

Suzanne Valadon: Defying the Definition of Gender in Life and Art

Suzanne Valadon (1865 – 1938) is one of the most influential and least acknowledged painters of the 20th century. If life is said to imitate art, then Valadon's rebellious, unorthodox, bohemian lifestyle is reflected in her works. Through this study, I intend to argue that the works of Valadon should not be studied based on her gender but in the context of the world she lived within. Valadon was a daughter, mother, wife, model, lover, and artist who painted from emotion and experience, her art and life are interconnected. Because of her unconventional lifestyle, it is said that she took on a male persona as an artist, and as such through her singular vision she defied the gender norms of her sex and altered the historical representation of woman as objects of desire. Therefore, you cannot analyze her paintings without also exploring her personal situation. This essay will explore both the conventional and unconventional themes in the paintings *Catherine Drying Herself* (1895), *Adam and Eve* (1909) *La Joie de vivre* (1911), *Casting the Net* (1914), *The Nude Black Woman* (1919), *Seated Woman Holding an Apple* (1919), *La Chambre bleue* (1923), and *Self-portrait* (1931). I will consider why Valadon chose the nude genre as the primary focus of much of her works (many consists of self-portraits) and what this says about gender in society. The life and works of Suzanne Valadon have been reprised in recent years as feminist art historians have questioned the art historical canon and are challenging the ideology of the male representation of the female nude which defined women as either virginal, a mother, or a seductress.¹ Through her work, Valadon took risks and developed a personal style with a distinct vision. She defied not only the rules of the day, but she

¹ Lane Gormley. "Artists and Models: Women in French Art from 1880 to 1930." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 5, no. 1 (1980): P. 43. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3346303>.

transformed the female nude and changed the model to artist relationship by viewing through a woman's eyes. In her depictions of the female nude, the woman was no longer an object for the male gaze but a subject in her own right.

Valadon was an anomaly for her time and has been remembered more for her lifestyle than her art, therefore her work has been left out of the art historical canon. Her extensive focus on both the female and male nude forms constitutes her works as *recherché* in comparison to her female contemporaries. Mary Casset (1844 – 1926) and Berthe Morisot (1841 – 1895) have been admitted into the canon and were both successful working artists living and producing works at the same time as Valadon. However, Valadon's art should not and cannot be compared in the same light as her female contemporaries. Unlike Casset or Morisot, Valadon was not a member of the bourgeois. She did not have the money or the status to officially train in the arts, instead she learned from observation and painted what she saw. This class distinction is what separates the women from each other and their art. Both Morisot and Casset stayed within the appropriate settings for a women artist, they depicted the femininity that was expected from their conventional and constrained social positions and the definitions of their gender. This is not to say that Morisot and Casset do not deserve their recognition, they most certainly do, but whatever avant-garde offenses they portrayed in their paintings, both stayed clearly within the standards of their subject matter. Valadon's marginalized class status allowed her to escape propriety and paint the nude without risking her position or reputation.² She rejected the delicate feminine brushstroke techniques and produced bold lines and vibrant colors which were traditionally considered masculine. Because of this Valadon entered the male dominated world of art first as an artist's model and then as an artist in her own right. Art critic Robert Rey wrote

² Patricia Mathews. "Returning the Gaze: Diverse Representations of the Nude in the Art of Suzanne Valadon." *The Art Bulletin* 73, no. 3 (1991): 416. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3045814>.

regarding Valadon's December 1921 Salon d'Automne solo exhibition praising her work stating that "The painting of these noble nudes is so clean, so clear, so natural, the colors so bold, the line always expressive ... I want to say and repeat that Suzanne Valadon is a very great artist, on a level at least equal to Berthe Morisot."³ Valadon was a force in art scene and comparable to her female counterparts but was clearly outside the definition of a woman artist. This divergence is the result of Valadon's reality as a marginalized and transgressive woman.

Valadon was an enigma, a mixture of rebellion, imagination, and creativity, and her journey from poverty to success was unexpected. Writer and family friend Jeanie Warnod described Valadon as "a mythomaniac and enjoyed inventing her life story, so that her stories were never the same from one day to the next."⁴ Born Marie-Clémentine on September 23, 1865, in the commune of Bessines-sur-Gartempe, Haute-Vienne, France to Madeleine Valadon, an unwed laundress and unknown father. As a young child, her mother moved them to Montmartre just outside of Paris. It was in Montmartre where Valadon would live her life among the artists during La Belle Époque. Madeleine Valadon could not keep her young daughter in school and sent her to learn at the local convent where Suzanne would not bother with her lessons and routinely escape. From the age of nine Valadon drew on whatever she could and whatever she saw. In Montmartre, she would have had a real-world education. Valadon would later state that "The streets of Montmartre were home to me; it was only in the street that there was excitement and love and ideas – what other children found around their dining room tables."⁵ By the age of nine, young Valadon had begun working, first apprenticing to an *atelier de couture*, then a waitress, a dishwasher, a street vendor, a groom in a livery stable, and lastly an acrobat. At only

