

11-25-2014

Child in a Red Apron (L'Enfant au tablier rouge)

RISD Museum

Maureen O'Brien

Rhode Island School of Design, mobrien@risd.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/risdmuseum_channel



Part of the [Painting Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

RISD Museum and O'Brien, Maureen, "Child in a Red Apron (L'Enfant au tablier rouge)" (2014). *Channel*. 44.
https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/risdmuseum_channel/44

This Transcript is brought to you for free and open access by the RISD Museum at DigitalCommons@RISD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Channel by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@RISD. For more information, please contact mpompeli@risd.edu.

My name is Maureen O'Brien. I'm the curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, and I'd like to talk to you about *A Portrait of a Child in a Red Apron* by the artist Berthe Morisot, one of the founding members of the group we know as the Impressionists.

What you see here is a painting of a little girl standing in a window in an interior, looking out on a landscape. So it's a figure painting, it's an interior painting, and it's also a landscape painting. It packs a lot of information, but it packs that information with what to the naked eye or first impression seems to be very loose and almost haphazard techniques. This was in fact a style that Berthe Morisot worked on very closely and carefully throughout her lifetime, and at this point in 1886 I really think she has reached a great moment of confidence in her style.

She is drawing her own daughter Julie, who is about seven years old, on a snowy, winter day. Julie is standing in front of these wonderful –what we call – French windows. They are windows that open like doors and have relatively small panes, and Julie is very close to one of these windows apparently looking out on the winter scene. Through the windows we can see that it has snowed; an unusual thing to be painted in Paris where snow doesn't stick to the trees for very long. But outside there are barren trees covered with white, and behind the trees seem to be blue chimneys that are puffing some smoke

The pallet of the painting is relatively limited. Most emphatic are the whites, the red of her apron, the blue of her dress, and her stockings. Julie, by the way, was the only child of Berthe Morisot, and her father was Eugene Manet, the brother of the painter Édouard Manet.

Julie is standing at the window and we can barely see her profile. It's what we call a *profil perdu*; it's almost lost to the eye. But she's very intent on what she's doing, capturing her in this moment of great intentionality and seriousness of purpose. It's something that a mother could do with a camera if she had one, but in this instance Berthe Morisot is capturing her daughter with a paintbrush and she's doing it quickly.

Her brush strokes are very long. They seem to slash through to create the impression of the apron, as well as the skirt on Julie's dress, and they spiral in a very controlled way, although it may seem out of control. They spiral along the edges of the painting so that you see the curtains hung high above Julie's head appearing to float out into the room as if a wind is blowing them.

Then below the window, there are these curved lines of pale lilac or lavender that perhaps you would think would be just her cleaning her brush on the canvas, but in fact she was such an intentional painter that those lines, too, are representations of air.

There are other things going on inside this painting that remind us of domestic life in France in 1886, and the kinds of things a child would do at that time. Julie is very close to the windows. She's holding one hand up; her left hand is being held up. And it appears that the fingertips of her right hand are very close to her face – to her profile. It's possible that she's looking through

the window with some sort of an optical device like a kaleidoscope. It could be a very exciting view to see the snow that way. But I think it's also possible that she's holding a piece of paper up to the window – a piece of tracing paper or onion skin paper – and that she's drawing the landscape outdoors. This was a common childhood way of drawing. You would simply trace what you saw through the paper, and then you would have the basis of the drawing to take back and perhaps color.

Now, as for the room we do know that it is indoors, it has windows with small panes, and the doors of the windows can be opened. But what we know about the painting is that this was actually Berthe Morisot's bedroom, and in fact to the left of Julie out of sight was a window that looked down into the family's living room or salon. So Julie was playing that day upstairs in her mother's bedroom and Berthe Morisot had set up her easel, her pallets, and her paints to paint Julie in this wonderful rapid impression of a child at play.

She never exhibited this painting and I don't think it was because it was unfinished; many of her paintings looked this way. Her favorite topics, as were the topics of some other contemporary women painters at the time, was her own intimate family life, and the servants she had in her home, her husband, and her daughter were more often than not the subjects of her paintings.

This one is such an intimate view of Julie that it remained in the family for over 100 years. Only recently it was sold by the family, and after having been owned by another private collector it came to the RISD Museum where we know it has found its place on the wall. It will always be here for viewers to admire it.

I find this painting so compelling because it is the daughter of the artist. It's a young, female child being portrayed by her own mother in a style that's very intimate to the mother and is also tremendously exciting and advanced for its time.

In a fresh and unvarnished way she brings us directly to the joy of the child; the sweetness and the privacy of the activity, but also puts these strokes on the canvas that are not meticulously drawn or thought out. At least they are not so meticulously drawn out to the viewer at first glance, but they are very carefully placed on the canvas to give you exactly the amount of information you need to respond to the image of the child the way the mother has responded to it; the way an artist would respond to it.

That impression, for lack of a better word, is what these artists were trying to do for us. They were trying to grasp modern, contemporary life – the movement of air, the tones of light, the activities of people in nature and indoors, in their own daily activities – and to express that as worthy subjects of paintings.

