

## Exhibitions

Charles Mahoney, Stanley Lewis and Alan Sorrell, who feature in the final section of the exhibition. Among these 'Allegories' one painter, Charles Sims, stands apart from the muralists. A precocious Edwardian fantasist, in 1926, two years before he threw himself from the Leaderfoot Viaduct at Melrose, Sims had begun to paint 'Spirituals' (no.355; Fig.25), a sequence of semi-abstract mystic-religious works that were unlike paintings that anyone had ever seen before and critics struggled.

Only a few years earlier his resplendent portrait of Sibyl Rocksavage (private collection) had been 'picture of the year' at the Royal Academy of Arts, London. But the death of a son in the First World War, the scene of deserted trenches and devastation at Arras, his dalliance with Vivienne Jeudwine and the break-up of his marriage, left him lonely and in the state of depression, which led him naked out into a harsh and jagged universe. It was as if those boys from El Greco's *Laocoön* (1610–14; National Gallery of Art, Washington) had escaped the sea serpent and risen into the tempestuous sky above Toledo to be buffeted, bruised and devoured. Life's fundament was gone. Even Orpen's amusing letters were not enough to

**25. *My pain beneath your sheltering hand*, by Charles Sims. c.1926–28. Tempera on canvas, 91 by 68.6 cm. (Liss Llewellyn Fine Art, London; exh. Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne).**

encourage him and according to Sims's friend, Harold Speed, the 'poor tortured spirit' was 'laid bare'. Speed concluded shortly after Sims's death, 'To be an artist is to have no sense of shame, his business is the revelation of himself to the world; and his hope (generally realized) is that nobody will understand it.'<sup>5</sup>

It is true that many of the artists represented in these exhibitions are not household names, but this, for the present reviewer, makes them more interesting. All provide fragments of a life. It may seem unnecessary to say it, but each picture represents a time when someone looked at their surroundings, their friends or into themselves, and in the act of making an image, recorded a moment of human fitfulness. No lens can do this, only the hand. Sickert, Spencer, the Nashes, Burra, Bawden and Ravilious are now so familiar that it is easy to forget that they spring from a large and varied conspectus and that the realisation of where the stylistic battles of the future will be fought is not granted to many. In all its complexity, the Laing Art Gallery exhibitions are committed to opening this great treasury of twentieth-century British art.

## Suzanne Valadon: Model, Painter, Rebel

Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia  
26th September 2021–  
9th January 2022

by PAULA J. BIRNBAUM

This is the first exhibition dedicated to the work of Suzanne Valadon (1865–1938) in North America. It offers a long-overdue career survey of an artist who has been marginalised in the history of art because of her gender, sexuality and working-class background. Curated by Nancy Ireson, it features over fifty drawings, prints and paintings – which constitute around ten percent of the artist's oeuvre – from museums and private collections in six countries, representing all stages of Valadon's career. The catalogue features high-quality reproductions and instructive essays, including contributions by Martha Lucy and the artist Lisa Brice.<sup>1</sup>

The exhibition is divided into six thematic sections, which are roughly chronological. The first, 'Maria the Model', presents Valadon (born Marie-Clémentine Valadon) as an artist's model who was known for her flexibility, endurance and commanding presence. The painting of the gallery walls a light blue, creating a mottled effect, connects to the theme of Gustav Wertheimer's large painting *Kiss of the siren* (1882; Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields; cat. no.1), for which Valadon modelled as the siren. This is accompanied by three original paintings, by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Jean Eugène Clary and Santiago Rusiñol, and reproductions of eleven others, by Toulouse-Lautrec, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and Pierre-Auguste Renoir among others, for which Valadon also modelled.

The next section, 'Suzanne Valadon the Artist', offers a room of Valadon's earliest surviving drawings and prints, documenting her transition from model to self-taught artist. The rich selection reveals her talent for capturing her own likeness, as well as those of family members. The wall labels effectively detail her introduction into the art world, describing the blurred boundaries



1 See S. Llewellyn and P. Lyss, eds: exh. cat. *WOW: Women Only, Works on Paper*, Newcastle upon Tyne (Laing Art Gallery) 2021. Selected by Sacha Llewellyn the works in the exhibition also include significant Laing Art Gallery additions by Beatrice How, Edna Clarke Hall, Annie French, Gwen Raverat, Thérèse Lessore, Lucy Kemp-Welch and Frances Hodgkins.