³The Art Story. Suzanne Valadon. [Suzanne Valadon Paintings, Bio, Ideas | TheArtStory](#)

⁴ Jeanie Warnod, *Suzanne Valadon* (New York, Crown Publishers Inc., 1981) p 8

⁵John Storm. *The Valadon Drama; the life of Suzanne Valadon*. New York: Dutton, 1958

fifteen years old an accident on the trapeze ended Valadon's short circus career and she found work in the unstable, underpaid, and unreputable world of the artist modeling. Modeling would be the beginning of her unique career, as a model she would have access to the most influential artists and new movements in art.

Between the 1880s and 1890s there were a growing number of women entering the artistic profession but the social restrictions on women of artistic production during the time made it near impossible for a woman artist to study the nude form. Modeling was not a respectable position, especially in the nude, but this is where Valadon learned technique. She posed for ten years under some of the most recognizable names in the canon including Puvis de Chavannes, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and Edgar Degas, all of whom were already well known and 20 to 40 years her senior, and some to which she was involved with. It would be Toulouse-Lautrec that named her Suzanna in reference to the biblical story ‘Susanna and the Elders,’ to which he saw a direct parallel to the young model.⁶ While modeling she would spend hours studying line, composition, contour, and color. As such, Valadon studied, drew, and painted the nude form from her first works in the 1880s. Feminist art historian Rosemary Betterton questions what viewing the nude body would have done for the female artist and what relationship could women artists have to the male iconography of the nude? This forces us to think about how women will appear and from which point of view.⁷ Even coming from the stance that the nude form is aesthetically valuable, it was at the time bordering on sexually explicit discourses in pornography. This did not bother Valadon; she thrived in the artist's environment and the creation of new personas; she brought the painter's visions to life. She was

⁶ Hazel Smith. “Suzanne Valadon: Artist and Muse of Montmartre.” *France Today*. December 3, 2019. [Suzanne Valadon: Artist and Muse of Montmartre - France Today](https://doi.org/10.2307/1394982)

⁷ Betterton, Rosemary. “How Do Women Look? The Female Nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon.” *Feminist Review*, no. 19 (1985): P 3. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1394982>.

an extremely successful model by her own account. Valadon's evolution from model to artist was rare and not without defiance, she forged a new identity, and gained respect from her male peers. As a model, Valadon was the idealization of the feminine but as an artist she took on masculine traits including the wild Bohemian lifestyle.

While modeling for Toulouse-Lautrec he saw promise in Valadon's work and introduced her to Edgar Degas. Degas would be her greatest influence and champion; she would refer to him as 'the master' for the rest of her life and despite their differences in age, class, and gender the two adored each other. After seeing her works he exclaimed that Valadon "was one of us," buying one of her pieces and then committed to teaching her drawing and etching techniques. However, Valadon's young life was complicated and in 1883, she gave birth to a son, Maurice Utrillo, who would later be known for his landscape paintings. He would learn from his mother, adopting her unique techniques and use of color. Miguel Utrillo, an art critic, claimed the boy was his own, but his paternity has been in question since Valadon was also in a relationship with Renoir at the time. Valadon's mother took in Maurice so she could continue working as an artist, although she loved her son it was not possible to be both a mother and a working artist. Her early lifestyle drawings were of woman and children in the nude, many are of her son Maurice. Her drawings of her son allowed her to combine her roles as mother and artist depicting portraiture, genre scenes, and the nude. Although, these types of scenes were common in the works of her male contemporaries, it was not common for women to depict nudes and even more uncommon for the nude to be represented truthfully as opposed to the idealized. Both Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec recognized her talent and encouraged her to exhibit her works. In 1884, Valadon was the first woman to exhibit at the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, where she showed five drawings of woman at various stages of their bathing routine which were heavily influenced by Degas. Her works were shown with theirs from then on in private galleries and Parisian salons socially

connecting her to the modern avant-garde artists. Valadon never adopted an official style but there is a heavy influence of Degas in her early drawings.

