

Suzanne Valadon, La chambre bleue, 1923  
Crédit photographique : Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI/Bertrand Prévost/Dist. GrandPalaisRmn

## Centre Pompidou visits

Guided audio tours through the exhibitions and permanent collection.

### "Surrealism" exhibition

This podcast accompanies "Surrealism. The centenary exhibition", which takes place in gallery 1 of the Centre Pompidou from 16 January to 26 May 2025.

Following the main themes of the exhibition, this podcast is a discovery of Suzanne Valadon's life, work and environnement in the company of the curators, Nathalie Ernoult, Chiara Parisi and Xavier Rey.

### Colour code:

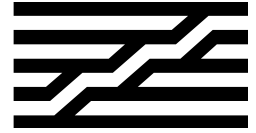
In **green**, narrative voice

In **black**, Nathalie Ernoult's voice

In **blue**, Xavier Rey's voice

In **brown**, Chiara Parisi's voice





In red, quotes

In purple, the musical excerpts

## Podcast transcription

Reading time: 20 minutes

[Jingle intro]

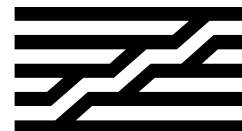
Hello, good evening, welcome. Open wide your eyes and ears, you've been taken for a visit to the Centre Pompidou.

[sound of piano]

Hello. Today, we are going to explore Suzanne Valadon's work in her retrospective at the Centre Pompidou, in Galerie 2 from January 16 to May 26 2025, in the company of the exhibition curators, Nathalie Ernoult, Chiara Parisi and Xavier Rey.

In the exhibition, Valadon's works are displayed alongside a number of works by female artists, her contemporaries and artists she knew. This offers us the chance to compare Valadon's self-portraits, nudes and still lifes with works by avant-garde artists of her time.

Welcome to the retrospective of painter Suzanne Valadon, the first to be dedicated to her by the Musée National d'Art Moderne since it moved to the Centre Pompidou. In fact, the last time that Suzanne Valadon was celebrated at our museum was when the Musée National d'Art Moderne was still located at the Palais de Tokyo, in 1967. That said, it is remarkable that the museum devoted a monography to Suzanne Valadon, as exhibitions dedicated to female artists were rare at the time. We felt that it was very important to celebrate her once again because, as you will see in the exhibition, she played a major role in the history of painting. She is a very important part of our collections, and what's more, this exhibition is mainly based on the wealth of Centre Pompidou's archives. Of course, we are delighted to work in close collaboration with Centre Pompidou Metz, which opened this exhibition two years ago now.



Back in 1948, the museum's first Valadon retrospective was held for the 10-year anniversary of her death, and this was the first exhibition to be dedicated to a female artist at the Musée National d'Art Moderne. This shows Suzanne Valadon's importance in the museum's collections and for the museum, which wished to celebrate her work very early on.

For Centre Pompidou, Suzanne Valadon is an artist that was at the pivotal point of the 19th-century avant-gardes, which you can find at Musée d'Orsay, and the avant-gardes of the early 20th century, which are the catalyst of the collections and the diversity of artistic expression at our own Musée National d'Art Moderne.

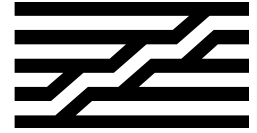
In this way, Suzanne Valadon is a remarkable artist in the movements that would spark evolutions in drawing and painting between the late 19th century, when she started out, and of course, the first third of the 20th century. The Realist, Fauvist and Expressionist revolutions come to mind, of course, which we can use as a starting point to structure our discussion of Suzanne Valadon's painting.

## Piano music

### 1. Selfportraits

We've placed *The Blue Room* in the room's introduction, surrounded by self-portraits of Suzanne Valadon. Is it not a kind of self-portrait without being a self-portrait ? What we can say is that symbolically, Suzanne Valadon depicts herself, a free woman smoking and reading, in her pyjamas. It could be her, even if the face, the model is not her. But it's a symbolic representation of what she is. And that's why we put it right at the beginning of the exhibition.