2 Catalogue: *Portrait of an Artist*. Edited by Sacha Llewellyn and Paul Liss. 398 pp. incl. 385 col. + b. & w. ills. (Liss Llewellyn, London, 2021), £15. ISBN 978-1-9993145-4-5.

3 A. Powers, P. Liss and S. Llewellyn: *British Murals and Decorative Painting 1920–1960, Rediscoveries and New Interpretations*, Bristol 2013; which accompanied an exhibition, *British Murals and Decorative Painting 1910–1970*, at the Fine Art Society, London, in 2013. These build upon Clare Willson's *Mural Painting in Britain, 1840–1940: Image and Meaning*, Oxford 2000; and the more recent attention paid to Orpen's so-called 'Irish Trilogy' in K. McConkey: "'Politics and that girl!': a study of 'Sowing New Seed' by Sir William Orpen", in N. Garnham and K. Jeffrey, eds: *Culture, Place and Identity (26th Biennial Irish Conference of Historians, University of Ulster, May 2003)*, Dublin 2005, pp.53–77; L. Tickner: *Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century*, New Haven and London 2000, pp.70–77; and Augustus John's *Lyrical fantasy* (1912; Tate).

4 Reviewed by Susanna Avery-Quash in this Magazine, 158 (2016), pp.755–57.

5 H. Speed: 'Charles Sims RA, 1873–1928', *Old Watercolour Society's Club 6* (1928–1929), pp.45–64, p.64.



personal life posed challenges to her artmaking. *Family portrait* (no.22; Fig.26) presents the unconventional household in which she was the matriarch and breadwinner – after divorcing her first husband, the affluent businessman Paul Moussis, Valadon had to make a living from her art and focused on selling her oil paintings. Despite their proximity to one another, the figures, who pose against an acid yellow background, are disconnected and emotionally disengaged. Utrillo, by this time a painter in his own right, who suffered from addiction and mental illness, appears dejected in the foreground, while Valadon’s young lover – the artist André Utter (1886–1948), who was a friend of her son and twenty-one years her junior – looms large in the background. Valadon depicts her elderly mother with a face marked by deep crevices and a grimace, which is in stark contrast to the artist’s sympathetic treatment of her own aging in her late self-portraits. Positioned prominently at the heart of the scene, Valadon emphatically presses her hand against her chest, in a pose reminiscent of the Virgin Mary. By contrast, *Landscape in Montmartre (Garden in the rue Cortot)* (1919; private collection; no.20), with its tranquil rendering of her neighbourhood’s lush greenery, provides a respite from familial tension. Throughout this section we observe Valadon’s keen desire to claim her place in art history, with nods to Renaissance masters as well as the work of her contemporaries, from Gauguin and Van Gogh to Cézanne, Manet and Degas.

‘Naked Ambition’ contextualises Valadon’s early paintings of female and male nudes in relation to her modelling experience, biography and awareness of the art market. It includes several works from a series in which nude pubescent girls explore their emerging sexuality. Unlike most depictions by male artists of eroticised sexual awakening – Munch and Balthus, for example – Valadon’s works elicit empathy from viewers, often depicting young women with maternal figures who ease their transitions to womanhood. This section also features the artist’s

between her professional and domestic life. In several works she captured the slight, androgynous body of her son, Maurice Utrillo (1883–1955), in the nude, alone or tended to by his grandmother. Although it was common to express the inner life of children during prepubescence in the nineteenth century, these drawings show Valadon’s maternal fascination with her son’s changing body over time. Valadon’s early interest in technical experimentation through printmaking is clear, as is her artistic

**26. *Family portrait*, by Suzanne Valadon. 1912. Oil on canvas, 98 by 73.5 cm. (Centre Pompidou, Paris; © 2021 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York; © CNAC/MNAM, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, New York; photograph Christian Jean and Jean Popovitch; exh. Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia).**

ambition. The wall labels also dispel the commonly held belief that she was Edgar Degas’s pupil, noting his admiration of her ‘genius’ for drawing, which was evidenced by his purchase of several of her works. He also nurtured her talent by providing access to his printmaking press and introducing her to the dealer Ambroise Vollard.