Using the comparison of Degas *Bath* pastels from 1886 one can see that Valadon emulated her nudes from his concept of the female nude. However, Valadon refashioned the essence of the subject. Like Valadon, Degas too challenges the norm of the nude in *After the Bath, Woman Drying Herself* (1890-1895) (fig. 1). Here the bather (modeled by Valadon herself) is caught in the intimate personal task of drying herself, she is not posed but captured in action, and this moment of action is something Valadon would replicate throughout her career. While the subject is portrayed seductively in the ideal form, her back is to the viewer, she may or may not be aware of her audience, therefore, it begs to question is she denying the gaze? Or is this an extreme example of voyeurism? The 1886 pastels allow one to contemplate the complexity of the modern nude aesthetic from the masculine viewpoint. Valadon's pastels and drawings from this time take Degas theme and create a new concept of the female nude altering the myth of what femininity embodies. In her drawing *Catherine Drying Herself* (1895) (fig. 2), a stark contrast is seen in the model's representation. Valadon first names her subject, and by naming Catherine she is validating her existence as a subject not object. Catherine is curvy and does not conform to the ideals of beauty for the period. Valadon preferred working-class models with "real" bodies which could have resulted from of her time as a working model. The female subject is unsexed and undermines the stereotypical image of a woman in the canon. Valadon situates her model high in the picture plane in comparison to Degas, there is no sense of the dominant downward gaze and subordinate. The bold lines (which will be her signature) animate the piece and take on a life of their own. Both Degas and Valadon portray women in motion, however Valadon's nude loses the sensual, oversexualized softness of Degas. Degas himself acknowledges this in a letter to Valadon stating that her "wicked and supple drawings" are

“drawn like a saw.”⁸ The differences in technique and composition are what changes the narrative of these works. Through her style and technique, Valadon is challenging the voyeuristic premises of the masculine viewer.

Valadon’s career stalled after 1895 when she married stockbroker Paul Mousis and moved to the countryside, proving the difficulty it was to be a wife, mother, and working artist. Although Degas continued to show her work and submit her paintings to exhibitions, she would not work as a full-time artist again until 1909.⁹ Her son Maurice suffered from alcoholism and bouts of depression adding to her struggles, and Valadon attempted to calm his behavior through teaching him art. After over a decade of marriage, in 1909, Valadon began an affair with Andre Utter, twenty years her junior and a friend of Maurice. This time marks the beginning of her most bold paintings, her nudes were a success and launched her career internationally. There is no woman artist in which Valadon parallels in subject matter. In examining Valadon’s nude paintings, one can see that she is reinterpreting male themes, and historical allegory. Art historian Lane Gormley compares Valadon’s art to that of Courbet, Degas, Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Renoir suggesting that they were contemporaries and Valadon through her life experiences saw as they saw.¹⁰ Valadon herself stated "As for theory, nature imposes it: first the painter's own nature, and secondarily, the nature of his subject.... Has there ever existed a painter who painted as he wished? Each artist paints as he sees, which is the same as saying that he paints as he can."¹¹ Through her social connections, Valadon remained current on the discourses

⁸ Rosemary Betterton. P 18

⁹ Jacqui Palumbo. “This rebellious female painter of bold nude portraits has been overlooked for a century” CNN Style. February 7, 2021

¹⁰ Lane Gormley. P 46“

¹¹ Ibid.

in art at the time and could consciously reshape the current thought of the day. Valadon paints what she sees in her nudes, her work is not about sexual desire. Valadon was always aware of what she was depicting and representing. Historian Nichola Haxell explains, “Her sustained use of the nude (both male and female) has been read as both a collusion with and challenge to the construction of female identity through established patriarchal modes of creative expression.”¹² Meaning, through her work, Valadon is rewriting the rules of what is acceptable in art historical canon, while challenging the patriarchal system.

For Valadon, her personal and professional life were intertwined and this is represented best in *Adam and Eve* (1909) (fig. 3). The painting is a groundbreaking piece of art, Valadon combines biblical genre painting, nude portraiture, and self-portraiture. The painting also constitutes two firsts in the art world, one being a fully naked male representation and a full-length nude self-portrait. However, fig leaves were added to the male when the piece exhibited in 1920 in advance to divert censorship.¹³ Here Valadon paints herself and Andre Utter physically interlaced, in the beginning of their new relationship, celebrating her sexuality and happiness in the moment. This is Valadon’s first piece not in an interior setting and interestingly, she chooses the Garden of Eden, a conventional allegory which she subverts to represent her unconventional relationship. Valadon depicts herself as Eve grabbing for the forbidden fruit suggesting that her relationship with Utter is inappropriate, but she does care. In this painting Valadon highlights the normalcy of the female libido and demystifies the taboo of sexuality. Valadon depicts herself as a modern woman who is oblivious to any onlookers. She is not overtly sensual but confident, and in doing so she once again rendered the male gaze nullified. Valadon's nudes are transgressive

¹² Nichola A. Haxell. “‘Ces Dames Du Cirque’: A Taxonomy of Male Desire in Nineteenth-Century French Literature and Art.” *MLN* 115, no. 4

¹³ Singletary, Suzanne.

first for the fact that she, a woman, is painting them, and secondly that she uses her body to express her own desires and needs where there has been no parallel tradition for her to follow.¹⁴

