et al. 1997, no.190.
9. See Paris 1896.
10. Information on this exhibition from Durand-Ruel Archives. See correspondence of 24 April 2001, in the Clark's curatorial file.

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Oil on canvas, 92.1 x 73.3 cm

Lower right: Berthe Morisot / Berthe Morisot

1955.926

Berthe Morisot was among the most loyal members of the Impressionist circle, participating in seven of their eight group exhibitions.¹ It was at the final exhibition in 1886 that *The Bath* first appeared in public, the most ambitious picture in Morisot's display and one of the largest of her career.² As on previous occasions, her submissions showed marked technical versatility, here

in the use of oil paint, pastel, watercolor, drawing, and in the decoration of fans. Less varied was Morisot's characteristic subject matter, divided between two broad themes: landscape, and studies of women and children. One of the few female contributors to these events, Morisot was often patronized by critics who felt they should exercise "gallantry"³ toward works with "the floating charm of sketches,"⁴ which she did not "trouble to finish."⁵ Several commentators, however, acknowledged her feeling for color and light, admiring a "gaiety and nonchalance" in her art that reminded them of a Rococo painter such as Fragonard.⁶

At the 1886 show *The Bath* attracted widespread and mainly favorable comment. The critic Jean Ajalbert approved of Morisot's "piercing quickness of eye," claiming that "she paints precisely, just as she sees and without flourishes . . . her brushstroke follows her glance."⁷ If another writer felt that the figure in *The Bath* "did not come out well,"⁸ a third announced that it was "veritably magnificent" with "perfect color and marvelous drawing."⁹ Comparing Morisot's image with academic paintings by Bouguereau and Cabanel, Émile Hennequin argued that *The Bath* showed "the primordial character of Impressionism," with its distinctive emphasis on "truth" and "extreme research."¹⁰ The subject of the picture proved more challenging, not least for male observers faced with a woman's art. Uncertain whether to see the bather as an adult or a child, Maurice Hermel found that such "diaphanous creatures" were "deliciously troubling,"¹¹ while Octave Maus exclaimed, "What seduction in the young girl at her bath, whose humid flesh shines out against a background of pink."¹²

The circumstances in which *The Bath* was made and the qualities of the canvas itself allow further insights into its place in the forty-five-year-old Morisot's oeuvre. Married to Eugène Manet, brother of the more famous Édouard, Morisot was broadly restricted in her choice of appropriate themes by gender and social convention. Her paintings of sisters and friends in their bourgeois homes and at leisure could thus be seen by an intimate of the family such as Paul Valéry to "keep closely in step with her development as a girl, wife, and mother."¹³ Morisot excelled in observing nuances of body language, the pleasures and constraints of fashion, and the subtle rapport between parents and their children. A favorite motif, presumably recalling her own experience, was the young woman dressed for a public excursion, often in an elaborate gown or outdoor costume. Here the