At a time when we are re-evaluating art by female artists and celebrating their perspective, which is very different to their male counterparts, it is exciting to see what Suzanne Valadon contributed to painting in her time and which is crystallised somewhat in an iconic work like *The Blue Room*, as this work came at a moment of maturity in her career, in the last 15 years of her artistic life. It was after World War I, which was an extraordinarily powerful trauma in European society.



*The Blue Room* presents all the stereotypes of the female figure, but this time, dressed. And yet, there are many nudes in Suzanne Valadon's body of work, as we've seen. Here, the figure is dressed, but she has a new disposition, an independent spirit and a specifically female one, for a moment that this woman has all to herself. She's smoking, which is also an act of independence, and in the end, perhaps that is the message that Suzanne Valadon wanted to transmit, as a female artist.

We can clearly recognise this woman as Suzanne Valadon, as she often represented herself in self-portraits, in which she reveals herself as an artist in the *Self-portrait with Palette*, or as a woman, at all ages of her life from 18 to 66; and, rare enough to be highlighted, she painted topless self-portraits.

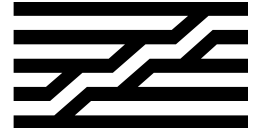
**Chiara Parisi :** Self-portraits provided an easy and free way for female painters to do nudes. Suzanne Valadon continued this practice and took it further, although she broke with the traditional code of femininity in painting. For Suzanne Valadon, a self-portrait is an affirmation of oneself as a supreme subject. It is a manifesto that is both artistic and political. There are 16 self-portraits in all, 6 drawings and 10 paintings. In them, she systematically depicts herself with severe lines, devoid of any compromise or desire to please, which was radical. Radical for any artist at the time, whether male or female. Out of all these wonderful, masterful self-portraits, it's worth highlighting the famous self-portrait in pastel from 1883. This is one of her very earliest well-known works.

The exceptional self-portrait from 1931, a self-portrait with bare breasts, is a severe work of unforgiving realism in her treatment of her face and the chest. Her gaze is proud, a statement and a challenge. She was 66 years old at the time, and depicts the lines of her face and firm bust with severity and uncompromising realism. With this painting, SV switches from being a passive, desirable subject to an active, desiring painter. Her proud gaze openly expresses the act of rebellion playing out implicitly.

## Piano music

### 2. Learning through observation

Suzanne Valadon's life is absolutely fascinating, both because it was



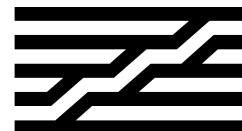
exceptional for her time and because she was able to garner appreciation and establish herself as an artist. However, the exhibition also aims to pay tribute to her body of work, her contribution to the history of painting and the excellence of her work, which left none of her contemporaries indifferent. What's fascinating about Suzanne Valadon's life is that she was first a model for male artists, then she taught herself how to draw and paint, and she was able to establish herself as an artist, thanks to her talent first of all, but also thanks to her temperament and spirit of independence in a milieu that left little room for women.

Suzanne Valadon came from quite a poor family, in fact they were very poor, relatively. She lived with her mother all her life, who was a laundress. She herself did various small jobs, so she had very little means. She learnt to draw and paint by observing artists, but she obviously did not have a studio at the beginning. So she painted, she drew first, she mainly drew. And she drew the members of her family. She had a child very young. She was 18 years old when Maurice Utrillo was born. So she often drew Maurice Utrillo as a child, her mother and the people she lived with, in very natural poses, very intimate, not staged at all. This would turn out to be the strength of her drawings - this natural aspect that can be found in all her early sketches. Obviously, these were little drawings that she painted and drew, just like that, on the edge of the table, not at all in a studio or with the intention of making a larger work, at the beginning.