During the late 19th century and early 20th century women and nature were connected, a woman was seen “as controlled by her instincts, emotions, and biology, which situates her closer to the realm of nature than her male "opposite" can be placed. Woman as nature was thus the embodiment of sexual instincts.”¹⁵ In *La Joie de vivre* (1911) (fig. 4), Valadon reinterprets Henri Matisse’s 1906 painting of the same name and overall scene. In Matisse’s painting, the women are one with nature and ideally posed to be viewed. In contrast, Valadon's version represents the women as one with nature but self-absorbed in their actions. Art historian Gill Perry explains that “These female figures seem strangely separate from each other, from the male viewer and from the nature that surrounds them. Far from evoking a utopian harmony of women and nature suggested by, for example, Matisse or Gauguin, Valadon’s robust and sharply outlined women suggest a more ambiguous, dislocated relationship with both nature and the male spectator.”¹⁶ While Valadon’s women can be viewed going against the current parameters of the canon this painting also contradicts that statement. The woman in the middle appears to be in pose, while the woman behind her is faces away, and two more are crouched in action. The women are in ways on display and not at the same time. It may be that the women Valadon is depicting reflects Valadon’s own experiences. Therefore, this could be an interpretation of how Valadon feels about the modeling profession and always being on display in retrospect.

In her most shocking artwork *Casting the Net* (1914) (fig. 5), Valadon goes against all social conventions and contradicts the male gaze replacing it with the female gaze. The near life-

¹⁴ Patricia Mathews.P 416.

¹⁵ Patricia Mathew. P 423

¹⁶ [Suzanne Valadon Paintings, Bio, Ideas | TheArtStory](#)

size painting depicts idealized, strong, athletic, and muscular men. They move in a way that emphasizes their physical attributes. There is a deep sense of desire and sensuality in the painting towards the male form. The men are not subjects but objects to be admired. Valadon has changed the narrative; she is now both artist and voyeur, and she is now the dominant and her model (Utter) the subordinate. In this piece Valadon clearly challenges the standard of the genre by flipping it around and fully embodies as a woman what was considered a masculine viewpoint. Through this piece the act of viewing places the woman in power.

There are few depictions of black women as the subject during this period and before that that were not linked to colonialism, slavery, or hypersexuality. Going further against the convention of the day, Valadon paints two pieces of a nude black female in *Black Venus* (1919) (fig. 6) and *Seated Woman Holding an Apple* (1919) (fig. 7). Valadon frees her subject from the long-established norm and places her with traditional themes of allegory, thus raising the issue of the black woman as a representation of sexuality. Her subject, who is thought to be a lover of her son Maurice, is depicted within the role of Greek goddess in *Black Venus*. She is not passive, she stares very consciously, self-assured, and almost confrontationally out at the viewer. She is not still but in motion, but she is not stopping to be viewed. Valadon's image does not over sexualize the subject; she is not the exotic 'other' as the typical images of the day would have represented her. In *Seated Woman Holding an Apple*, Valadon depicts her model as the biblical Eve, once again holding the forbidden fruit. However, in this painting her subject does not dignify the viewer with a returning glance. This portrayal has many subjective meanings regarding race, sexuality, gender, and the canon but one cannot know what Valadon's main objective was in this piece. It is certain in retrospect that Valadon did challenge all these themes and the highly contested subject of the black woman.

In her most recognizable piece, *La Chambre bleue* (1923) (fig. 8), Valadon mocks art historical precedent and recreates the canon. Reminiscent to Titian's *Venus with an Organist and Cupid* (1549) and Edouard Manet's 1863 painting, *Olympia* with hints of Matisse's influence in the floral blue and white background, Valadon directly provokes the male conventions of the genre. In this self-portrait Valadon presents herself as the modern odalisque. Lounging in the conventional pose for the female nude, wearing pants, and smoking; all traditional male characteristics. The books at her feet further represent her intelligence as the modern woman. There is nothing seductive in this painting, it is not meant to be sensual, but a reflection of Valadon's own self-awareness. Valadon is comfortable in her body, mind, and sexuality. This portrait is the cumulation of all her teachers and learned techniques. It has a demanding sense of authority as Valadon exclaims that she is confident in herself and in her abilities as an artist.

Valadon was "one of the most well documented and "seen" French artists"¹⁷ in history. This is true not only because of her work as an artist model but also through her various self-portraits. Valadon candidly painted and documented herself throughout her life with reverent realism. These portraits allow the viewer an intimate look into the psyche of Valadon. Betterton explains that "It is clear from the self-portraits that she saw herself in an uncompromising and independent way. She is both subject and object, viewer and viewed, in her nude studies, in a way which begins to redefine and reconstruct the relationship of artist and model and, in turn, of spectator and image."¹⁸ In her last depiction of herself, Valadon's *Self-portrait* (1931) (fig. 9) expresses the intimate relationship between spectator and image. Valadon, serious and no longer youthful, does not idealize herself; she gives us an honest interpretation of aging and a woman's identity. Modeling allowed her to see real woman take on different facades and masquerade as

¹⁷ Singletary, Suzanne.

