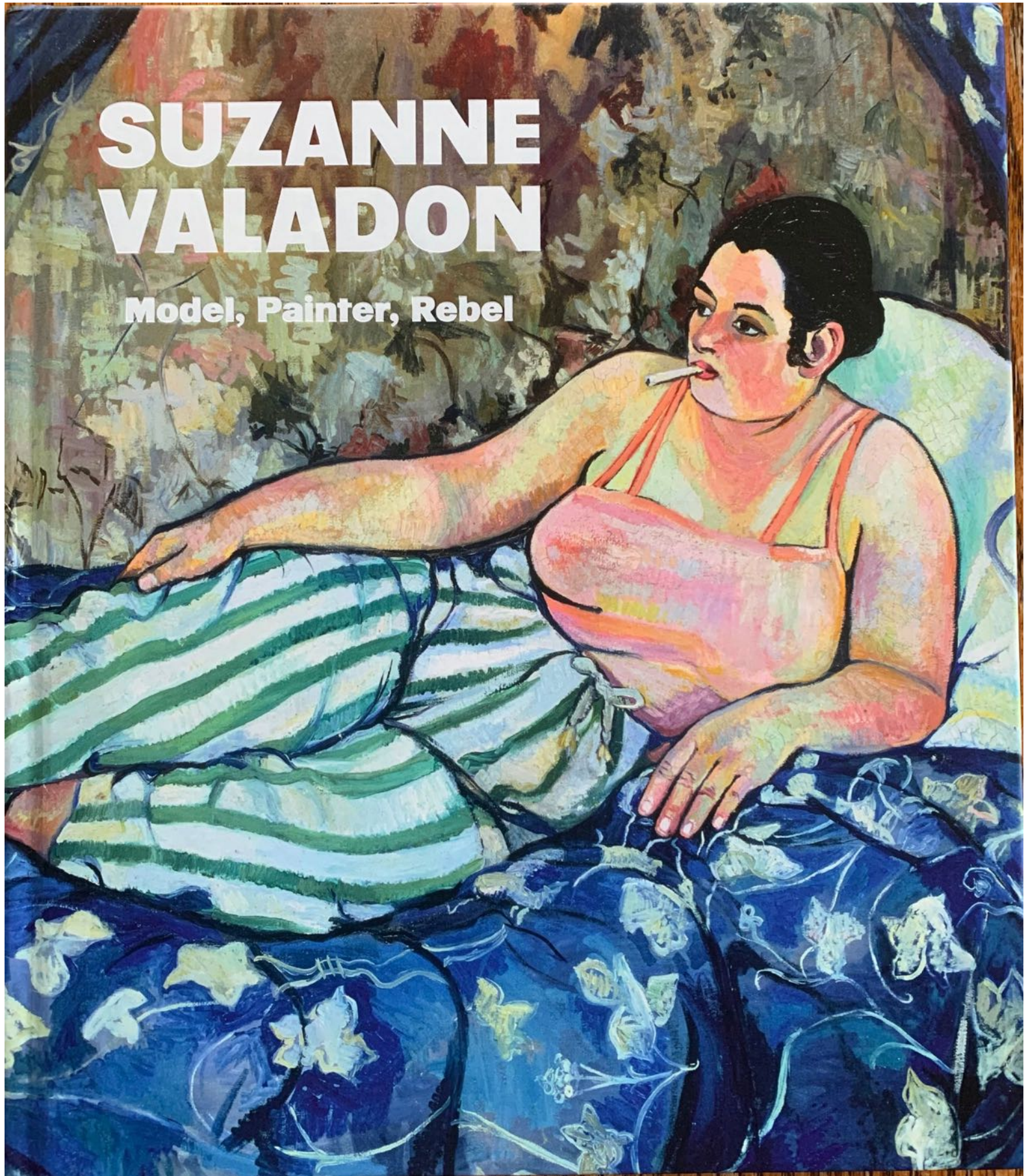


SUZANNE VALADON

Model, Painter, Rebel



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Edited by Nancy Ireson

with contributions by Lisa Brice, Adrienne L. Childs, Lauren Jimerson,
Marianne Le Morvan, Martha Lucy, Denise Murrell, and Ebonie Pollock

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Disrupting Tradition: Suzanne Valadon's *Black Venus*

Adrienne L. Childs, Nancy Ireson, Lauren Jimerson,
Denise Murrell, and Ebonie Pollock

Online conversation held March 22, 2021, transcribed and edited by Corrinne Chong

Nancy Ireson: I'd like to open this conversation by asking Ebonie about her BA thesis, "Suzanne Valadon's *Black Venus*," which to our knowledge is the first focused study of the topic. Can you tell us what drew you to this particular painting, and how you arrived at what you describe as the "Black Venus series"?

