Susanne Valadon

Susanne Valadon was baptized Marie-Clémentine Valadon but used the names of Maria and Susanne Valadon later in life. This lesson will refer to her as Susanne Valadon as that is how she signed her art.

Records of Susanne Valadon’s early life were not well documented. Some sources contradict others and the amount of early documentation is very limited. Most accounts agree she was born in the small rural town of Bessines-sur-Gartempe, France, on September 23, 1865 to Madeleine Valadon, a live-in seamstress and laundry maid, and to an unknown father who was accused of forgery and sentenced to hard labor in prison. However, he died before he began his sentence. Madeleine was widowed with two children prior to her brief relationship with Valadon’s father. The pregnancy came as a surprise to Madeleine’s employer, the widow Guimbaud, in whose house she lived. Madeleine’s older child lived in the home of relatives in the same town.

As an unwed mother, Madeleine’s life was very difficult since she carried the stigma bearing an illegitimate child and having been married to a felon. She was considered a disgrace and the gossip trail of a small town made life miserable for both Madeleine and her young child. While accounts vary, at some time Madeleine took her young daughter to Paris. Some accounts say she left her other children with their relatives in Bessines and others say she took her seventeen year old daughter, Marie-Emilienne, with her. They settled in Montmartre area, high on a hill above the chaos of Paris. Madeleine eventually got a job as a maid. Later, Valadon attended a day school at the convent of St. Vincent de Paul to learn the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic.

The Franco-Prussian War broke out in 1870 and for a full year, Madeleine and Valadon witnessed devastation and the death of innocent Parisians. In the end, over seventeen-hundred men, women and children perished. The war took its toll on Madeleine. She drank much of the time, avoided cleaning their apartment and gave up trying to raise Valadon. Some say she went mad and exhibited no affection for her young daughter. Left to her own devices, the unattended Valadon turned to the rubble in the streets as her playground and found company among boys, working men, tradespeople, outlaws, homeless and prostitutes. She developed a reputation as “Valadon Terror,” as her actions of profanity and hysteria were often displayed. She loved her life in the streets and, at age nine, abandoned school altogether.

At home, the unattended Valadon drew images and could spend weeks in a frenzy of drawing. Cats, dogs and even nude figures of children were among her favorite subject matter. The drawings were rather primitive, no real talent shown, and no imagination or emotion evident in her work. Fortunately for Valadon, she live in Montmartre, the location of many artists and where any ability of an artist was celebrated. Artists, writers, actors, musicians and students all found their way to “the hill.” Toulouse-Lautrec, Roussel, Corot, Renoir and Van Gogh were among the crowd. Valadon listened to the conversations about art from esteemed patrons at cafés but she couldn’t make the connection that she could become an artist herself. On the other hand, she knew she belonged to them somehow.

Nine-year old Valadon eventually found employment at a variety of jobs, in a sweathouse, as a dishwasher, waitress, pushcart vendor, groom in a livery stable, and even as an equestrienne with a circus, although that has not been proven. It’s thought that, perhaps it was more of a local carnival. There is record of sixteen-year old Valadon taking a fall from a trapeze which ended her life in the “circus.”

As she aged, Valadon turned to modeling for artists and realized, as the model, she became part of the artist’s creation. She also realized that she could be an artist herself. She finally felt part of something. Her zest for life and disposition for a good debate made her welcome among her peers at many cafés and studios.

Her creative side prompted her return to drawing at a more advanced level than before. Observing artists who drew her, Valadon began to learn and drew with confidence, with bold lines and with joy. She pulled from her emotions and was able to portray both the subject’s strengths and weaknesses.