¹⁸ Rosemary Betterton. P 14

ideal representations of perfection through the male gaze. Valadon was always true to herself and her emotions when painting, this painting is a justification of her worth as a woman and an encouragement for other woman to see themselves as they are not as they are imagined to be.

In the last decade of her life. Suzanne Valadon's popularity and success continued, she was highly regarded among critics and her contemporaries. Valadon was exhibiting internationally in New York, Prague, Chicago, and Berlin all while consistently displaying her paintings at the Salon des Femmes Artists Moderns. In 1937, a year before her death she sold many paintings to the French state including three paintings to the lauded Musée de Luxembourg. Despite these accomplishments, along with being the first woman to exhibit at the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, her radical approach to the female nude form, and her image immortalized in the works of de Chavannes, Renoir, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Degas, she has been relatively forgotten in the decades since her death. It is suggested by Nancy Ireson, Deputy Director for Collections and Exhibitions at the Barnes Foundation that her "fame dimmed following her death, perhaps because she was never associated with a particular art movement, or because she was overshadowed by her male peers."¹⁹ However, Valadon's distinct lifestyle, her disregard for tradition, and her deliberate commitment to defying the definitions of gender did not align with the conservative ideals of the writers of the art historical canon. It is suggested that the iconography of the nude has served as the embodiment for female sexuality and objectification since the Renaissance and has been unaffected by woman artists since.²⁰ But Valadon did challenge that culture and she succeeded; her nudes are extraordinary in relation to the time she lived. Valadon transformed the gaze and gave it back to women. She presented women as passionate beings capable of desire and the voyeuristic gaze. Suzanne Valadon lived

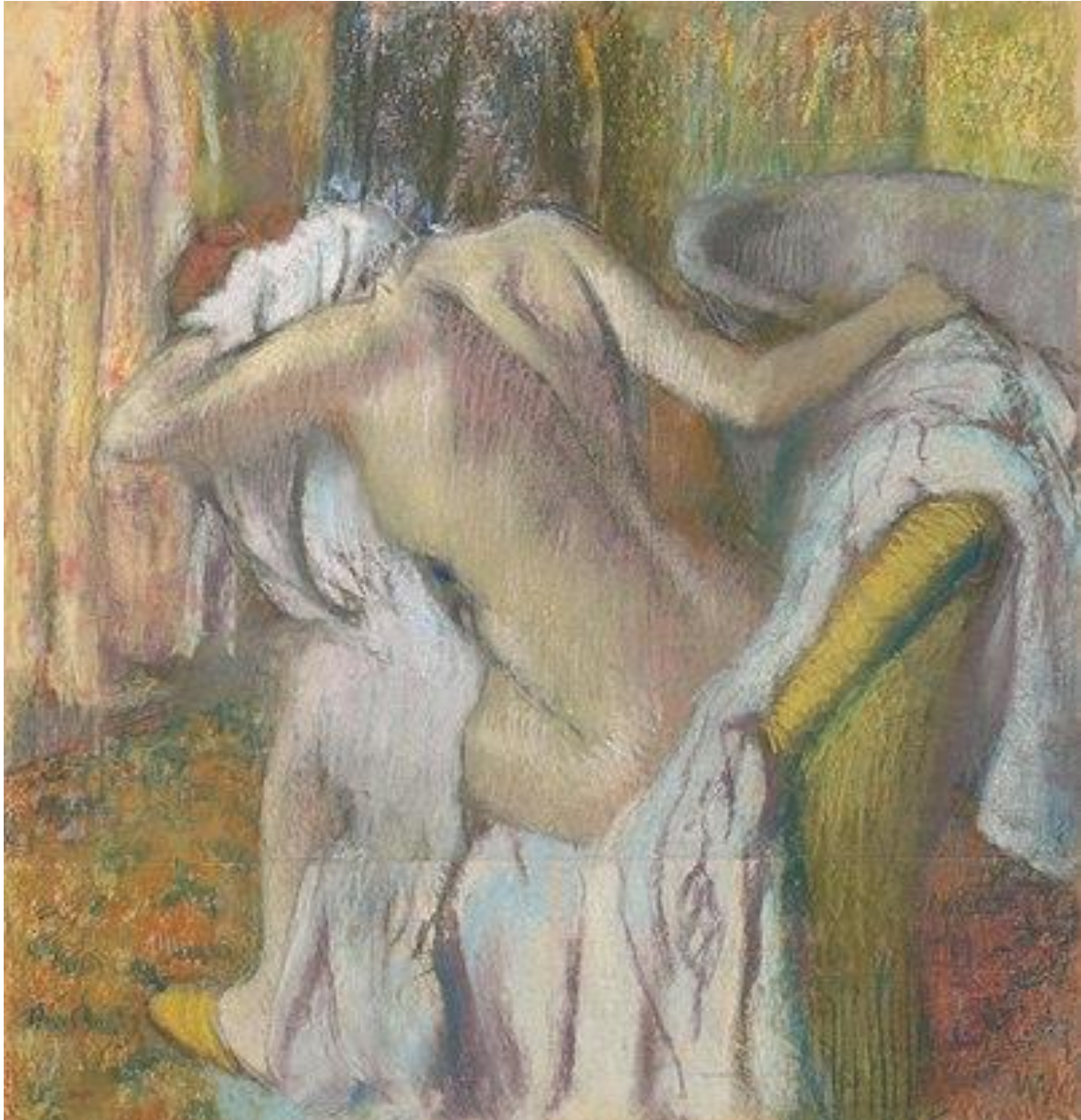
¹⁹ Jacqui Palumbo. "This rebellious female painter of bold nude portraits has been overlooked for a century" CNN Style. February 7, 2021