Ebonie Pollock: *Black Venus (Vénus noire)* (1919; see plate 35) was the first work by Valadon that I encountered, in a book on interwar women artists in France. I was immediately riveted by the painting's complexity, many layers, and interaction with different dialogues in the history of Western art. Further into my research, I learned from the catalogue raisonné that she painted four other Black nudes over the course of 1919 (fig. 1). These remain in private collections today and include *Seated Woman Holding an Apple (Mulâtresse assise tenant une pomme)* (see plate 34) and two other paintings, plus a preparatory study titled *The Sleeping Negress (La négresse endormie)*.¹ That these works are the only instance in her career when she worked with a Black model

struck me as significant, as did the fact that she employed the same Black model. These obvious thematic and temporal links suggest that the five paintings may be interrelated, leading me to recognize them as a series.

Lauren Jimerson: The curator from the Musée des Beaux-Arts du Palais de Carnoles in Menton graciously provided me with a condition report on *Black Venus*, which was recently restored. Studying this report, I noticed a large inscription in red on the back of the canvas that reads: "N°1 / Vénus noire / s Valadon." Compared with the signature on the front, the inscription appears to have been written by Valadon. The numeration supports Ebonie's proposal to consider this group of paintings as the Black Venus series.

Denise Murrell: I agree that the appearance of all five canvases within a year is intriguing. As Ebonie mentions in her research, 1919 coincided with W. E. B. Du Bois's first Pan-African Congress and the finalization of the Treaty of Versailles. This was a moment

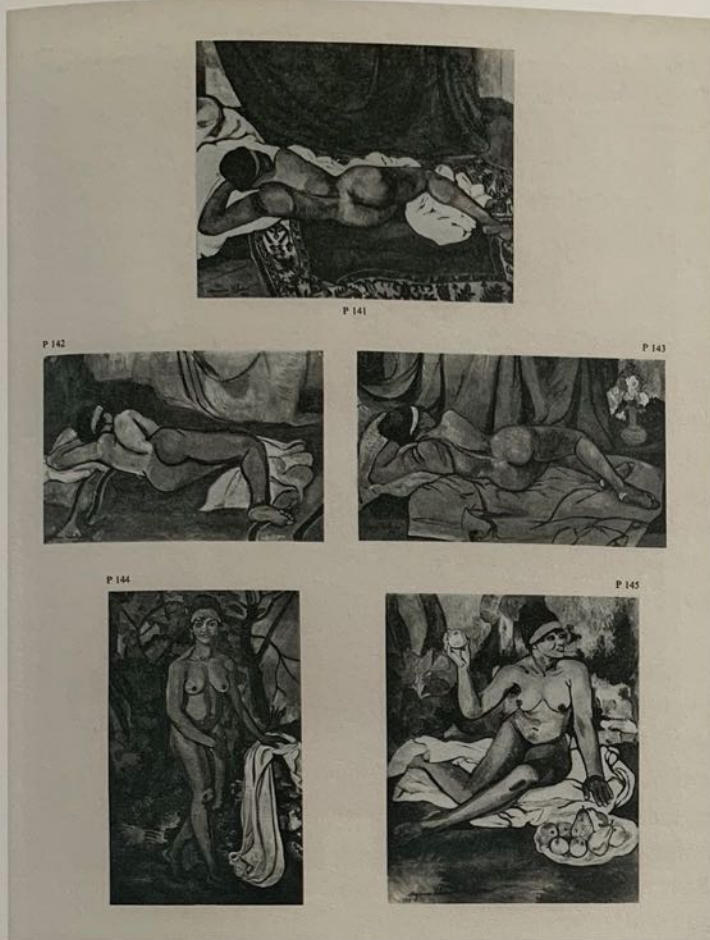


Fig. 1. Valadon's paintings of Black nudes from 1919 as reproduced in Paul Pétridès, *L'oeuvre complet de Suzanne Valadon* (Paris: Compagnie Française des Arts Graphiques, 1971).

when issues of empire, colonialization, and Pan-African identity were in the news. The fact that Valadon worked repeatedly with a Black model in 1919, and then never again, implies that she was aware of these events. There could be an ideological significance to her intense, almost obsessive focus on this figure during that particular time.

EP: Much of the critical focus in the literature has centered on this moment in her work, in the variety of things that it said, incited, and invoked. This compelled me to learn more about the model, especially in the context of Valadon's early career as one. She was purportedly more sympathetic toward her models, treating them with respect and,

perhaps, with more attention paid to their likeness, person, and humanity than you would normally see in avant-garde art of the period. So, I thought it was a perfect time to distill the experience of the Black model and to interpret it against the backdrop of France's colonial culture.

DM: I am also reminded of Manet's three portrayals of the Black model Laure that he painted in 1863, but unlike Valadon, he left us the model's name and even her address.

EP: It seems odd that we do not have a name or any identifying information for Valadon's Black model, especially given that we know the names of so many of her other models whom she did not paint with as much intensity or focus. It speaks to a level of erasure that I think is part and parcel of Black women's experiences in the early twentieth century.

Adrienne L. Childs: Even if we found out who the model was, the fact that the Black Venus is an archetype means that the image trades, then and now, on ways Black women were pictured in the past, which are outside of the model's identity. It's really important sociologically to learn about their lived experiences. I don't think that the model's anonymity detracts from what these kinds of works do.

