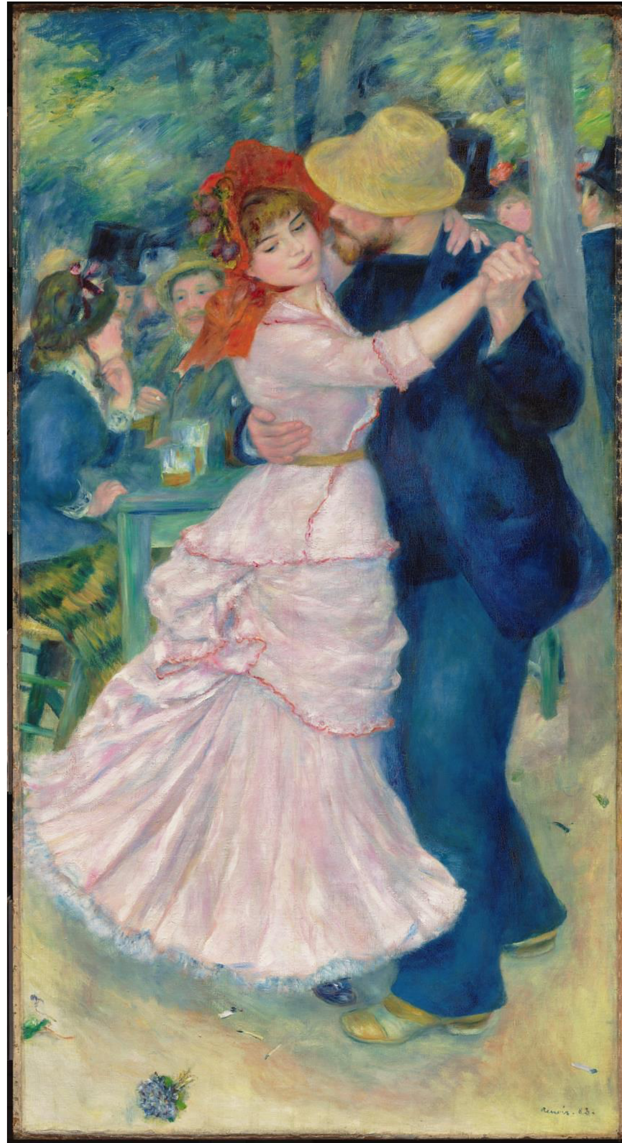
Suzanne Valadon
Background Notes
Dr Catherine Hewitt — 25 October 2023



Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Dance at Bougival*, 1883, oil on canvas,
181.9 x 98.1 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Suzanne Valadon was one of the Impressionists' most beautiful models. Pierre-Auguste Renoir painted her as a carefree dancer in his *Dance at Bougival* (1883). He also depicted her in a long white satin ball gown in the painting *Dance in the City* (1883). Suzanne is the morose woman slumped at a table with a glass and a bottle before her in Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's *The Hangover* (1887-89). And Czech artist Vojtěch Hynais painted her as a winged figure on the stage curtain he was asked to design for the National Theatre in Prague.

But behind Suzanne's captivating façade lay a passionate, tempestuous character with a dramatic past and a closely-guarded secret. She was one of the Impressionists' most beautiful models. She was born Marie-Clémentine Valadon in 1865 in the heart of rural France, and was the illegitimate daughter of a linen maid. When the family's poverty obliged them to move to Paris, the young Marie-Clémentine drifted from one unskilled job to the next until, aged fifteen, she was offered employment in a circus. However, tragedy struck when she fell from a trapeze and suffered a devastating injury. It ended her career as an acrobat, but steered her into the profession which would define the rest of her life: painting.

Marie-Clémentine changed her name to the more Italian-sounding Maria and began working as a model in Montmartre. By the late 19th century, this part of Paris had become the centre of the avant-garde art scene. Rent, entertainment and drinks were cheap, so the area attracted swarms of the capital's young artists. It was in Montmartre that a new generation of painters huddled around café tables and shared their grievances and ideas. Édouard Manet had a regular table in the Café Guerbois, where he was invariably surrounded by artist friends such as Claude Monet. This was an exciting time of artistic revolution.