²⁰ Rosemary Betterton. P 4

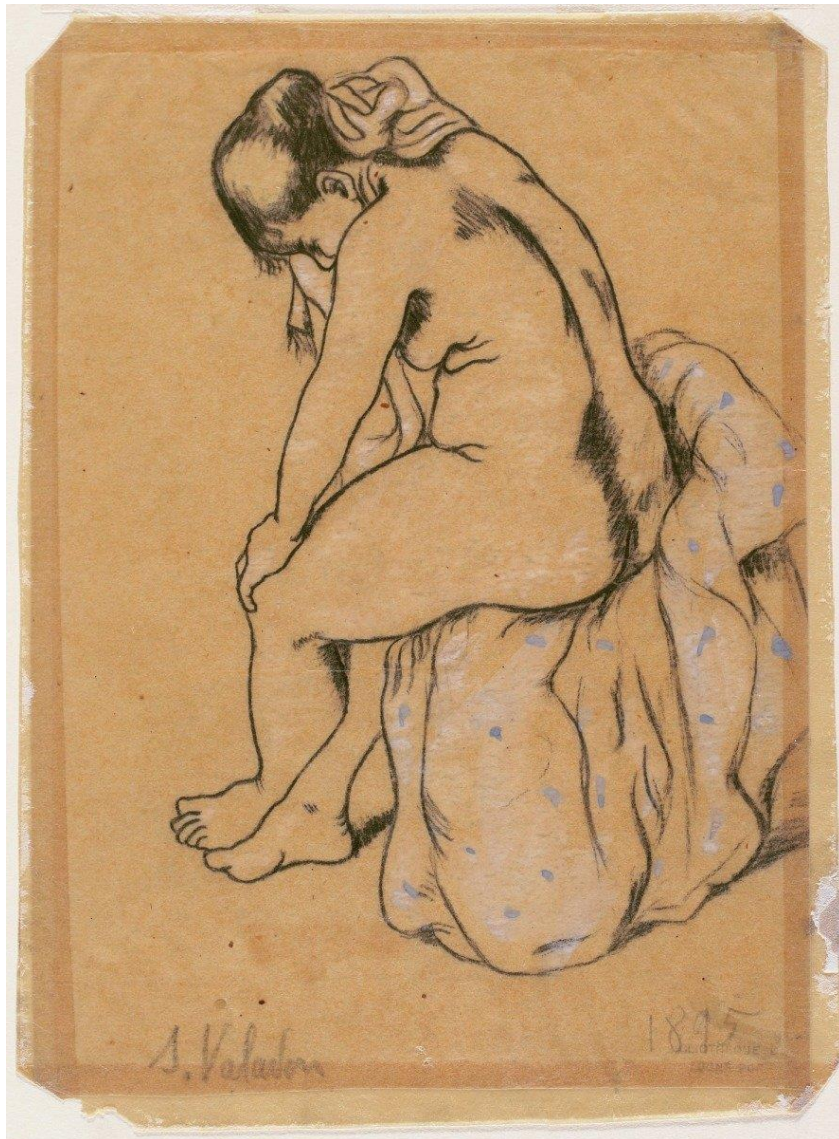
on her own terms and painted as she lived while redefining the ideals of gender and setting a path for future female artists.

In April of 1938, after a successful retrospective of her works at the Galerie Bernier Suzanne Valadon died in her studio apartment while painting. The French art critic George Besson stated Valadon was “the most justifiably famous” woman artist of her time and another critic indicated that her place in the history of 20th century painting was guaranteed.²¹ Today her home, 12 Rue Cortot is included in the buildings that make up the famous Musée de Montmartre. The museum is dedicated to the history of the vibrant neighborhood and to the artists who gave it life which Suzanne Valadon was certainly a part of.