**“I have drawn like crazy so that when I no longer have eyes, I will have them at the end of my fingers.”**

**Suzanne Valadon**

However, these drawings ended up helping her have a career as an artist, as very early on, they were recognised for their high quality, particularly by Edgar Degas. There are similarities between the two artists' subjects, and the very distanced approach to the female body as well, which was a topic of much discussion around Degas. This was how Degas identified her talent and decided to acquire her work for his personal collection. Degas was part of this model of great artist collectors who were very open. He was one of the first to recognise Gauguin's talent, for example. So Valadon enters Degas' collection and that is how she finds herself earning the seal of



approval, in a certain way, from one of the grand masters of the late 19th century, and she's encouraged to continue, I imagine, while very early on, following a perfectly independent path, probably driven by a certain freedom, which nowadays makes her a key artist in the history of art. She has a certain vigour in her representations, with simultaneously a certain softness in her representation of the female body, and she continues with the thing that surprised Degas so much, that is, this kind of truth.

From her early sketches, we can see that Valadon did not seek to idealise her models. She painted her son and her mother as she saw them. She transcribed this truth with her pencil. We can see it in her drawings and it continues, sometimes in quite a different way, in her paintings.

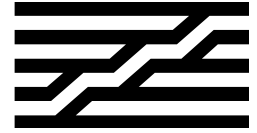
## Piano music

### 3. Family portraits

The search for the natural and the true that drives Suzanne Valadon continues in her paintings and especially in the portraits of her family, a blended family with her son, Maurice Utrillo, her mother Madeleine and André Utter, her lover, who she married in 1914.

Representing her family became a leitmotiv for her. There is a very beautiful painting that is called *Family Portrait*, in which she represents herself with her husband, André Utter, Utrillo and her mother. These are the people who live with her. This is the only family painting, so to speak, where she is included. In the other paintings of her family, she does not represent herself. Here, she places herself in the middle of the painting, as the head of the family. We can see that she's the one looking at the viewer. Utter is looking to the side. Utrillo seems elsewhere and her mother is also a bit distant. She affirms her role as the head of the family in this painting, which is an iconic Suzanne Valadon work.

Like all artists of modest means, the models available to her were her family members. But effectively, this has particular importance in Suzanne Valadon's career, as she has often been associated with her son's work, but nowadays, we recognise her full importance, even before her son became the painter we know.



**Maurice Utrillo:** Suzanne Valadon had many lovers and, at the age of 18, she had a son that she named Maurice, who would be called Maurice Valadon for a while. He was eventually recognised by one of her lovers at the time, though we don't know if it was really his son or not, whose name was Miquel Utrillo. So, he took his name. Maurice lived with his mother for many years. He had problems with alcoholism very early on. As early as his adolescence, he became an alcoholic and so she took care of him a great deal and he was always present in her environment. She drew him a lot, she painted him as well but most of all drew him at all ages of his life, as a child, teenager and adult, she depicted her son. She depicted her family, initially because she didn't have the means for models. Because you have to pay models. She knew how much it cost, because she was one herself. So, she used her family as her models. She used Utrillo, her son, and she used Utter, her second husband.

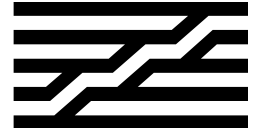
**André Utter:** For Suzanne Valadon, there was a key moment in her work, which was when she met André Utter, a friend of her son, who would become her lover. There was an age gap of more than 20 years between Utter and Valadon, but in him, she found a certain youth and dynamism, which gave fresh life to her creations. This changed her painting to a certain extent, which became more solid after meeting Utter, and she affirmed herself a lot more as an artist than she did before.

## Piano music

### 4. Environnement

Suzanne Valadon lived in Montmartre, which was a hotspot for artists, both those from the late 19th century, like Puvis de Chavannes who came to Montmartre, Degas, and so on, but also young painters like Toulouse-Lautrec and Derain whom she met in cafés.

