

Research Article

Suzanne Valadon's *The Blue Room* Model as a Depiction of a Modern Venus: Visual Analysis and Case-Comparison with the Effigy of the Venus of Brassempouy

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Abstract

Suzanne Valadon's *The Blue Room* (1923) is instantly transfixing. A woman lounges on a bed in a camisole and striped slacks. Her gaze does not acknowledge the audience, but fixates elsewhere, perhaps authentically lost in thought, perhaps in performative absorption. Valadon was one of the few women artists who emerged during the Fauve period of modern French painting. Her depictions of the female nude were groundbreaking for their so-called female perspective. While the woman in *The Blue Room* is a non-nude, her pose is evocative of Titian's *Venus and Cupid with the Organ Player* and, by association, with Manet's *Olympia*. In contrast to these representations, who portray women in some type of performative role, Valadon's "Blue Room Venus" seems to be decontextualized from her role as social being. Symbolic details such as a stack of books in the corner and *kanji*-like swirls abstractly floating in the background seem suggestive of an inner life—a being unconcerned with performing femininity while still acknowledging her womanhood through Valadon's gaze. In this paper, it is argued that Valadon's model challenges Renaissance ideals of femininity, typically allegorized through the mythical Venus, embracing primitive values of authenticity. Thus, artistic context and cloisonnism style suggest that the "Venus" in Valadon's *The Blue Room* is more prehistoric than mythical. To assess this view, a visual analysis of Valadon's work was completed within a compare-contrast model based on the Venus of Brassempouy, a prehistoric effigy discovered near Aquitaine, France, during the *Fin de Si ècle*. An analysis of the Brassempouy effigy as presented by Dixson and Dixson (2011) supports the idea of Valadon's "Blue Room Venus" as similar in body type to the Brassempouy effigy, perhaps alluding to similar themes.

Keywords

Suzanne Valadon, *The Blue Room*, Venus Pudica, Venus of Brassempouy, Cloisonnism, Primitivism, Female Gaze, Cigarettes

1. Understanding Context: A Brief History of Suzanne Valadon

Suzanne Valadon, *n ée* Marie-Clémentine, was born in 1865 to an unmarried domestic worker, historically described as affectionately distant [1]. Having been raised in the Parisian Quarter of Montmartre, Valadon worked odd jobs to support

herself during her youth. One of these jobs included the circus, where she worked until she had an accident in a trapeze. The unfortunate incident nevertheless redirected her towards a more fortuitous direction. She began working as an artistic

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model for Impressionist painters, most notably Renoir (she featured prominently in his *Danse* series) but also Berthe Morisot, Toulouse-Latrec and Edgar Degas [2].

Valadon learned painting while modeling. She would observe the artists at work and ask them to teach her about technique, which they happily obliged. Impressed by her drawing, Degas formally became her mentor and her patron. He once wrote to Valadon praising her draftsmanship: “From time to time in my dining room,” Degas wrote to Valadon after purchasing a work of hers, “I look at your drawing in red pencil, still hanging, and I always say to myself: ‘This devil...had the genius of drawing’” [3]. While Degas did not formally teach Valadon to draw or paint, the artist’s mentorship would have influenced her artistic style. Valadon’s paintings, like those of Degas during the 1880’s, often emphasized an absorptive gaze [4].

In 1909, Valadon gave birth to Maurice Utrillo, who would become a lauded painter of cityscapes within the Parisian school [5]. Utrillo’s birth and paternity became the subject of some speculation since Valadon, like her mother, gave birth out of wedlock to her son. This, however, did not preclude her from continuing to work as an artist of increased recognition. In 1923, at the height of her success, Valadon painted *The Blue Room*, a bold work of female autonomy that continues to feel strikingly modern. Some scholars argue that the model in *The Blue Room* is Valadon herself, raising intriguing questions about Valadon’s self-concept and artistic aims.

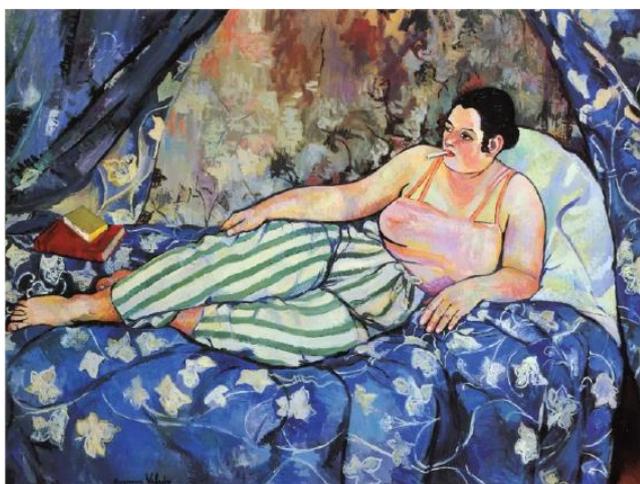


Figure 1. Suzanne Valadon, *The Blue Room*, 1923, Oil on canvas, Centre Georges Pompidou. Source: Centre Pompidou, <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/ressources/oeuvre/cpg8rdy>.