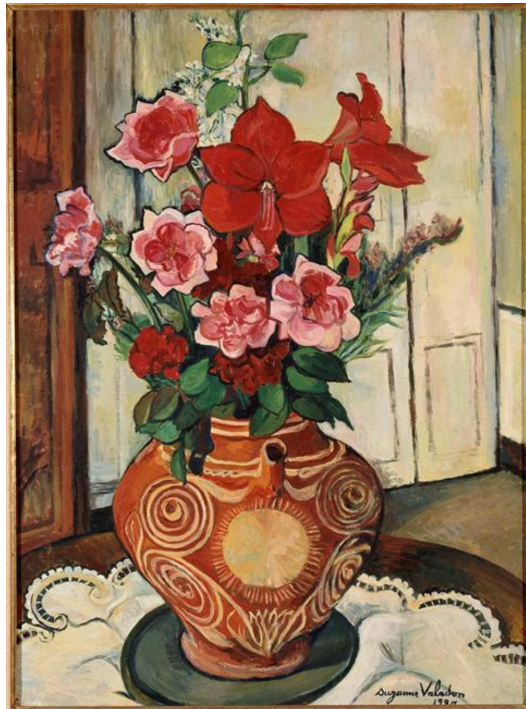
Maria Valadon's beauty quickly won her admirers. The blossoming teen posed for – and had affairs with – some of the most renowned painters of the day, including Renoir and Toulouse-Lautrec. Lautrec is said to have given her the name Suzanne as a joke after the Bible story *Susanna and the Elders* (Suzanne often posed for older men). Meanwhile, Montmartre gossip recounted that Renoir's lover, the plump countrywoman Aline Charigot, became furious when she saw *Dance in the Country* showing Suzanne, and smudged out her younger competitor's face. Renoir had reportedly repainted the smeared canvas using the victorious Aline as the model. Still, Suzanne loved drama and basked in the attention. But then one day, Renoir caught her drawing. Her secret was discovered: Renoir's model was herself a talented artist.

Privately, Suzanne had been drawing since she was eight. The Valadons were too poor to afford art materials, so Suzanne used stubs of charcoal and scraps of paper, whatever came to hand, to make her pictures. A pragmatic countrywoman, her mother thought drawing a waste of time, so Suzanne had grown used to keeping her hobby to herself. In the late 19th century, the Paris art scene was still a steadfastly male environment. Respectable, middle-class girls didn't work, and if a woman had to earn a wage, painting was hardly a reasonable or lucrative employment option. It was acceptable for a well-bred lady to practise art as a hobby, but for many, painting as a serious female profession was a scandal.

Acceptance at the prestigious Paris Salon remained the ultimate testimony of painterly success in the 19th century. This huge exhibition was the most important event of the artistic world. It was here that reputations were made and skill showcased. Gradually, the conservative Salon jury was growing more receptive to women artists, but a skilled woman artist still struggled to gain even a fraction of the recognition that a man of similar talent might enjoy.

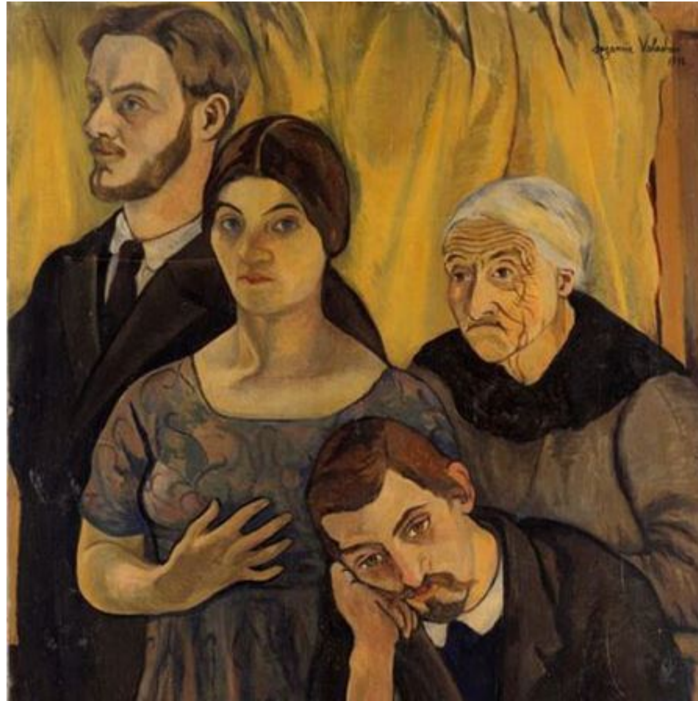
Suzanne's situation was different. For once, her low class was an advantage; coupled with her modelling career, it enabled her to enter the profession without immediately provoking controversy. And when she began painting, she astounded viewers, producing vibrant still lifes and portraits which showed the human form in a frank, matter-of-fact style. Suzanne's

pictures of children flew in the face of idealised images of social harmony. Her youngsters were not posed, but shown in clumsy, natural postures – unaesthetic but more true to life. Other artists showed what viewers wanted to see. Suzanne showed them the truth. She rejected the notion of the 'woman artist' – she wished to be seen simply as an artist.