DM: I agree with Adrienne that the Black model's anonymity does not preclude a thorough, formal, iconographic, and critical reading of Valadon's paintings. Furthermore, the likelihood is that if you do find something, it will be a fragment, though one that could still enhance certain aspects of the analysis. For instance, if we knew where she lived, it could supplement and strengthen our mapping of the multiethnic avant-garde artistic milieu that we know existed in Montmartre and then in Montparnasse. It's frustrating that there

is nothing about the identity of Valadon's model in the scholarly literature, but I still think that there may be a notebook or correspondence somewhere with the answer. Valadon certainly knew her name because she called her back repeatedly.

EP: There are definitely more stones left to be turned, but it is a difficult process that has not been taken up by many scholars.

DM: It is important that we acknowledge that the archival review has not yet been completed due to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. It will be interesting to see how the research unfolds.

NI: Certainly, the practical challenges brought about by the pandemic have not helped. Restricted access to resources and facilities has made the research process much more laborious than usual. Amid these obstacles, Paris-based archivist Marianne Le Morvan—founder and director of the Archives Berthe Weill—undertook an extensive investigation to uncover the identity of Valadon's model on our behalf. She reviewed the correspondence that she could access, compared the model's likeness to images by other artists, and searched professional inventories, but we are yet to discover a name. The Association Maurice Utrillo disclosed that, despite suggestions to the contrary by previous scholars, they didn't feel that the model was one of Utrillo's lovers, which, as Ebonie has pointed out, has been confirmed in the secondary literature.

LJ: One line of investigation that I pursued recently was the correspondence between Valadon and the modern art collector Charles Wakefield-Mori, who provided the founding gift of works to what is now the Musée des Beaux-Arts du Palais de Carnoles. Valadon painted Wakefield-Mori's portrait in 1922 and, according to a 1927 Berthe Weill

exhibition catalogue, *Black Venus* was at that stage a loan from his collection.² In light of this information, I hoped there might be some written correspondence that would provide more context for the painting and its model, but unfortunately the museum does not hold any such letters.

AC: One thing that we can work with is the apparent setting for the painting. The model in *Black Venus* appears to occupy a mythical space in nature—one that is not necessarily grounded in the Garden of Eden but is nevertheless Edenic and primitive. This space becomes racialized with the insertion of the Black figure. This leads me to ask: Does nature have to be narrative or can it be neutral?

LJ: It is worth noting that around 1918, Valadon was in the Rhône area and did a number of landscapes. They look distinctly different from the background depicted in *Black Venus*. To me, it definitely does not resemble any kind of French terrain, especially not with the hints of Gauguin's striking chartreuse notes. Valadon traveled as far as Corsica and that's the extent of it. So, I agree with Adrienne that the setting is not really situated in any specific place.

DM: I feel that examples such as *Black Venus* and *Seated Woman Holding an Apple* occupy a nebulous space. I find it interesting that the background is not overtly tropical, which would have been a clear marker of ethnicity. However, the motif of the Black body in and as nature has been entwined with the dichotomy of nature versus culture since the seventeenth century, so it is difficult to view the setting as neutral ground. The placement of the Black body in locales situated outside of culture, of "civilization," can either be construed as conveying a timeless primeval nature or an imagined Orientalist realm that is disconnected from modern life and in need of the European civilizing mission.