In 1883, at age eighteen, Valadon gave birth to a son, Maurice Utrillo. The father’s identity is not certain since Valadon had many lovers. It was Spanish journalist Miguel Utrillo who was willing to sign a legal document acknowledging paternity, although never proven. He left France before the child’s birth but supported Valadon financially. She later met and married a wealthy broker, Paul Mousis, in 1896, and experienced, for the first time, life to be pleasant for the next fifteen years. Mousis built a fine house in the northern suburb of Paris for Valadon, her son and mother and she had plenty of time to resume her painting. In time, Valadon’s marriage was in turmoil largely due to the
alcoholic drinking of her adolescent son. She tried to control his drinking by giving him art lessons as therapy but found that was useless to cure his alcoholism. Maurice showed talent and worked hard to further develop his work, even exhibiting it, but his need for alcohol continued to the degree that he was often institutionalized. In the meantime, Valadon had become bored with suburban life and her husband. After thirteen years of marriage, the couple divorced and Valadon, her son and mother left the Parisian suburbs and returned to Montmartre.

Back in Montmartre, Valadon met and married artist Andre Utrillo in 1914, a man half her age. At his urging, She began to paint for the first time. Madeleine Valadon died one year later, living with her daughter for sixty years despite their struggles early in life.

Valadon, her husband, Utter, and son, Utrillo, all pursued their careers in the years ahead. Known as the “Forsaken Trio,” they often exhibited together. Individual reputations grew but not to the same degree causing a bit of a ruffle for Utter who did not advance as well as the others. Valadon’s work was on exhibit around the world but it was Utrillo who earned more fame. Utter eventually moved out of the house while his wife and stepson enjoyed financial gain. Valadon and Utter remained married but lived their separate lives for years. Utrillo married in 1935, leaving his mother after fifty-two years. This was a difficult loss for Valadon.

Valadon suffered a stroke in 1938 while painting at her easel and was rushed by ambulance to the hospital. She died at a hospital in the morning of April 7. She was seventy-two years old. Her funeral took place two days later when she was laid to rest next to her mother, Madeleine. Her son, Maurice, was forbidden to attend by his wife as he was overcome with grief.

About the Art

*The Blue Room* was painted, oil on canvas, by Suzanne Valadon in 1923 and hangs in the National Museum of Modern Art in Paris.

Directed Observation

Show students an image of *The Blue Room*. Tell them it was painted by Suzanne Valadon. Offer students biographical information about Valadon. After some time for thinking, encourage students to share what they see. Welcome all comments. The following questions are provided to help students use art vocabulary to talk about the work.

1. What are your first reaction to this painting? How is it different than other reclining figures? Unlike thousands of portraits of reclining women, this one was painted by a woman. What do you think Valadon was trying to communicate? (The reclining figure is a modern woman, not an object. Even the placement on books on the bed supports this theme.)
2. Discuss how Valadon uses the elements of art in this composition.
3. Identify the patterns used and discuss the impact it has on this work.
4. Even though she never received formal art training, Valadon had a good sense of composition. Everything in this painting has a purpose such as bringing balance and unity to the work. For example, the color scheme, the patterns, the lines, the placement of books on the bed and the posture of the figure. Discuss these items and how each specifically supports balance and unity.
5. In addition to balance and unity, there is a degree of chaos and stability. How so?
6. Good art, that which really engages the viewer, has many “layers” of interest points.
7. The professional and personal relationship with Valadon, Utter and Utrillo must have had advantages and disadvantages. What were the advantages and disadvantages?
8. Discuss Valadon’s troubled childhood and how it impacted her life and her art. How does it show in her art?
9. Valadon lived for more than fifty in the same home with two people that made her life very difficult, her mother and her son. What does this say about her character?

Things to Do

1. Examine the art of Utrillo and Utter and compare it to Valadon’s.
2. Valadon painted the figure in The Blue Room in a posture of relaxation. When you are relaxing, what is your position?
3. Catch a family member in a relaxed, informal pose and photograph him or her. Pay attention to composition. Crop the frame so the image is the focus but leave enough “breathing” space around the figure so it’s not too tight. As you gain confidence as a photographer, choose the environment and begin to stage it by placing objects near the figure that exhibits their possessions or personality.
4. Have a friend or family member sit in a relaxed position. Make a quick sketch lightly in pencil, then gradually work in bolder lines, value shifts and background until the composition is completed. Exhibit with a white mat.