Suzanne Valadon had two great loves at the beginning of her career. The first was Erik Satie, the composer, who she met at Bohemian cafés in Montmartre. Suzanne Valadon was very free, so she often went to all these cafes and Erik Satie fell madly in love with her. The affair did not last long. Only six months. We know the exact duration, because Erik Satie noted the day he and Valadon broke up. But this would give him the opportunity to write a little 2-3 minutes composition called *Vexations*, which would never



be performed in his lifetime and in which he gave the indication that it should be played 843 times in a row, as many vexations as he would have experienced from Suzanne Valadon when he was in love with her.

And the importance of Montmartre, which would be reaffirmed by other great artists who lived there, is still visible. You can visit Suzanne Valadon's studio at the Musée de Montmartre and relive a moment in the artist's personal space.

“Art is a way of perpetuating this life that we detest and yet love for its mystery.”

Suzanne Valadon

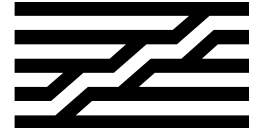
It's also important to remember that Montmartre in the 1910s was not the Montmartre of today. There were a lot of green spaces, there were vines, nature was a part of the area. She returned to nature at her house in Saint-Bernard and on her travels. So, nature is something - she painted landscapes - that was very much present in her life, in her head and that inspired her. Nature doesn't lie. In nature, she found this truth that she was looking for, and she also found nature in the people she painted and tried to transmit it in her painting. She wanted to show and depict the natural side of people.

Piano music

## 5. Portraits d'amis

After the war, Suzanne Valadon starts to be known - she's had exhibitions, she's exhibited a lot in salons, Utter helped her meet gallerists, she also exhibited in galleries - and her work collected. And these collectors and art critics ask her for portraits, so she paints portraits of her friends, which are called “bourgeois portraits”. She's no longer depicting simple people that she showed and drew in her drawings, but rather the bourgeoisie, collectors, gallerists, etc. who became her friends. Madame Coquiot became a good friend of hers. Nora Kars, who was also the wife of painter Georges Kars, became a good friend. She captures the soul of these





people, that's what she said, you have to capture the soul of these people, but she also idealises them somewhat, if we can say that. She's a lot less harsh in her portraits in the 1920s than in her family portraits, where she spares no-one.

All these portraits of her entourage, her friends, were people she knew, most of the time. There are some portraits where the subject is not identified, but often, they were commissioned portraits and portraits of people she knew, or portraits she wanted to do, like that of Docteur Le Masle, who she was very, very close with, who was also a friend of one of her students and whose portrait is unfinished. She didn't finish it. We don't know if she wanted to leave it unfinished or if she wasn't unable to finish it. These were people who mattered to her.

## Piano music

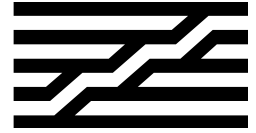
### 6. Still lifes

“Nature has a complete hold on me – I am passionately, profoundly charmed by the trees, the sky, the water and people. These are the shapes, the colours, the movements that made me paint, to try to render, with love and fervour, what I love so much. In what I painted, there's not a mark, not a stroke, that is not based on nature.”

Suzanne Valadon

Still lifes and landscapes are very important in Suzanne Valadon's body of work. In these works, she shows her full virtuosity in representing reality, in the flamboyant colours, but this field of art to which she belongs has often been reserved for women artists, especially since the 18th century.

The art of the still life is undeniably related to the inferior genres that women were allowed to practice. Nevertheless, it is clear that Suzanne Valadon probably looked at Cezanne's art, and this is particularly noticeable in a composition like *Plat d'étain* from Musée de Grenoble, in which she shows the same freedom in relation to the illusionism of the space, in such a way as to create another space that is so truly pictorial that, despite the motif, it invokes a sort of abstraction, in any case, of freedom of form and colour in relation to the model.