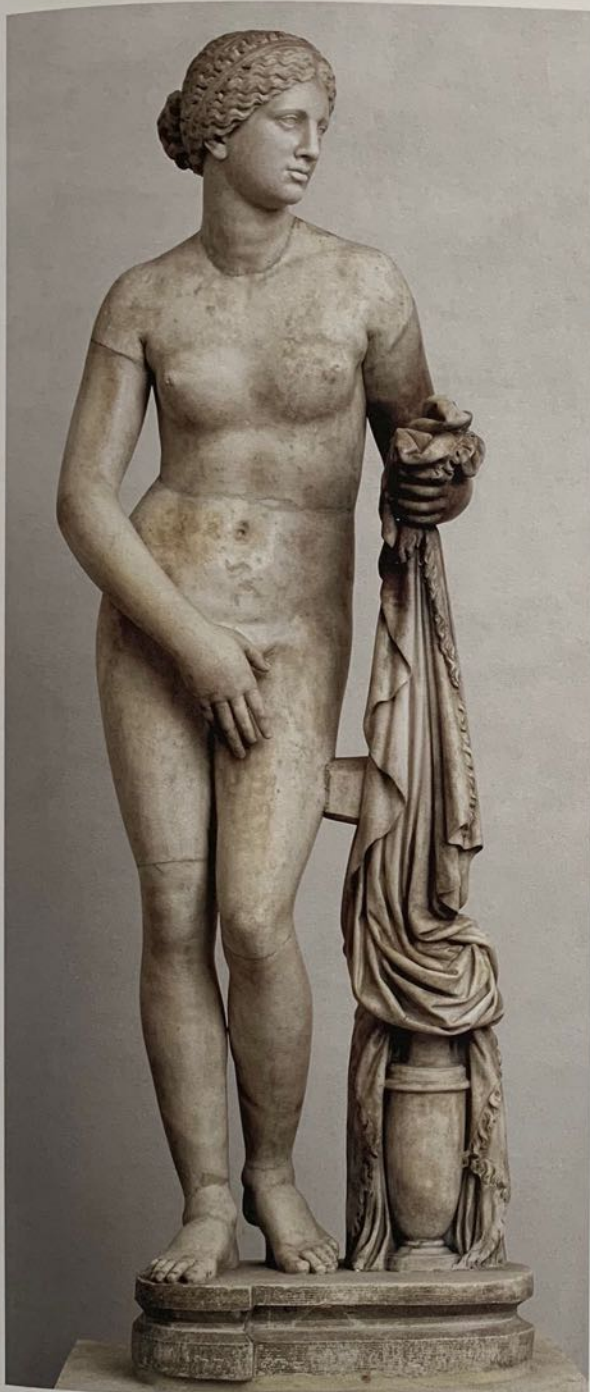


Fig. 2.
Aphrodite of Knidos,
2nd century Roman copy
after Praxiteles (Greek,
active 4th century BCE).
Restored by Ippolito
Buzzi (Italian, 1562–1634).
Museo Nazionale Romano,
Palazzo Altemps, Rome

These representational tropes are part of what constructs the ideologies of white supremacy and the justification of empire and enslavement. This tension is heightened by Valadon's classicization of her Black model, a seemingly progressive gesture, and the latter's emancipation from a subordinate position had she been juxtaposed with a white figure. Valadon's model invokes classical ideals of beauty, but she cannot evade the lineage of racialized representations of Black bodies in nature that persisted well into the twentieth century.

EP: I agree that Valadon's depictions of the Black figure steer away from the blatant denigrating perspective that typified many of the images that preceded her time. In my view, the Black Venus is shown in the classical pose of the renowned sculpture of Aphrodite of Knidos (fig. 2), even in the way the drapery falls. This idealization of the figure may elevate the Black model, but it does not erase its ties to trope-ridden racialized images of the day. I think it's vital to investigate the distinction between Valadon's artistic intent and the painting's reception by a French public that was more accustomed to seeing subordinated figures of Black women in the trope of sexualized savages.

NI: How might we read Valadon's work in relation to the artists of the previous generation? She modeled for many nineteenth-century painters and—by her own admission—paid close attention to what she saw.

DM: Valadon was synthesizing and experimenting with multiple veins of pictorial representation. For example, the flat modeling of form and the vague rendering of vegetation recall Gauguin, while the figure's demure classicized pose may point to the influence of Puvis de Chavannes, Valadon's former lover (fig. 3). As Ebonie elucidated in her research, the classicized nude



Fig. 3.
 Pierre Puvis de Chavannes
 (French, 1824–1898).
Tamaris, c. 1886–87.
 Oil on canvas, 10 × 15 ½ in.
 (25.4 × 39.4 cm).
 The Metropolitan Museum of
 Art, New York, H. O. Havemeyer
 Collection, Gift of Mrs. J.
 Watson Webb, 1930

typically has a diverted gaze that does not meet the viewer's. From a Manet scholar's perspective, the direct confrontational gaze of Valadon's model seems to channel the brazen modernity of *Olympia* (1863; see p. 45, fig. 3), whose audacity to stare down the presumably white male viewer was one of the most scandalous and scorned aspects of that work. It was also understood that any female nude was emblematic of sexual availability. Valadon complicates our reading of the *Black Venus* through an interplay of contradictory qualities: the figure's modest gesture but unabashed gaze, and the classicized body versus untamed nature. This synthesis or conflation of visual motifs and the ideas they embody lead me to ask: what was the most empathetic (or humanizing) way to represent a Black female nude in 1919?

AC: Modernist painters such as Cézanne, Matisse, and Picasso were attempting to disrupt the established narrative of the nude, but ultimately they reinscribed it in some

ways. One method of accomplishing this was by using race to shift the established paradigm of beauty in the genre of the nude. How? By placing a raced body there. So, how does Valadon's own deployment of race subvert or sustain the persistent tropes? The fact that she is channeling Gauguin, whose colonialist gaze has been widely criticized, problematizes this question. In the literature, the most common narrative is that her nudes are transgressive in the way she reimagines the figure through her modernist lens, and her sensitivity as a woman and former model is often evoked.

EP: *Black Venus* often reminds me of the color, facture, and backdrop in Gauguin's *Parau na te Varua ino (Words of the Devil)* (1892; fig. 4). Their formal and compositional similarities aside, there is a discernible difference in the way that each figure is gazing out. In Valadon's portrayal, the model is stony-faced and stoic. Gauguin's model, on the other hand, exudes sexuality through her coy, come-hither expression. So, in response

Fig. 4.
Paul Gauguin
(French, 1848–1903).
Parau na te Varua ino
(*Words of the Devil*), 1892.
Oil on canvas, 36 1/8 ×
27 in. (91.7 × 68.5 cm).

