

Art and Gender

Suzanne Valadon: Model, Painter, Rebel Exhibition at The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia

By Yemisi Ajayi

Suzanne Valadon's Rebel: this exhibition shows almost 60 pieces of Valadon artworks - the works are an overview of all features of Suzanne Valadon's life and artworks journey. The introductory text at the entrance to the gallery begins with her personal and childhood information. We get to know that she was raised by a poor single mother with little education. Viewers learn that Valadon became a subject of a painting by other male artists she works for them as a model at a young age. This introduction text of her background gives viewers insight into her private life as a young woman and her struggle as a self-thought artist - and how she became successful without formal art education in the Paris art world. The text acknowledges that her achievement was full of obstacles including poverty and her social class challenges. Valadon painted her works on her expression rejecting traditional art methods.

The information that Valadon was not a widely known female artist or because she was forgotten her background texts - and knowing that she painted on her term motive visitors to continue to view the whole exhibition, the text entices visitors because it includes importance message of her personal life and that she was a confident woman whose works was not shaped by the traditional style of producing artwork. The texts describe her as a feminist painter of her generation- she was not afraid to paint her body and other women's body in a strange period. The concept of gender and sexuality stand out at the introductory text the executive director and president of Barnes Foundation said, "through this exhibition, we aim to draw attention to the ways many artists of merit are unjustly neglected because of biases surrounding gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class." This reveals the society in which Valadon lived and painted and labored to attain success as the female and feminist artist of her time.

Valadon exhibition narrative of all her works that tells the story of the artist. This shows that she draws from her own life experiences to create a body of work that visualizes the present-

day woman. The subject matter that communicates in her painting is relevant, her painting address motherhood and at the same time a professional artist, how she makes her way in a world that is controlled by men. The text shed light on that period, when women are struggling to make their name in the art world. Valadon's representation in the exhibition narrative is female-oriented. The artworks show intimate and domestic scenes, for example, her son, Maurice Utrillo, and her mother who supported raising her son. There is a room full of Valadon's portraits of other women, both dressed and nude, that suggested her connection with other artists and suggest her interest in other female models or feminist artists. The story is intended for the public, feminist movement, art historians, and activists. For a college student in art history and other art courses and the public at large.

All the artworks show Valadon's perception and creativity, from the domestic scene to still life fantasy. Like the female bodies she painted, it is realism persuasive and resolute. Viewers learn Valadon's experiences as an artist's model, mother, lover as well as a great female artist of her time who paint a self-nude portrait - she understands that the female body can be different, and she shows this knowledge in the way she portrays her subject in all her painting. The climatic twists are Valadon's portraits are based on real emotions and her experience which will encourage visitors, particularly women. As a female artist, Valadon paint with confidence to be independent in her skill and viewpoint, she painted real-life challenging scenes and subjects of feminism to examine and explain gender identity outside of the existing tradition. Valadon's artworks contributed to a theoretical argument about feminist art.

The artworks are thematically organized; the exhibition displays the works of Valadon including paintings, drawings, and prints between 1890 and 1937. The exhibition is arranged on a pattern of themes, including Valadon's family portrait, and her survey of the female body. Refusing to follow artistic trends and continuously faithful to figurative representation. Valadon developed a distinctive pictorial language characterized by decisive lines and bold coloration. The painting of Gustav Wertheimer's *The Kiss of the Siren*, 1882 was included where Valadon was a model and the subject in the painting, and it the first work we come across upon entering the exhibition gallery – this proves that Valadon existence in the French art world. The exhibition pieces end with the painting *Nude Sitting on a sofa* series (1916). The exhibition starting with Valadon as a subject for the artist's model and ending with other female bodies

sitting on a sofa relaxed and reclining with their body and not ashamed shows Valadon as a protagonist of the exhibition because it takes visitors on a journey into life of the extraordinary female artist and her important connection to early modernism of feminist art that address gender, equity, and sexuality which is relevant to the feminist movement of today.