2. Visual Analysis of *The Blue Room*: Noted Influences and Themes

Some scholars point out a similarity in composition between Valadon’s *The Blue Room* and Titian’s *Venus and Cupid with the Organ Player*, particularly in the lassitude of the model’s pose (Figure 2). Other scholars have suggested that

Titian and Giorgione’s *Sleeping Venus* is more aligned with Valadon’s “Blue Room” muse. It is helpful to remember that Titian’s artworks inspired *Luncheon on the Grass* and *Olympia*, two of Manet’s most iconic scenes. Notable for their bold subject matter and, in terms of aesthetic quality, for their flat color and bright lighting, Manet’s modernist artistic style appears to have been one of the definitive influences in Valadon’s painting. A parallel can be established between the inspirational link of Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* with Manet’s *Olympia* and Valadon’s *The Blue Room* with Titian’s *Venus and Cupid with the Organ Player*, suggesting that Valadon may have seriously studied the works of Manet and Titian to explore similar themes and attitudes in her own work. Of equal importance is the modern challenge to classical ideals of Venus that both Manet and Valadon explored in *Olympia* and *The Blue Room*, respectively. An ideological transgression of this character would have been on par with the female-empowering sociocultural moment lived during mid-19th century France.

Because much of what defines the qualities of sensuousness and attractiveness relies on the model’s gaze, the direction of the gaze and its implicit qualities will be briefly analyzed in a series of relevant works according to Chu’s (2012) definitions of performance and absorption [4]. A “performative” gaze is one which recognizes and addresses the viewer, while an absorptive gaze is one which denies or ignores outside observation. An understanding of the gaze can help the viewer understand the outstanding motivations of the character in the artwork, providing the ideological foundation for the next level of visual analysis: the comparison between Valadon’s *Blue Room* “Venus” and the Venus of Brassempouy.

2.1. Challenging the Renaissance Ideal of Venus: A Study of Gaze

Like the earlier *Sleeping Venus* (1510), Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* (1538) is an example of the *Venus pudica*, an idealized version of the goddess Venus as chaste yet sensuous. The theme of *Venus pudica* was popular during the Renaissance, the *Birth of Venus* (1485) by Sandro Botticelli is one of the primary examples of the motif. In contrast to *Sleeping Venus*, where Titian and Giorgione painted a relaxed model in a state of sensuous repose, Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* is fully awake, directing her welcoming gaze towards the hypothetical male viewer. In contrast, Manet’s *Olympia*, which evokes *Venus of Urbino* in composition and setting, subverts classical ideals of Venusian beauty and purity, in part, through Olympia’s empowered gaze. Whereas the *Venus of Urbino*’s gaze appears receptive, Olympia’s direct and resolute gaze is not necessarily inviting to the hypothetical male, provoking much scandal in the Salon [6]. In any case, both models project a performative gaze—one that directly addresses the audience, acknowledging their status as object of attention [7].

The gaze does not address the audience, however, in Titian’s *Venus and Cupid with the Organ Player*. Her gaze ap-

pears distant as she looks away into an unseen area of the plane. It could be argued that she remains receptive to “male touch” as the cupid’s arm dangles over her breast. Though she angles her head towards the cupid, perhaps to heed his proclamations, her non-reactiveness appears to shroud her moti-

vations. Though she appears to heed Cupid’s whispers, her overall demeanor seems cool and detached, preoccupied with the unseen. Her gaze appears non-performative, if not fully absorptive.