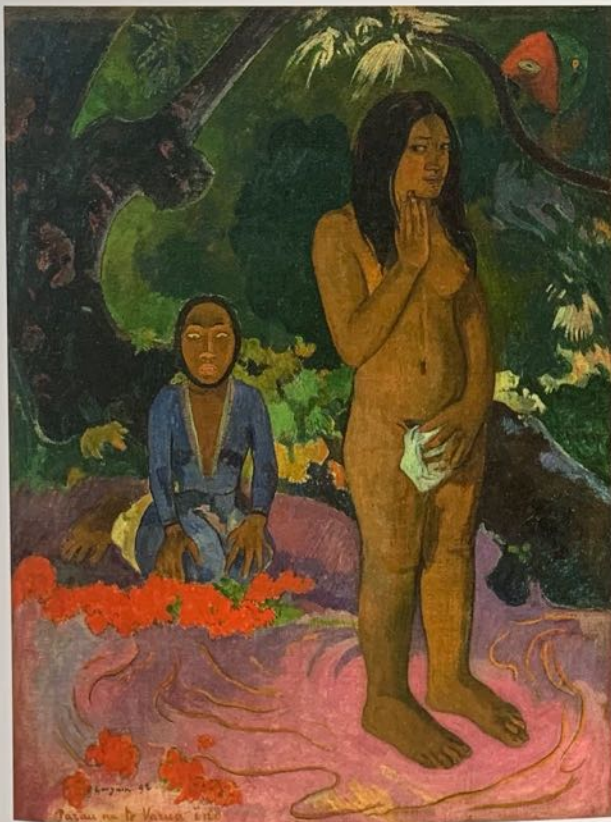
National Gallery of Art,
Washington, DC, Gift of
the W. Averell Harriman
Foundation in memory of
Marie N. Harriman, 1972.9.12

Fig. 5.
Marie-Guillemine Benoist
(French, 1768–1826).
Portrait of Madeleine (*Portrait
de Madeleine*), 1800.
Oil on canvas, 31 7/8 ×
25 5/8 in. (81 × 65 cm).
Musée du Louvre, Paris

to Adrienne's question, I do feel that there is in Valadon's practice a difference in the way that she's viewing and portraying the model, despite the affinities in the paintings otherwise.

LJ: I agree with all of you that there's a sense of Gauguin here. Valadon was clearly well-versed in art history, and there are also some seemingly arbitrary similarities with Marie-Guillemine Benoist's *Portrait of Madeleine* (*Portrait de Madeleine*) (1800; fig. 5) that are worth exploring here. The portrait entered the Louvre's collection in 1818, and I wonder if Valadon had seen it. There are some interesting parallels, such as the way the Black model is covering herself with the white drapery; the direct gaze; the three-quarter pose; and the positioning of her long, graceful arm.

DM: Valadon could have seen the Benoist, but I do want to underscore the different connotations between the bare-breasted Black body and its fully nude counterpart. In the context of Benoist's time, the portrait was completed only a few years after the first French abolition of territorial enslavement, which was soon reinstated. The emblematic representation of the expansion of French citizenry included ennobling images of the country's newly franchised Black populations. The French scholar Anne Lafont maintains that in many cases after 1800, a Black body that is clothed but bare-breasted was emblematic of enslavement. She is construed as a Black woman without any autonomy, without any say in her self-representation. Conversely, the more clothed she is, the more control she exerts over her own body. So, I think that Benoist's and Valadon's respective models play into different moments.



AC: During the nineteenth century, the Black body always seems to be tethered to slavery, whether or not the person was enslaved or emancipated. By the twentieth century, the issue of slavery does not appear to be as urgent. With this being said, I do not necessarily view Black bodies as colonized ones. I think these ideas began to evolve slowly in the twentieth century.

EP: Given the passage of more than one hundred and twenty years since the final abolition of slavery in the French empire, you would think that by 1919 we would be distanced from the idea of the Black woman as slave, but this was not the case. For instance, even though the figure in the Black Venus series isn't visibly oppressed, these paintings were titled *Esclave (Slave)* in various publications at the time, including the first book on Valadon, authored by Robert Rey in 1922.

DM: This points to the fact that titles for artworks often emanated not from the artist but from the archivists, collectors, and dealers who were cataloging, displaying, and attempting to sell them. Moreover, for so many people of the time, the term "negress" was synonymous with slavery. Chronologically, it was impossible that the woman in Valadon's Black Venus series would have been enslaved, but the association between the Black body and slavery was engrained in the reception and criticism.

NI: Lauren, given your work on Valadon's self-portraits, could you explain more about how you see her 1909 painting *Adam and Eve (Adam et Ève)* (see plate 27) inviting parallels with *Black Venus*?

