

From Cradle to Grave

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“The Cradle” is Berthe Morisot’s most famous painting, and the first of many to focus on her favourite theme of mother and child. The work’s small size (56 × 46 cm) enhances its intimacy, depicting Morisot’s sister, Edma, watching over her sleeping daughter, Blanche. Edma accentuates the feeling of closeness between the two by drawing the cradle’s drape towards herself and mirroring Blanche’s bent right arm with her own left. Even with the soft pastel colours removed in a black and white rendition, the mother’s subtle expression of love mixed with awe remains; her visage is confident and positive.

Berthe Morisot was a successful academic painter, exhibiting in the establishment’s Salon de Paris for seven years. “The Cradle” was painted in Paris in 1872, just before Morisot

became the first woman to show with the breakaway Salon de Refuses in 1874, where her paintings were exhibited alongside those of the impressionists. She was one of only three women to become accepted members of this august group. “The Cradle” received only mild acclaim in 1874 and was withdrawn from the exhibition, unsold. It remained in the family of the model, until 1930, when it was purchased by the Louvre.

Le berceau, Berthe Morisot (1841–1895). RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d’Orsay) / Hervé Lewandowski.

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