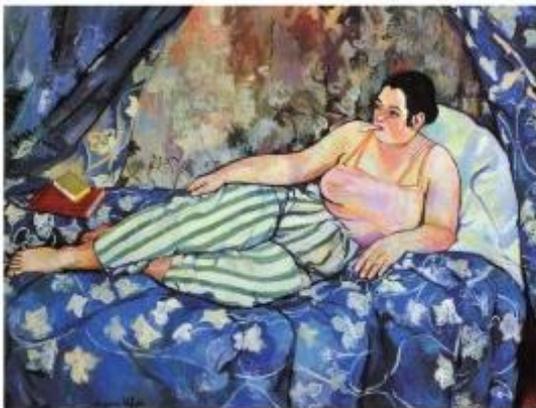
(A) Giorgione and/or Titian, *Sleeping Venus*, 1510, Oil on canvas, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden



(B) Titian, *Venus with the Organ Player*, 1550, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin - Gemäldegalerie.



(C) Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1538, Oil on canvas, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy.



(D) Suzanne Valadon, *The Blue Room*, 1923, Oil on canvas, Centre Georges Pompidou, France.



(E) Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, Oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay.

Figure 2. An analysis of the gaze can clarify classic Renaissance ideals of Venus compared with modern depictions of the archetype. Gaze types: (A) Absorptive--fully closed eyes and relaxed pose; (B) Absorptive to an extent. Venus looks away from the audience, seemingly focused on Cupid’s musings, though her mind and her gaze appear to focus elsewhere. (C) Performative. Venus looks directly at the viewer, interpreted as sensuous to the hypothetical male. (D) Apparently absorptive, though the tension emphasized through the cigarette and the classic nude pose hint at some performance, enhancing the work’s thematic allure. (E) Fully performative. Olympia looks straight at the viewer in apparent defiance. The directness of her gaze, more about empowerment than insinuation, scandalized original attendees of the Salon, who heavily criticized Manet’s now-immortal oeuvre.

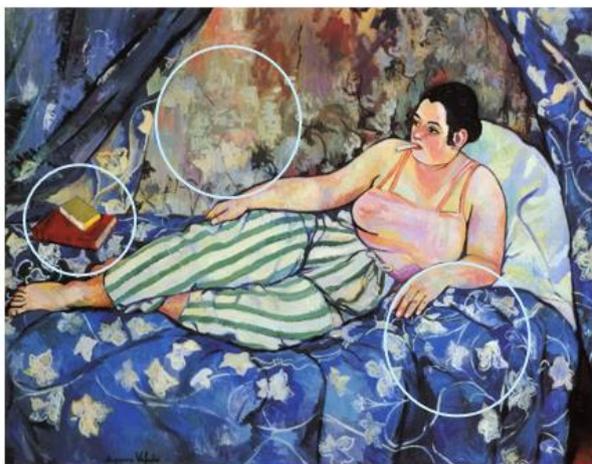
Likewise, Valadon’s “Blue Room Venus” directs her gaze away from the audience, towards an unseen region of the

plane. However, in contrast to Titian’s *Venus and Cupid with the Organ Player*, who stoically shrouds her emotions, the

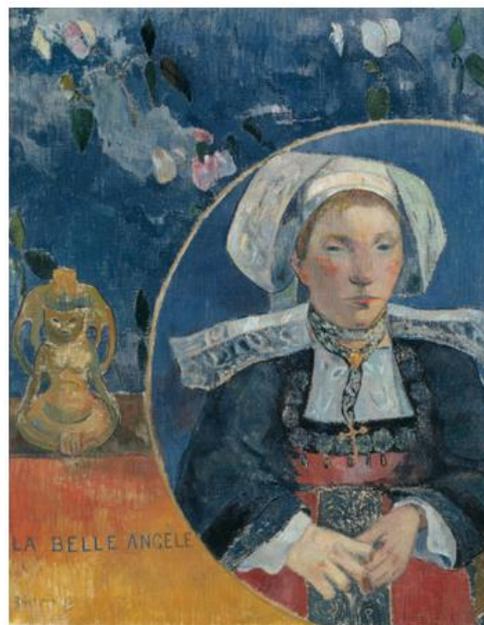
cigarette in her mouth suggests that Valadon's Venus is uncomfortable with being the object of attention. Her gaze is performative since it acknowledges an outside gaze of some sort but leaves open the possibility of absorption as smoking is often associated with the idea of being 'lost in thought'. Kanji-like wisps floating in the background may support the idea of absorption, if considered from the perspective of Zen Buddhism which was increasingly known at the time thanks to Japanese artistic influence which was standard for *fin de siècle* modern art. Rendered in the style of a classical nude while fully clothed, Valadon's model denies the audience her physical nudity as part of her empowerment, offering in its place a sense of vulnerability. The "Blue Room Venus" poses in comfortable attire. Lounging in a camisole and striped casual trousers, she creates the impression of posing in her own space. As such, the non-sexualized rendering of the model transforms her from object of attention to relatable subject if appreciated from a female or even an androgynous