LJ: In *Adam and Eve*, Valadon depicted herself and her lover André Utter in a timeless, Edenic landscape comparable to that in *Black Venus*. Also, while in many of her frontal nudes the figures are posed in awkward,

contorted positions, in the case of *Black Venus* and her self-portrait with Utter, we see dynamic, forward-moving bodies that exude a sense of agency. The two works, both monumental in size at about five feet tall, were executed ten years apart. By the time Valadon painted *Black Venus*, she was more technically accomplished in her rendering of human flesh. Utrillo later praised his mother's ability to blend "natural tones, darker hues and pinks to paint Caucasians, sepia for Blacks (Black women, to be precise)."³

EP: Valadon was self-taught, and her early works were mostly drawings, but as she became more confident, she progressively expanded her palette. Her early paintings exhibit a fairly restrained range of colors, but by 1919 she incorporated a broader spectrum of tones and shades. Her modeling of the figure also became more complex. I do think that in these paintings, there was perhaps an element of exercise or experimentation for her.

NI: At this point, I think that it would be interesting to compare Valadon's representations of a Black model to her paintings of white female nudes. Might this offer further insights into Valadon's attitudes toward the Black model?

DM: As Ebonie clarified in her research, Valadon's paintings of white figures in interiors, including her self-portraits, are noticeably more intimate and individualized than her three images of sleeping Black nudes. In the latter group of interior scenes, the Gauguin- or Cézanne-like flattening of form, together with the simplified, almost Fauvist color palette and sparse backdrop, imparts a generic feeling. The artist does not characterize her Black model as an individual, as she does her white figures. So, again, we get the sense she is experimenting; a certain tentativeness about how to portray the Black model comes through.

EP: I think that's especially the case in the interior scenes because they are actually iterative. There is an interesting sketch that shows her trying different modes of painting the contour of the body and reconfiguring various compositional elements. So, there is a little bit less of the confidence, perhaps, that you see in *Seated Woman Holding an Apple* and *Black Venus*.

DM: If the outdoor nudes are a kind of setup for nature and the interiors stand in for culture, then the signs of the latter are far less specific and detailed. Does this suggest that these are just two different variations? Does she place the Black body in culture in these interiors?

EP: I would not go so far as to say that Valadon places her interior Black nudes in culture. Yes, they feel less primitive than outdoor nudes, but they're much more couched within an Orientalist context, especially as she begins to develop some of the patterned fabrics in those canvases.

AC: This Orientalist connection might be one of the reasons why the perception and nomenclature revert back to the notion of the slave. Any depiction of the Black woman—or any woman—in a harem-like setting is going to be a throwback to this association. The Orientalist and Africanist painters were still going strong at the start of the twentieth century. They were sponsored by the French government to depict the country's colonial and geopolitical ideologies. With this being said, there is a different feeling in Valadon's project, largely because of the absence of conventional authenticating details of race and signifiers of subordination. She still seems to be part of the avant-garde group of outsider artists who were trying to move the needle in other ways. The reception, however, was definitely looking backward.

NI: I'd like to return to the titling of the works in the Black Venus series. Terms such as *mulâtresse* and *négresse* blatantly play into the racialized tropes of the time. There is also the issue of whether or not these titles reflected the artist's attitudes toward race.

AC: All of these titles, regardless of who assigned them, have long histories within the parlance of how to describe Black women. The *mulâtresse*, *Vénus noire*, and *négresse* are all archetypes of Black women that had been in place for at least a century. The title *Black Venus* is especially problematic because it is an oxymoron, a joke, an impossibility made possible by Valadon, whom I believe was striving to dismantle the traditional white nude. So, in looking at visual materializations of Black women as Venuses, there is a transgressiveness to them that makes them all the more compelling and draws them back to the Hottentot Venus—also an oxymoron—as you cannot have a savage embody the attributes of Venus. Denise, do you think that we ever break the old chains that bind that term?

DM: The issue is that the reversion to type takes place even when the identity of the model is known. For instance, Manet's model was named Laure but the portrait was called *La négresse*. Benoist's Madeleine was discoverable if anyone had taken the time to research the literature specifically around the idea of her individual identity. But even for Black models who were named, their images were often reduced to racialized types. This is part of why, in exhibitions I've organized, I insist on an approach that sidelines racially generic titles. Racialized nomenclature during that era of empire and enslavement is by definition a device of marginalization and obliteration. If you do not refer to the comparable white image as *L'Européenne*, but relegate all Black women to *négresse*, you situate them outside the norm.

This terminology reinforces the normativity of the white figure and the alterity of the Black figure. The option that I've chosen in the past is to bracket such terms and to use the name of the individual to the extent it's known, or to describe who she appears to be—for example, *Circus Performer* or *Young Woman with Flowers*. I think that we have to start somewhere: retitling is one of the many revisionary gestures that we are trying to make as interventions with art history.