Valadon's still lifes were generally painted in her studio, and in many of them, we can even see the studio. In the still life of the violin, for example, we can see a painting leaning upright in her studio, the bottom of the painting *Casting the Net*. She also painted still lifes with animals when she was in her country house near Lyon and Utter brought home game that he hunted. So, she painted still lifes with hares, ducks, and so on. She painted a great number of bouquets of flowers, especially towards the end of her life, when she was tired. Bouquets of flowers that she composed and painted in her studio, and she dedicated and gave these paintings to her friends.

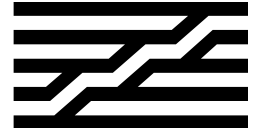
## Piano music

### 7. Joie de vivre

*Joy of Life* is a bit of a manifesto, a milestone work in the career of an artist like Suzanne Valadon, because it is filled with references to great pictorial tradition, even from before the avant-gardes of the 19th century. It is also emblematic of the modernity that Suzanne Valadon embodies, particularly with the male figure which, unlike the highly codified genre of countryside scenes with female nudes, is part of the composition and may even point towards a female gaze, if we can say that there is such a thing here.

The inclusion of the nude man watching the bathers relax in nature represents a *mise en abyme*, with the viewer looking upon the masculine man watching the scene of the *Joy of Life*. So the gaze is two-fold and male, with the voyeur looking from outside the painting, and she also places this voyeur inside the painting, with the naked man watching the women relaxing in nature. It's a play on voyeurism which is extremely innovative, representing a new perspective on this scene, a genre scene that Suzanne Valadon shows us.

The gaze in the painting, which is quite voyeuristic even so, is a particular gaze, as the person watching is her husband, Utter. Or rather it's her lover - at the time, they were not yet married. We see him, we can easily recognise him in the painting. He is withdrawn, he is distanced and he is really in the position of a voyeur. There are multiple versions of this painting and there's one where it's even more obvious that it's Utter, as we see him



with a dog and we know that Utter kept dogs.

In this painting, Suzanne Valadon returns to the grand tradition of Arcadian landscapes, as we can see in the work of Nicolas Poussin and Puvis de Chavannes, then Edouard Manet, Auguste Renoir and Henri Matisse. This tradition features idealised nude women, outside of any temporality.

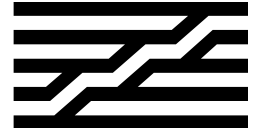
In this context of a male artist and female model, Valadon flips the situation in two ways: she depicts female nudes with a female perspective: these women are not objects of desire - one is stretching, others are drying their feet or have their backs to us. And as a female artist, by choosing her lover as her model, she creates a shift in how we see male nudes.

## Piano music

### 8. Nudes

Suzanne Valadon was a model. She was a nude model for male painters, so she was familiar with female nudes. She knew how people look at female nudes. And she saw this and presented it differently. She presented it with the personality of the nude person and not with a kind of idealisation of the nude. This was key in changing the type of gaze and the way in which we see nudes. A nude painted by a man and a nude painted by Valadon does not have the same meaning. In any case, her nudes are not idealised, they are not made for the male gaze, the voyeuristic male gaze. They are made for the people, for the women as they are, for the personality in these paintings, the personality of the women, and not at all to exert male desire on female bodies. So, at this level, we can talk about a female gaze for nudes. I am not sure that men, at this time, were doing the same thing. Well, there was Degas. We talk about Degas' distance in relation to women in his drawings. And she creates this distance too, because she places women's bodies in their truth, in her quest for truth and not with idealisation or in classical models that are found in 19th-century painting. And even when she paints an *Adam and Eve*, it's not just a random body, it's her own body and Utter's body, and I don't think there are other painters who have used the representation of Adam and Eve to depict their own story. She uses her own story in her paintings.

“Remaining true to oneself, endeavouring to express the multiple and



changing aspects of life, light and form, is for the artist the only law.”