Suzanne painted female nudes from a woman's perspective. She presented her audience with images of both attractive and unattractive women, but all appeared with a lack of self-consciousness conspicuously different from traditional nudes offered to the male gaze. There is assertive sexuality in many of Valadon's figures the nudes are unashamedly naked. Valadon rejected a representation of the female body as an object controlled by the male view. The history of the image of women as erotic objects in art history is constant and, for modern eyes shaped by the critical insights of feminist ideas continue to be an issue.

Valadon's painting of "Joy of Life" is also an interesting work that addresses gender equity in this work – the painting examines four women, who were seen bathing and are observed by a naked man who did not recognize the men presence - them about the She painted a more natural landscape scene. With the Blue Room, Valadon effectively rejects the tradition of male artists' viewpoint of painting women as objects of pleasure. With the clothing and the setting, she did not portray women as an object but she depicts them as an independent woman that is not bothered about social norms or class, gender, and sexuality.



Suzanne Valadon, *Joy of Life*, 1911: The Barne Foundation

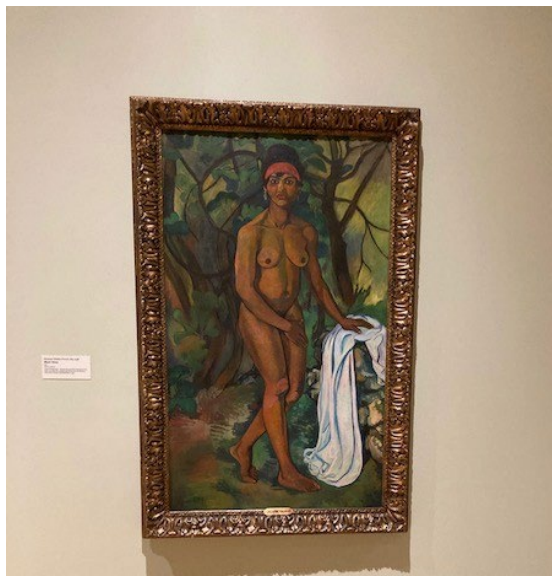
Another important painting that addresses gender equity is the painting of *The Blue Room* 1923 In this portrait the female model, in cloth up, the woman in this painting gaze away from the viewer, lost in a moment of distraction – and then seen in materials physical and colorful punch. Clad in green striped pajamas buttons and a pink top, the woman with a cigarette in her mouth and hands whose muscularly reveals hard labor. Valadon brushstroke of the deep blue field of the floral motif and set against a curtain of earth-toned marks. The Blue Room is a familiar scene with gender subjectivity.



Suzanne Valadon's "The Blue Room" (1923)

This painting is striking, the Black Venus, painted in 1919. Unlike other nudes, this painting depicts a life-size portrait of a nude African descent woman. Valadon seems to

challenge the traditional subject of gender and race in this painting. The model's name is not unknown, but Valadon's two versions of the same female body feature in this exhibition at the Barnes Seated woman Holding an Apple (1919). Reading the wall texts, I learned that Valadon was accused of racism but her offense was the opposite because she did not paint the black body according to the existing idea of her period on the Black female body. The subject matter of the painting was linked to supernatural love including the scene of creation and nature, perhaps the white robe flowing down from the table represents her purity and freedom. Valadon pieces of African women from that period are free of all kinds of social class issues. She stands as an independent woman, free to be herself and enjoy her body in a peaceful environment. This painting is a realistic and figurative representation of a new black female. Valadon with this painting associated herself with gender and racial discrimination and showed her support for the Black female body.



Black Venus 1919 by Suzanne Valadon

In conclusion, Valadon's artworks were based on her experience of the way her body was depicted as a model and is clear from her self-portraits when she shows represented the figures as a determined and independent female artist. Valadon made two nude self-portraits from different ages one showing her naked breasts with her gaze that show experiences and wisdom. Valadon enjoyed the view of her body either young or old which made her paint other female nude bodies

gracefully. In the exhibition, Valadon set ideal nudity which represents that Valadon's nude is about identity. This exhibition is fascinating and inspires me as a female artist and I believe will motivate visitors as well as feminists for self-evolution. Valadon is both subject matter and object in this exhibition narrative viewed in her nude studies in a way that reassesses the foundation of the feminist artist in connection with sexuality, race, and gender.

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