Suzanne Valadon, *Bouquet of Flowers*, 1930, oil on canvas, 73 x 54.3cm,
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Limoges

The public often found her work shocking, but artists Toulouse–Lautrec and Edgar Degas, who became her great friends, could see her skill. Degas encouraged her painting and affectionately called her his 'Terrible Maria'. In 1894 when she was just 28, her work was accepted to the Salon de la Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, an extraordinary achievement for a working-class woman with no formal art training. However, once her talent was acknowledged, Suzanne's outrageous, bohemian lifestyle caused a scandal. She gave birth to an illegitimate son, the future painter Maurice Utrillo, when she was just eighteen. While she struggled as a working single mother, Suzanne enjoyed affairs with countless painters and the eccentric composer Erik Satie before marrying businessman Paul Mousis. But after 12 years, Suzanne began an affair with a man half her age, her son's friend, the painter André Utter. She divorced her husband and moved into an apartment in the Rue Cortot in Montmartre with Utter and Maurice. With their passionate natures and explosive rows, the trio became branded the Unholy Trinity.



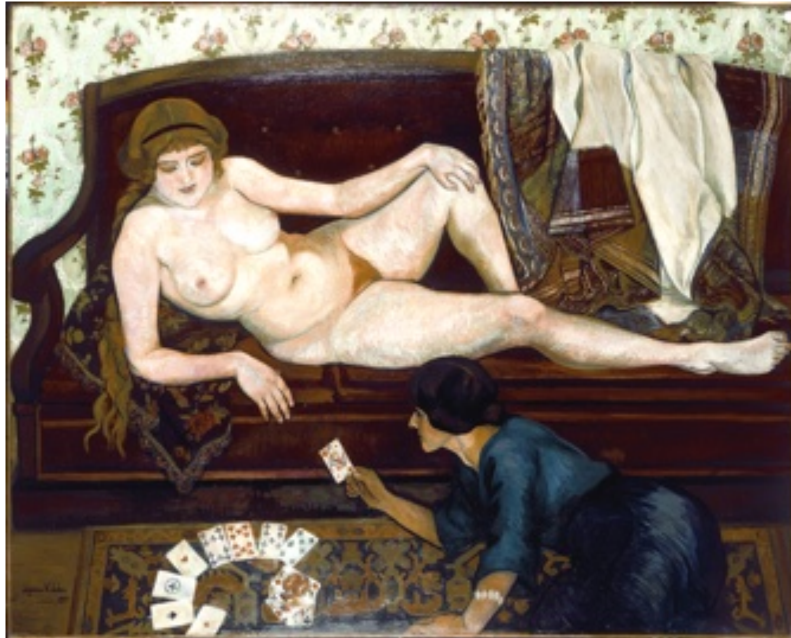
Suzanne Valadon, *Family Portrait*, 1912, oil on canvas, 98 x 73.5 cm,
Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

Suzanne's outrageous behaviour made her the talk of Montmartre. Still living it up in her 60s, Suzanne was one of Montmartre's timeless eccentrics. Suzanne had been poor for most of her life, but by the mid-1920s she was earning well, while Maurice's nostalgic paintings of Montmartre street scenes were making a small fortune. Suzanne bought a château in Saint Bernard in the east of France in 1924, and added a plush chauffeur-driven car to her list of assets. Now that she had money, she also purchased expensive hats and fur coats in all colours and shades from Paris's top designers, which she knew she would never wear. The stories of Suzanne's excessive living proliferated.

However, throughout her life, professional glory was obscured by personal shame. Maurice's alcoholism was a constant shadow. He regularly went out on drunken binges and was in and out of psychiatric units. Montmartre remained Suzanne's home for the rest of her life. She lived alone once Maurice married in 1935 and Utter moved out to live with a mistress. She died where she was most content: at her easel. She was 72. Suzanne's funeral was attended by the former prime minister, Édouard Herriot, and the artists André Derain, Marc Chagall and Raoul Dufy.

Suzanne Valadon's creative oeuvre includes some 478 paintings, 273 drawings and 31 etchings, and her work can now be seen in permanent collections around the world. If she has failed to fix herself as prominently in our minds, it is perhaps because she espoused no theory, adhered to no school and rejected the label 'woman artist'. She simply painted what she saw with honesty. Suzanne employed bold outlines, strong colours and pared subjects down to their bare essentials. 'Her great merit is that she never makes a single concession,' Suzanne's friend, the gallery owner Berthe Weill once explained. Suzanne tells the truth – and truth is not always pretty. 'None of those sweet, syrupy embellishments which women

adore,' the artist scoffed. 'The uglier they are, the more I enjoy painting them.' There is nothing half-hearted about Suzanne Valadon's work.



Suzanne Valadon, *The Future Unveiled*, 1912, oil on canvas, 130 x 163 cm, Collection: Association des Amis du Musée du Petit Palais, Geneva

Suzanne's story offers an inspiring illustration of female achievement against the odds. Her life was a series of setbacks and challenges. But she stood strong in the face of adversity, both personal and professional. She was a mother working in a creative profession long before the modern icon of femininity – simultaneously ambitious career woman and devoted mother – came into being. As such, she not only carved herself a niche; she dramatically altered women's place in Western art.

Further reading:

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