## Suzanne Valadon

The question that is often asked is why she didn't hide the woman's genitals and pubic hair. The pubic hair also shows Suzanne Valadon's modernity. All her nudes are shown with pubic hair, she doesn't hide it. And we have to remember that this was something that deeply shocked the public in the late 19th and early 20th century.

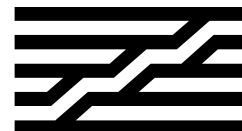
It wasn't so much the nude that was a subject of scandal, but the fact that these nudes were realistic and therefore had pubic hair. So that was something that also broke with male artists. Looking at 19th-century painters, there is no pubic hair, the genitals are hairless or hidden, but when they aren't hidden, there's no pubic hair. What was avant-garde, breaking with the previous century, was this freedom that she had with the body, which she represented as it was, in its true form and without hiding the genitals. She was not really able to for men, she had to hide them, but for women, she represented them.

## Piano music

### 9. Casting the net

The exhibition closes with a masterpiece, a manifesto that says a lot about Suzanne Valadon's art and her contribution to history. First of all, it's a female artist taking on a male nude, taking on an exercise that was considered, in the hierarchy of genres, to be the most elevated, that is, a nude figure in a landscape. So this painting also turns all of the grand tradition upside down.

And once again, what is very surprising and characteristic of Valadon, is that she does this in a large format. There were female artists that painted male nudes, but often small drawings. They would practice painting the male body, but in small drawings. I think Suzanne Valadon is the first woman to paint male nudes in large formats. *Casting the Net* is a very large painting. *Joy of Life* is a large painting. *Adam and Eve* is a life-size painting, so large as well. There is something very surprising about this type of theme, in any case for a woman. I think that she's really the very first to have dared to paint male nudes in large formats and therefore for all to look



at, not just for the intimate family gaze, as other female artists did. In this case, it's not certain if the figure is Utter or not. Utter was probably the model, but the body of the net-thrower is athletic, with absolutely perfect proportions. Here, she shows an idealised body, which is not the case for her female nudes. But the body of the male nude, in *Casting the Net*, is totally idealised, which is what male artists did with women. This is what she represents in *Casting the Net* and it is not André Utter's real body, even if he served as the model. On the topic of the male nude, we can add that in 1909, very early on, when she did her first painting of a male nude, which is *Adam and Eve*, Suzanne Valadon wanted to paint a nude that was really nude, i.e. showing the man's genitals.

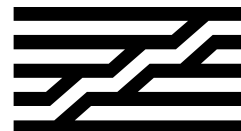
We have a photo of *Adam and Eve* in an initial state, where we can really see Adam's genitals, very visible and frontal, in a frontal position. She doesn't try to hide them with an angled position. This was obviously extremely innovative and probably shocking for the time, very much ahead of her time, too far ahead of her time, which meant that she was obliged, or she felt obliged, to hide Utter's genitals with a vine leaf in a second version of the work, probably in order to present it at the 1920 Salon. It was the same for *Casting the Net*, in which, when the body appears front-on and you would be able to see the male's genitals, she slips the net over the top. But in earlier studies, which you can see in the exhibition, we can see that her initial intention was to show the genitals. In the studies, they're visible. But they're hidden in the final painting.

Suzanne Valadon changed the way we see nudes. Typically, nudes were mainly female, offered up to the male gaze. Valadon painted male nudes for the female gaze, a desiring nude, an athletic nude and an object of desire, while her female nudes are very realistic, not at all presented for male desire.

## Piano music

[Jingle outro]

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### **Credits**

Production and editing: Delphine Coffin

Narrative voice: Delphine Coffin

Recording: Ivan Gariel

Editing and mixing : Bastien Pigeon and Ivan Gariel

Readings: Christine Hooper, Florian Hutter and Elisa Doughty

Music: Erik Satie, *Vexations*

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