AC: There is no question about the marginalizing impact of racialized titles. However, there are narratives associated with the figure of Venus, which means that Valadon was potentially drawing upon the mythology. To take away the title is to take away the specific story that she may be trying to tell. I'm just being the devil's advocate here. On the other hand, there may not be a story behind the *mulâtresse* and *négresse*. Can we comment on this? I do feel that the *mulâtresse* is a different designation.

DM: There was a category of Black woman, the *mulâtresse*, who had some measure of sexual desirability because of her white blood. This proximity to whiteness—or actually being partially white—was a mitigating factor. So, I agree that there is a distinction between *mulâtresse* and *négresse*, but both terms reduce individuals to types. Valadon could have dropped these racialized titles and simply given them descriptive alternatives such as *Nude with an Apple*. It's an interesting challenge.

NI: In many instances it is unclear whether Valadon paid much attention to titles—they were reproduced in various ways during her lifetime—but because the title *Black Venus* accompanied the first showing of that particular painting, we have chosen to keep it for this exhibition. I believe that the artist was trying to convey something quite specific with that title. But I do agree that,

in many instances, racial references in titles only compound negative associations. For this reason, though the seated Black figure in Valadon's work has sometimes been referred to as the *mulâtresse*, in the exhibition at the Barnes the painting appears as *Seated Woman Holding an Apple*.

LJ: I was looking at another example from 1909: a work by Valadon showing two white female nudes, exhibited in 1913 at the Salon des Indépendants under the title *Two Figures (Deux figures)* (see p. 19, fig. 1). When it was reproduced in the catalogue raisonné, it was given two different titles, *After the Bath (Après le bain)* and *Neither White nor Black (Ni blanc ni noir)*. So, here we have one painting that surfaced with three different titles during its history—one of which bears an allusion to race that does not make any sense. The arbitrariness of the titling prompted me to ask: How much meaning can we actually garner from these titles if they're consistently being changed and we don't know who's changing them? The Black Venus series is an exception, as the inscription "N°1 / Vénus noire" affirms the intentionality of the title.

AC: The variations in the titles tell the story, and it is vital to track them. It's interesting that the onus has often been on the researcher to prove that there was a racist impulse driving the creation of these works. We know that these European cultures were racist, so why isn't there a need to prove that these works were *not* racist? While we cannot blanketly assume that Valadon was racist, we cannot escape the fact that she was embedded in a society where certain ideas were ascribed to Black people that were seen as absolutely fundamental.

DM: I try not to assign racism to the individual artist unless it comes from their own writings. But to succeed professionally, artists wrestled with the pressure to produce

images that fit archetypes for which there were receptive critics and audiences and a lucrative market. To become a great artist, you let other people decide details such as titling that conformed to popular tastes. Your own intentionality may or may not have concurred with what was in demand. Works that deviate from the standard still sit in private collections today or are lost. We can certainly say that these systems—that is, the institutional structure of everything from government policy to commercial and cultural production—played a pivotal part in this overarching racism. It was almost irrelevant whether you were personally racist or not.

EP: I think that the mutability of titles, especially in images of Black women, was symptomatic of the French colonial mission during the interwar period. There was a lot of ambiguity surrounding the treatment of Black people as free figures, their status as citizens, and their acclimatization but alterity. This uncertainty meant that the Black model did not have a clear standing in the French imagination.

LJ: This brings to mind René-Jean's review of *Black Venus* at the Salon d'Automne in 1913.⁴ He draws an explicitly racist connection between the Black model and the witches from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, which speaks volumes about how this image was received at the time in France.

AC: Do you mind if we pivot the conversation from negrophobia to negrophilia? The first wave of negrophilia seized bohemian Paris during the 1920s. Jazz music and Black performers, most notably Josephine Baker, were all the rage. But this sudden allure of Black culture can belie the racism that we've addressed, which leads us to ask: Do Valadon's paintings mirror the cultural milieu in which they operated?

DM: I do think there is a performative aspect to Valadon's images. Her portrayals of Black women are always a bit ambiguous because the stereotypical signifiers of race are not instantly legible. Her use of tropes is far more nuanced than what was in the standardized repertoire. For example, the model in *Black Venus* wears an indeterminate headwrap in lieu of one with a red, green, and gold madras plaid—a definite marker of the French Caribbean colonies. Also, her earrings would typically be made of red coral. Valadon's departure from definite stereotypes complicates our reading of where she stands and how her paintings were understood in relationship to negrophilia or, more generally, the issue of race.

AC: There's an attempt by some artists to put the Black figure in a modern context, and to me this speaks to the vogue for Black Jazz age culture. Valadon's *Black Venus* series imagines the figure outside of this milieu, but it doesn't mean that she did not meet her model at the cabaret.

LJ: The circus could be an interesting context to look at because Valadon was supposedly an acrobat until she fell and injured herself. This was a place where many different races converged, but where ultimately race became a spectacle. Nevertheless, it appealed to many performers of color who were navigating new careers in Paris. Ebonie, as I was reading the section on Aïcha Goblet in your thesis, I immediately thought of the biracial aerialist Anna Olga Albertina Brown. Degas, Valadon's mentor, immortalized Olga in his painting *Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando (Mlle La La au Cirque Fernando)* (1879; fig. 6). All this makes me wonder if Valadon and Degas discussed Olga, or whether, years later, Valadon also encountered her model at the circus.