perspective. Paul Gauguin, a chief exponent of *cloisonnism* and grandson of feminist activist Flora Tristan, would often render his models in androgynous ways. When speaking of Gauguin's *Barbarian Tales*, Hargrove (2014) said "androgynous appearance manifests the fusion of male and female traits common to traditional descriptions of the Buddha" [8]. Arguably, the *Blue Room Venus* exhibits androgynous traits. The flatness of the composition, the prevalence of blue and even the *kanji*-esque motifs in the background are reminiscent of Gauguin's *The Beautiful Angel* (1889), itself inspired by ukiyo-e conventions like the division of the plane. Likewise, a feline-like figure rests in the background, seemingly in lotus pose, though some have identified the figure as Peruvian in inspiration, in alignment with Gauguin's background [9]. In *The Blue Room*, the cigarette as phallic object, the empowering defiance of the non-nude, the performative absorption—hint at similar concepts of harmonious male-female fusion.

Ideas from Buddhism: Male and Female Fusion



Suzanne Valadon, *The Blue Room*, 1923, Oil on canvas, Centre Georges Pompidou.
Source: [Daily Dose of Art](#)



Paul Gauguin, *The Beautiful Angel*, 1889, Oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay

Figure 3. Ideas from Buddhism: Male and Female Fusion. Androgynous motifs are analyzed in Valadon's *The Blue Room* and compared to Gauguin's *The Beautiful Angel*; a work strongly influenced by ukiyo-e composition.

2.2. "Blue Room Muse": A Different Type of Venus

So far in this paper, Valadon's "Blue Room Venus" has been understood in association with renditions of the Venus ideal by Titian and modern artists like Manet and Gauguin. We have also discussed how the mythological Venus has been classically understood as a graceful figure, capable of being aloof and attentive. However, to understand the proposed link to prehistoric Venus, it is helpful to revisit the historical con-

text in which *The Blue Room* was painted. Emerging victorious from the First World War, France experienced an updated version of the Neoclassical fascination with orientalism and ancient history thanks to a wave of archeological discoveries like Tutankhamen's tomb in Egypt [10]. In fact, such an interest in the exotic and the primitive had never truly waned since its *fin de siècle* rise, but in fact expanded after Gauguin's excursion to Tahiti produced colorful, psychedelic-like works of symbolic figuration. In the early 1900s, the Fauves or "Beasts" embraced highly vivid, increasingly abstract aesthetic motifs based on ideals of Primitive art as a

truly authentic mode of expression [11].

Though pioneers Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt had been active during Impressionism, the Fauves saw a new wave of women artists who revolutionized the nude—among them, Valadon herself, who painted female nudes from the perspective of lived experience. In *Future Unveiled* (1912), for instance, Valadon channeled the absorptive gaze of the nude bathers painted by Degas in the late 1880s by depicting a naked woman engaging the gaze with the card spread set by her fortune teller. The woman's pubic region has been emphasized with pubic hair, a theme predominant in Fauvism and the Primitive.

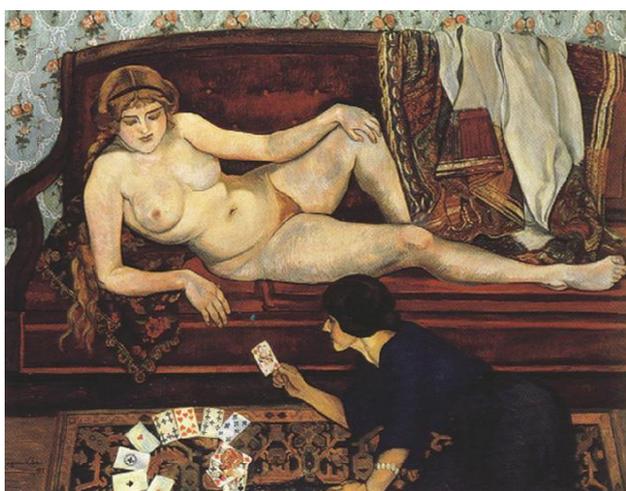


Figure 4. Suzanne Valadon, *Future Unveiled*, 1912, Art print (Original: Oil on canvas), Fine Art America.



Figure 5. Pablo Picasso, *Two Nudes*, 1906, Oil on canvas, Museum of Modern Art.

Thus, Valadon's thematically Fauvist nudes revolutionized modern painting for their frankness and non-objectifying gaze.