²¹ Hewitt, Catherine. *Renoir's Dancer: the secret life of Suzanne Valadon*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017



(fig.1) Edgar Degas, *After the Bath, Woman Drying Herself*, 1890-1895



(fig. 2) Suzanne Valadon, *Catherine Drying Herself*, 1895



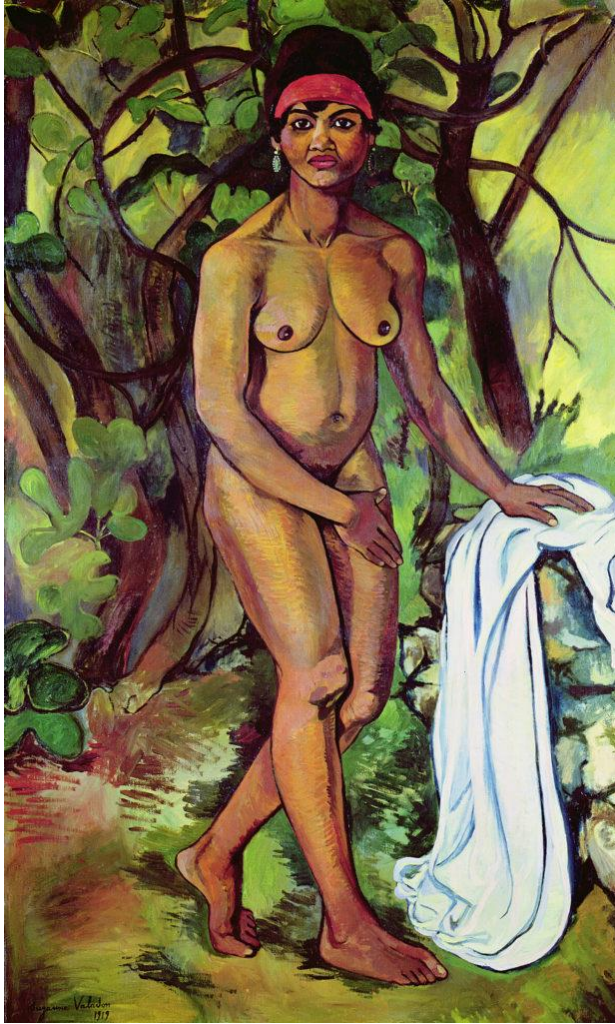
(fig. 3) Suzanne Valadon, *Adam and Eve*, 1909



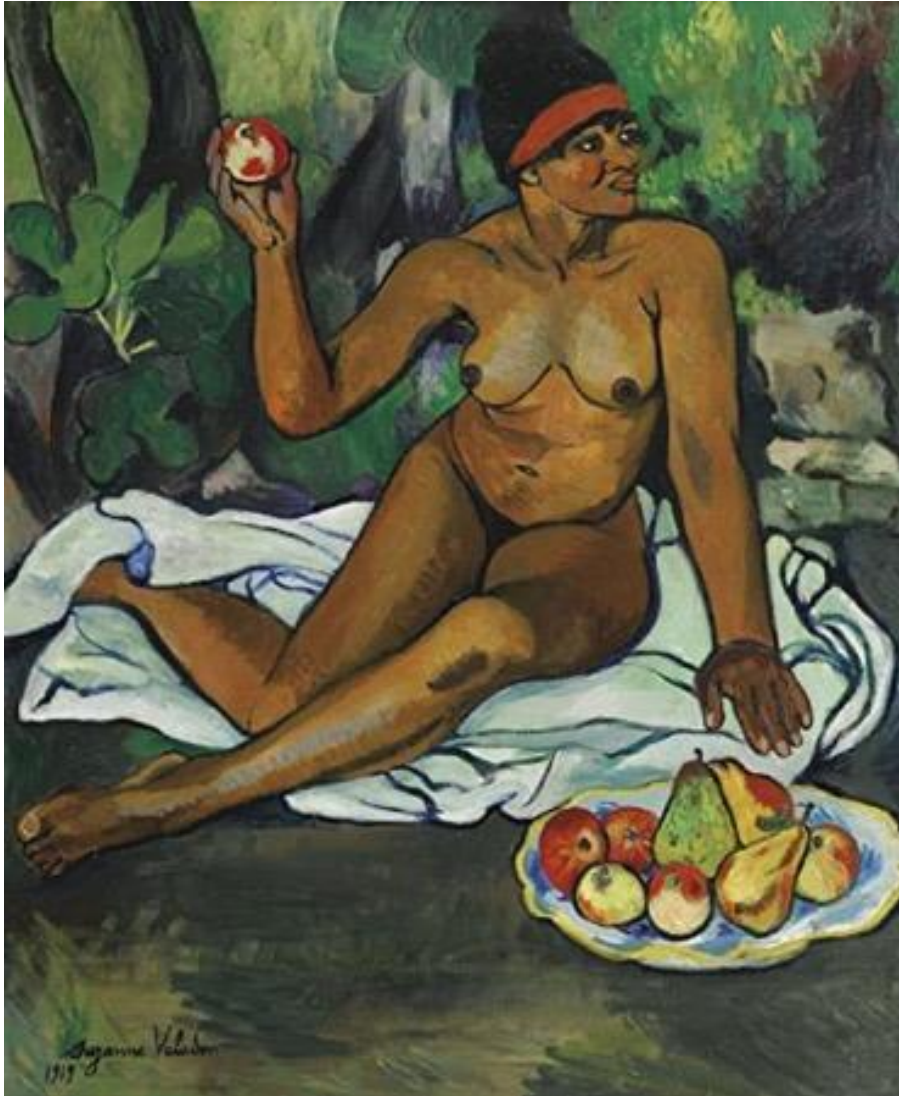
(fig. 4) Suzanne Valadon, *Joy of Life*, 1911