EP: I think that the context of negrophilia is interesting because there exists a tension

between the fetishization of Black female performers by the French public and the unprecedented opportunity for these women to capitalize on that avenue for commercial success and financial gain.

DM: Exactly. They should be respected for seizing these opportunities, which allowed them to create some space of autonomy and to find an alternative to positions of outright servitude. This avenue is comparable to later African American performers who made fortunes playing stereotypes while actively participating in the Black liberation and civil rights movements. You find what is available to you at the moment, you do what you can with it, and you just try to move the needle further along.

NI: If we accept that figures such as Miss La La and Josephine Baker harnessed prejudice in the service of their careers, is there any mileage in thinking about Valadon as someone who—in different ways—succeeded against the odds?

DM: Again, I think that this relates to how individuals used performative modes of occupation, whether as an artist's model, a café waitress, or a stage performer, to become part of the artistic milieu. It was almost imperative to shock audiences and to transcend artistic conventions. To echo Adrienne, this was part of why the French avant-garde embraced Black culture. So, when I look at the brazen nude picnicker in Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass* (*Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*) (1863; Musée d'Orsay, Paris) in juxtaposition with the classicized bather, I see a dichotomy between avant-garde difference and classical convention that is also present in Valadon's *Black Venus* in a single figure. This conflation between tradition and originality, conformity and self-expression, epitomized the tension of this period of cultural production.



Fig. 6.
Edgar Degas
(French, 1834–1917).
*Miss La La at the Cirque
Fernando* (Mlle La La au
Cirque Fernando), 1879.
Oil on canvas, 46 1/8 x
30 1/2 in. (117.2 x 77.5 cm).
National Gallery, London

NI: At a time when many artists were attempting to Africanize European culture, do you think that Valadon was trying to rewrite the European artistic tradition? Or rather, was she trying to expand it? During this period, citizens of countries colonized by France became French ...

AC: I don't see her as trying to Africanize the body, but I do see her inserting the African body into these discourses about the history of European art and representation. So, perhaps her decidedly modern images are her way of pushing back against the traditions that the avant-garde were also striving to dismantle.

EP: I agree with your point about the deployment of the Black figure to disrupt prevailing views of the racialized body and to unsettle the public. However, I've struggled to see *Black Venus* as a modern portrayal,

though it was somewhat of a step forward in representations of Black women.

DM: This is her own version of modernity, and it is significant that *Black Venus* is one of very few single, full-figure Black nudes that I can recall in the preceding century of French painting. In popular culture and ephemera, the Black model would almost surely be far more caricatured and stereotyped, bearing the tropes of exoticism and sexuality. Valadon dispenses with some of the tropes and props of blackness: there is no madras headdress, no coral jewelry, no white female to subordinate her. But despite the classicization of the body, whether in an interior or in timeless nature, her Black Venus series still evokes those past tropes of ethnicity. It is precisely through this conflation, this synthesis, that Valadon asserts her individual approach and goes against the grain of what was fashionable at that particular moment. And for that I think we can admire aspects of her portrayals of Black nudes even as we cannot ignore the racist connotations as well.

EP: I think there's another interesting context in 1919, which is the "return to order" in the post-World War I era. Valadon takes the idea of returning to traditional form, but does it in the least traditional way possible by using a Black woman as model. In effect, there is this fascinating tension between negrophilia and the return to order operating in the same period.

NI: That's very interesting. I'm reminded of how Modigliani was also rethinking the nude during the late teens, using models whose hair and makeup reflected contemporary trends. Perhaps Valadon was doing this more radically, rightly or wrongly, aware of the racist baggage surrounding the Black figure.

EP: Modigliani was a family friend, so the two could have been in conversation.

DM: Valadon was surrounded by European modernists who were working with the Black body in one form or another. It is improbable that she would not have been aware of some of these discourses. She is a fascinating figure, and her story has certainly sparked my curiosity about other women artists of the period. There is so much new work, original work, *groundbreaking* work to be done, as we excavate all this material and revise our understanding of early twentieth-century art.

Notes

- 1 See Paul Pétridès, *L'oeuvre complet de Suzanne Valadon* (Paris: Compagnie Française des Arts Graphiques, 1971), D229, P141–45.
- 2 Galerie B. Weill, *Suzanne Valadon: Peintures*, exh. cat. (Paris, 1927), no. 46.
- 3 Maurice Utrillo, "To My Mother," in Catherine Hewitt, *Renoir's Dancer: The Secret Life of Suzanne Valadon* (New York: St. Martin's, 2017), 383.
- 4 René-Jean, "La peinture et la sculpture au Salon d'Automne," *Comoedia*, November 4, 1919; translated and reprinted in "Selected Texts on Suzanne Valadon," in this volume, 147.