A new conceptualization of the female nude—and femininity itself—was taking place during the first decades of the 20th century. Like Valadon's *Future Unveiled*, Picasso's *Two Nudes*, rendered in 1906, exemplifies the fascination with the female primitive at this time. Two nude women in a cave face each other, though one directs the gaze at the audience, the other looks away—a display of the dual nature of the gaze as performative and absorptive. Their strong, square bodies eschew classical mores of femininity for a relatively androgynous sort of conceptualization. Taken together, these explorations of the female primitive paved the way towards an artistic expansion of woman as authentic, complex being—a theme which pervades in Valadon's *The Blue Room*.

3. A Genuine Primitive: The Venus of Brassempouy

An important archeological event which precludes these alternative depictions of women was the discovery of the Venus of Brassempouy in France, 1892. Dated from the Upper Paleolithic at over 25,000 years old, the figure is the oldest known realistic depiction of a human face [12]. Understanding the context of this discovery can inform our understanding of *The Blue Room* as a depiction of a modern, primitive-inspired Venus. Discovered in Southern France in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, near the region of Aquitaine, only the effigy's head was found, the body later reproduced from mammoth ivory fragments from elsewhere in the region. While some scholars don't consider the full-body image of the Venus of Brassempouy wholly representative of the effigy, it is nevertheless considered a good approximation [13]. Coupled with a fascination for the primitive, an archeological discovery of this magnitude taking place 'at home', so to speak, in the French countryside, would have been relevant to the *Fin de Si ècle* artistic milieu, who was given to collecting archeologically relevant objects like African masks.

In 2011, Dixson and Dixson researched how a set of 15 different prehistoric Venus effigies were perceived by 161 participants [13]. Findings from the study can help us understand specifically what prehistoric archetype Valadon's *Blue Room* Venus could be and, consequently, what related themes are potentially gleaned from the painting. For instance, Dixson and Dixson found that the Venus of Brassempouy elicited longer gaze times over the midriff than the Willendorf Venus (an effigy of an obese woman, commonly perceived by participants as elderly) or a control image of a modern-day woman with a narrow waist. A visual analysis of Valadon's *Blue Room* model suggests a similar body type to the Brassempouy, perhaps eliciting a similar absorption of the gaze in viewers of the painting. Rouquerol's theory of the "ventral center" argues that the anatomical proportion of these Venusian effigies is not meant to be realistic but designed to place the pubic region at eye level to emphasize its importance for fertility rites [14]. Hence, the dwelling of the gaze over the

Brassempouy Venus's midriff: participants might have been, implicitly or not, trying to ascertain the effigy's pregnancy status. Compared to other figurines, most participants determined that Brassempouy Venus was *not* pregnant (neither was the Willendorf), though, for context, the famous Venus of Laussel might have been. This shifts the current understanding of prehistoric Venuses from strictly fertility-related effigies to serving diverse purposes, according to figuration.

Accepting the similarity of body type, Valadon's "Blue

Room Venus" is also likely not pregnant. This finding supports the idea of Valadon's Venus as defying a role-based expectation. While the cigarette can effectively suggest the same, the Brassempouy body type significantly enhances its intention as signifier of an autonomous woman. In essence, Valadon chose to depict an artistically non-conventional body type in a rather bold way. The "Blue Room Venus" is simply her own authentic self.