Valadon’s early paintings are featured in the next section, titled ‘Intimate Circles’, which focuses in particular on how changes in her



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magnificent *Adam and Eve*, (1909; Centre Pompidou, Paris; no.27), a unique reworking of the biblical theme. Valadon depicts herself and Utter as the biblical couple. Although the wall label acknowledges that it was unusual for a female artist to paint the male nude, audiences will probably not understand the true radical nature of this work. Valadon broke many taboos in this painting by celebrating their sexual union with intertwined bodies in active, unabashed poses, complete with pubic hair. Although critics did not mention this fact, she and especially Utter would have been recognisable to some contemporary audiences. A decade after its creation, Valadon self-censored the work by adding fig leaves in order to cover Adam's genitals, an act that would have warranted further discussion here.<sup>2</sup>

'Redefining a Genre' brilliantly captures how Valadon critically participated in the tradition of the



Below  
27. *Black Venus*, by Suzanne Valadon. 1919. Oil on canvas, 160 by 97 cm. (Musée des Beaux-Arts de Menton; © 2021 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York; courtesy Musée des Beaux-Arts de Menton; exh. Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia; Bridgeman Images).

28. *The violin case*, by Suzanne Valadon. Oil on canvas, 81 by 100 cm. (Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris; © 2021 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York; courtesy Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris, France/ HIP / Art Resource, New York; exh. Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia).



odalisque, with its eroticising and orientalisising tendencies. The gallery is filled with sumptuous paintings of reclining female nudes posed before backgrounds with brightly patterned backdrops, reminiscent of chinoiserie and North African textiles. The wall text points out that these works met with considerable commercial success in the early 1920s, with critics speaking of Valadon's 'masculine force' and 'virile power'. A fascinating roundtable discussion titled 'Disrupting tradition: Suzanne Valadon's "Black Venus"' is included in the catalogue, which focuses on one (no.35; Fig.27) of two paintings in this section with an unidentified Black model. Building upon Denise Murrell's groundbreaking 2018 exhibition and publication *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today*, 'Redefining a Genre' offers new insights into how Valadon both challenged and perpetuated racial stereotypes.<sup>3</sup> *The blue room* (1923; Musée des Beaux-Arts de Limoges; no.40), one of Valadon's most important works, also appears in this section. Although the woman reclines against an exotic background, she defies sexual objectification. The heavy-set model epitomises the 'garçonne' or modern, sexually and economically liberated woman of the early 1920s; she is clad in loose-

fitting striped pants and a sleeveless top, relaxing on a bed strewn with books while smoking a cigarette. The wall label details 'the emergence of the modern woman', but it would have been a helpful addition to have elaborated on the changing public perceptions of women's roles and physical appearance in the wake of the First World War.

The last section, 'Faithful to Figuration', somewhat awkwardly merges three themes into one: late portraits, family portraits and still lifes. Although many female artists of the time began their careers by painting still lifes, Valadon turned to this theme in her later years, a decision that was likely motivated by financial pressures to sell her work. These still lifes are portraits of a sort, depicting personal effects laden with associations. For example, in the background of *The violin case* (no.43; Fig.28), Valadon includes a fragment of her painting *Casting the net* (1914; Centre Pompidou, Paris; ex-catalogue), a work in which Utter is depicted three times in a male version of the three graces. It is unfortunate this painting was unable to travel, as juxtaposing these works in the museum would have allowed Ireson to examine how Valadon renegotiated boundaries of gender and genre. Similarly, in *Self-portrait*, (1927; Musée

de Montmartre; no.54), she exposes the mechanics of self-representation by capturing a mirror reflection of herself – a sixty-two-year-old woman – as a framed work of art, surrounded by studio props from her own still-life paintings. Throughout the exhibition, and most notably in this section, Valadon's association with feminist ideals is downplayed.

