

# Women Impressionist Artists:

## Her Paris



Above: A wall-size mural of the Eiffel Tower welcomes visitors to the Her Paris exhibition at the Denver Art Museum. Below: Women weren't allowed to enroll in the pre-eminent state-run art school, the *École des Beaux-Arts*, so many attended the private *Académie Julian*, along with foreign students who were not allowed at the *L'École*.

By Laurie Dunklee  
Paris was the hub of the art world in the latter half of the 19th century, with some of the best art produced by women. Some of the women artists are well-known to us, while others' work has recently been brought into view.

"Some of the paintings in this show have only been out for 10 years, and they are in great demand," said Laurence Madeline, curator of "Her Paris: Women Artists in the Age of Impressionism," at the Denver Art Museum through Jan. 14. "So much is still in storage, in disrepair or lost. Where are these paintings?"

The exhibition features more than 80 paintings by 37 women artists from across Europe and America, who migrated to Paris between 1850 and 1900 to further their careers. Represented are well-known artists such as Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt and Rosa



Bonheur, as well as painters lesser known in the United States, including Anna Ancher and Paula Modersohn-Becker. A wall-size mural of the Eiffel Tower greets visitors. "How did Paris appear to women of the time?" Madeline asked the group during a media preview. "Paris was enjoying a renaissance during the Second Empire [1853-70], under Napoleon III," Madeline said. "Liberal

Right: "The Artist Venny Soldan-Brofeldt" by Hanna Pauli. The artist looks confidently out of the canvas, unlike the demure expressions typical of the time.

Below left: "Peasant Woman from Normandy" by Asta Nørregaard.

Below right: "Children Playing on the Beach" by Mary Cassatt, a popular depiction of children directly observed from life.



reforms were introduced. The new Paris, with its beautiful public parks, made an impression on young women artists and they were infused with love for the city."

Unfortunately, Parisian society was still very restrictive for women. They were not allowed to attend the *École des Beaux-Arts* (Academy of Fine Arts)—the country's most important art academy—until 1897, and it was not socially acceptable to frequent the

public cafes, where artists congregated to work on their art and share ideas.

At L'École des Beaux-Arts, a state-run school, men learned art fundamentals, including figures. Male models were used and women were not allowed in the room with a nude. "It was said that with women in the room, 'the men could not behave freely,'" Madeline said. "The reality was that women were a threat because their



Left: "Among the Flowers" by Louise Abbéma portrays a Parisienne, a fashionable lady. Women artists, who knew the art and practice of fashion, were adept at painting women as works of art in clothes.

Below: "Evening, Interior" by Harriet Backer. One of three paintings depicting readers that highlight the life of the mind.



Right: "Stokkavanel" by Kitty Kielland. After studying in Paris, artist Kielland returned to her native Norway, where she was instrumental in the development of plein air (outdoor) painting—sometimes in treacherous weather and on canvases as large as six feet across.



Right: "The Meeting," a portrait of Paris slum children by Marie Bashkirtseff. Bashkirtseff is best known as a diarist. Her journal has been called "a strikingly modern psychological self-portrait of a young, gifted mind."

Far right: "Echo," by Ellen Thesleff, shows a young girl discovering, in a single cry, the power of her own voice.



art competed with the men's. So it was an economic issue."

Women attended the private *Académie Julian*, along with foreign students who were not allowed at L'École des Beaux-Arts.

The artists also formed their own organizations, including the influential *Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs*. The *Union* distributed a weekly publication to its members to foster mutual support and campaigned

for women's entry into state schools and competitions. Its annual exhibitions, the *Salons des Femmes*, were reviewed in the daily and art press and became a catalyst for hot debates of women's potential contributions to art.

The restrictions put on women artists resulted in a move forward into modern art styles. "Since women could not wander freely in Paris, their paintings inhabit an intimate, indoor world," said Angelica Daneo, curator

of painting and sculpture at the DAM. "Their figures are mostly family and friends and their landscapes are their own gardens." "It's ironic that other greats of the time, like Monet and Manet, were leaving the traditional L'École des Beaux-Arts styles to focus on small subjects and paint their own gardens," added Madeline.

The final gallery gathers paintings of girls and young women. "These paintings are about the moment when a girl transitions into a woman," said Daneo. "The subjects are full of self-doubt, as well as hope for the future. They are symbolic of the trajectory of women's art. Women were ready for full recognition as artists."

"All women artists are ready, thanks to the ladies who paved the way," said Madeline. "This show is not about women, just very good artists."

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