(fig. 5) Suzanne Valadon, *Casting the Net*, 1914



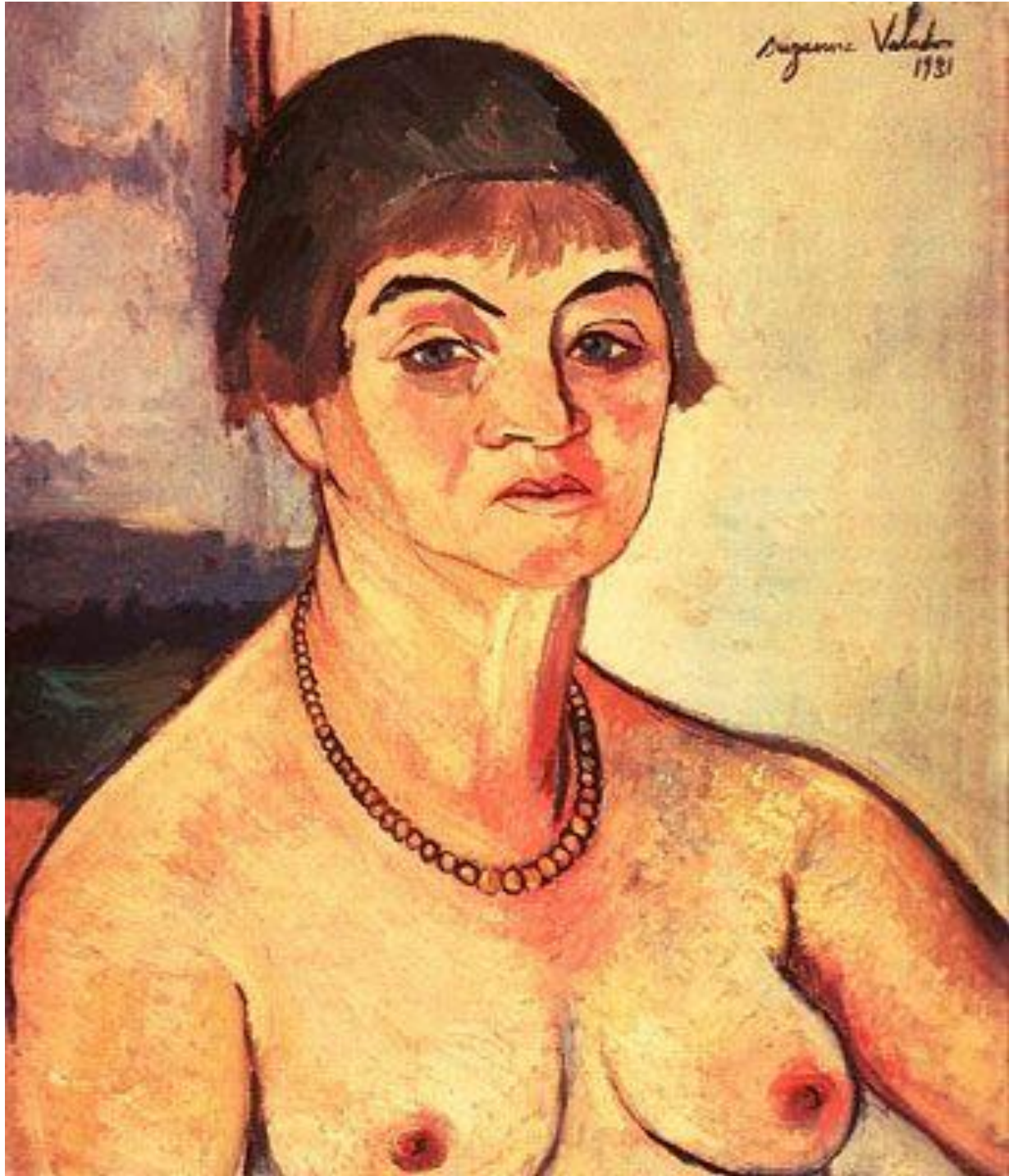
(fig. 6) Suzanne Valadon, *Black Venus / Venus noire*, 1919



(fig. 7) Suzanne Valadon, *Seated Woman Holding an Apple*, 1919. Private collection, Miami.



(fig. 8) Suzanne Valadon, *La Chambre bleue*, 1923



(fig. 9) Suzanne Valadon, *Self-portrait*, 1931

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