*Suzanne Valadon: Model, Painter, Rebel* presents a groundbreaking account of a female artist who defied the odds to become a highly successful painter. Although she did not engage with feminist politics, she both exhibited with and mentored younger women artists; and such works as *Blue room* show her interest in debates on the 'woman question'.<sup>4</sup> She was unafraid to display, with great honesty and innovation, the full range of women's life experiences – from puberty to sexual intimacy and from motherhood to aging. This exhibition demonstrates her engagement with modernist painting and positions her as an inspiration for contemporary female artists. Given the ambition and radicality demonstrated here, a re-ordering of the subtitle to *Painter, Rebel, Model* would have been more fitting.

1 Catalogue: *Suzanne Valadon: Model, Painter, Rebel*. Edited by Nancy Ireson. 160 pp. incl. 100 col. ill. (Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, and Paul Holberton, London, 2021). £35. ISBN 978-1-913645-13-7.

2 See L. Jimerson: 'Defying gender: Suzanne Valadon and the male nude', *Woman's Art Journal* 40, no.1 (2019), pp.3-12.

3 Reviewed by David Pullins in this Magazine, 161 (2019), pp.591-94.

4 See P.J. Birnbaum: *Women Artists in Interwar France: Framing Femininities*, Farnham 2011.

**Jasper Johns: Mind / Mirror**  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and Philadelphia Museum of Art  
29th September 2021–  
13th February 2022

by EILEEN COSTELLO

The largest exhibition devoted to the work of Jasper Johns (b.1930) in the course of the artist's illustrious sixty-seven-year career is on view and, in an unusual curatorial strategy, presented

simultaneously in two unrelated institutions. This mammoth retrospective was organised by Carlos Basualdo, Senior Curator of contemporary art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and Scott Rothkopf, Senior Deputy Director and Chief Curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.<sup>1</sup> Planning began in 2016 for the exhibition, which was originally intended to open in 2020 in celebration of Johns's ninetieth birthday, but it was delayed due to the pandemic. It was worth the wait, as this seemingly exhaustive survey is an opportunity for a new generation of viewers to experience a panoramic introduction to this grandmaster's artistic production, and for those already well-acquainted with Johns's oeuvre, it will reaffirm his greatness.

Across the two venues, there are over five hundred works of art on view, almost one hundred from the artist's collection, making him the single biggest lender. Having made their selection of paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures, which date from 1954 – the year in which Johns made a conscious decision to 'stop intending to be an artist and to actually become one' (p.22) – to the present day, the curators set themselves the additional challenge of defying strictly chronological display traditions.<sup>2</sup> They also sought to make the work that Johns produced decades ago look as fresh and unfamiliar as when it was first shown, and to use the two venues to produce two distinct exhibitions, rather than one that replicated the other. Basualdo's and Rothkopf's solution was to design *Jasper Johns: Mind / Mirror* around two key, interrelated concepts that Johns has consistently engaged with, and which have undergirded his work from its inception. The first is his fascination with perception: what the eye sees and how the mind interprets it. The second is a compositional strategy: that of mirroring, doubling, echoing, reversing and repeating imagery, a method that Johns frequently deploys in order to rethink and recycle his repertoire of motifs and ideas.



29. *Fool's house*, by Jasper Johns. 1961–62. Oil, sculp-metal and charcoal on canvas with objects, 182.9 by 91.4 cm. (Private collection; © 2021 Jasper Johns / VAGA at Artists Rights Society, New York; exh. Philadelphia Museum of Art).

Each venue has devoted ten galleries to its exhibition, with each room representing an aspect of the ways in which perception and representation are at play in Johns's work. Highlighting his fascination with symmetry and doubling, every gallery in one venue has a corresponding, complementary room in the other, which articulates a similar idea but through a different set of examples. One can think of it as a sort of 'call-and-response' interaction between individual rooms as well as between the two shows as a whole. Didactic wall panels in each gallery introduce and discuss the individual