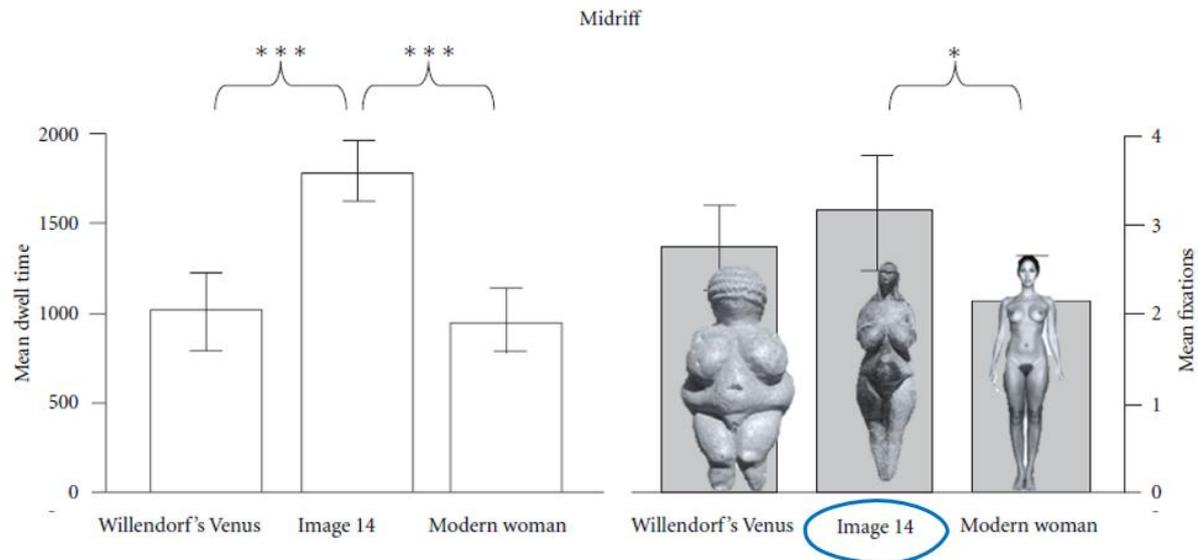


Figure 6. Bar chart detailing mean dwell time over the midriff for three Venus figurines. Superimposed, from left to right: (A) Willendorf's Venus, (B) Image 14 or Venus of Brassempouy, (C) An image of a modern woman intended as a control. Original chart and images sourced from Dixon and Dixon (2011), edited by the author for clarity.

4. Study Limitations

In this study, Suzanne Valadon's *The Blue Room* (1923) was visually analyzed to identify relevant themes and aesthetic influences. Prevalent among those themes was the defiance of the Renaissance ideal of the *Venus pudica* through modern signifiers like the cigarette, the pseudo-absorptive gaze, and stylistic devices appropriate to *cloisonnism* and Japanese-inspired modern art. While we can extrapolate numerous themes from Valadon's painting, such as the association between Japonism, Zen Buddhism and androgyny in *The Blue Room* and the role of Gauguin's influence in Valadon's artwork, limitations in scope prevented extended analysis of those elements in the present study, intended chiefly to identify elements of the female primitive through prehistoric evidence such as the Venus of Brassempouy. For the sake of brevity, this analysis is not meant to be exhaustive. However, for context, Japonism—the name given to the influx of Japanese art and culture in France during the mid-1800s, was a significant influence for both Manet and Gauguin, who produced artworks aligned with the stylistic conventions of *uki-*

yo-e or Japanese woodblock prints. As such, future studies of Valadon's *The Blue Room* can benefit from a closer view of Valadon's artistic influences, from Manet and Gauguin to Morisot and Van Gogh. Grounded in findings from an anthropological research study, this study's outcomes can potentially inform future understandings of Valadon's work as an authentic modern woman.

5. Conclusion

Valadon's *The Blue Room* reads as a depiction of a boldly modern and self-possessed autonomous woman, attuned to progressive mores by daring to be authentic. An analysis of the model's gaze, supported by contextual aesthetic elements in the painting such as the stack of books in the corner and rising *kanji*-like shapes in the background suggests the idea of an active inner life or a state of absorption. However, the cigarette in mouth hints, perhaps, at a performative sort of *absorption*, driven by the tension inherent to being the focus of attention. The Primitive, a popular motif among modern artists of the early 20th century, may have been explored by Valadon through the prehistoric Venus body type and signifi-

ers of empowerment like cigarettes. A visual analysis of Valadon's *Blue Room* model compared with findings from a 2011 anthropological study by Dixson and Dixson suggest that her body type resembles that of the Venus of Brassempouy, which may encourage in viewers similar thematic associations such as defiance of social expectations, making Valadon's *Blue Room* model a different type of Venus.

Author Contributions

Robmarie Lopez is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Biography



Robmarie Lopez is a graduate student of Modern and Contemporary Art History at Azusa Pacific University. Robmarie Lopez is a graduate student of Modern and Contemporary Art History at Azusa Pacific University. She has a keen interest in Post-Impressionism and understanding the ways in which Japanese art and culture shaped modern art. She writes about Japanese artists and *ukiyo-e* prints at inkbrushmood.com. As a former psychologist with research experience, Robmarie also applies her background in works of visual analysis with functional applications. Her article: "What Makes a Hospital Gown Functional? A Comparative Case Study of Effective Patient-Centered Design Practices in Four (n=4) Hospital Gowns" (in publication at the *Patient Experience Journal*), aims to create awareness about the importance of functional design practices to improve inpatient mood and treatment adherence. Similarly, her book, *Cineterapia: Pel  cula Como Met  fora* (2023), provides an introduction to movie analysis in mental health settings.