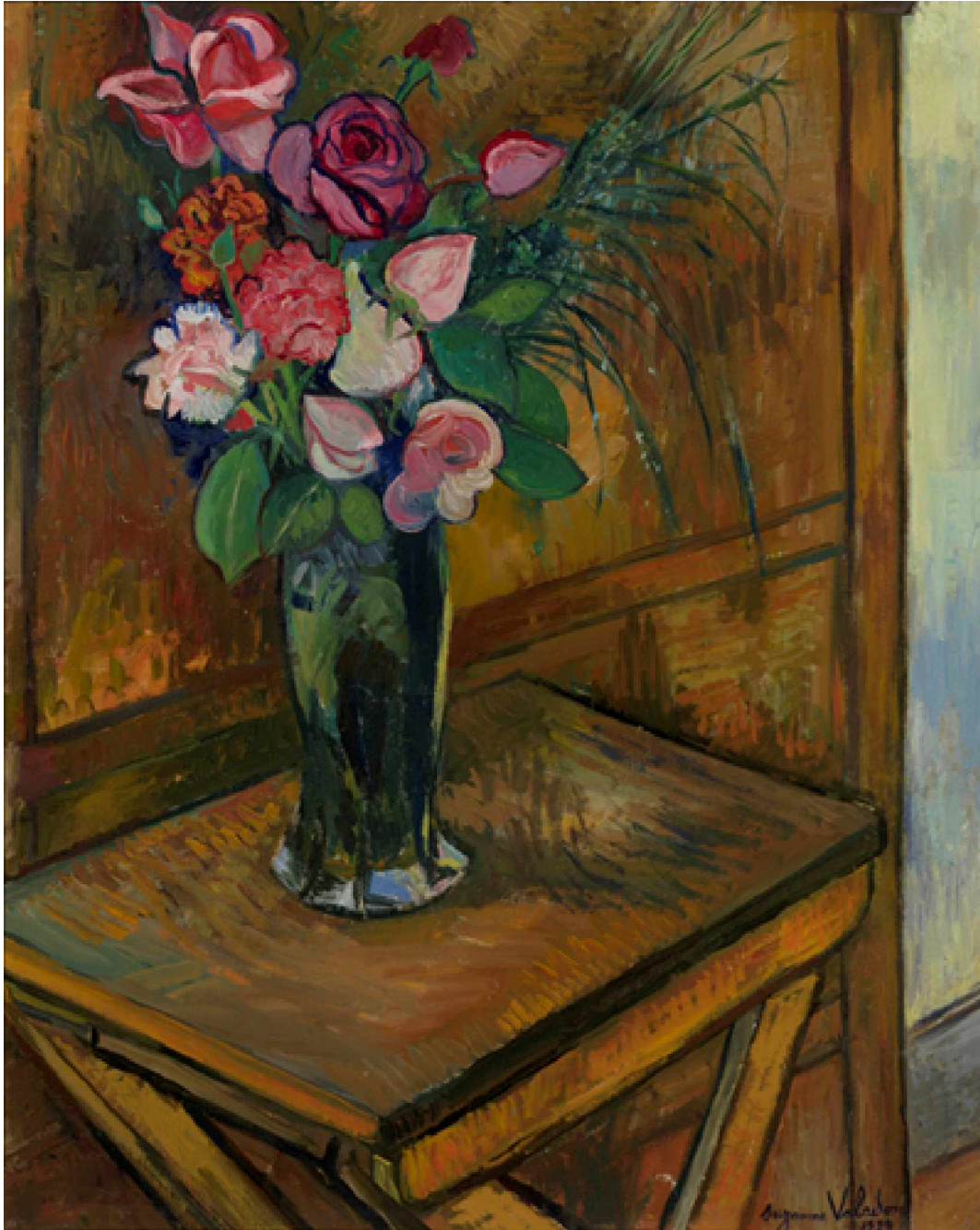


Duke Street Gallery

INFORMATION SHEET



Suzanne Valadon (1865-1938)
Vase de fleurs sur une table

Oil on canvas, signed and dated 1929
24" x 19.75"

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Suzanne Valadon

Suzanne Valadon (original name Marie-Clémentine Valadon) was born in 1865 at Bessines-sur-Gartempe, near Limoges, an illegitimate daughter of a French laundress. From age nine on she supported herself by doing odd jobs. One was as a circus acrobat. She did it until she fell off the trapeze when she was sixteen. Looking for a safer occupation, she became an artists' model. Posing for such artists as Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir.

Mingling with the Impressionists in the clubs and cabarets of Montmartre, where she caused a sensation with her provocative stunts, Suzanne took numerous lovers. At eighteen she gave birth to an illegitimate son, the future artist Maurice Utrillo.

Valadon soon took interest in painting. She observed carefully the techniques of the artists for whom she was posing and began creating her own paintings. Toulouse-Lautrec was the first to see her drawings and to encourage her. Then her work won the admiration and support of Degas (he bought three of her works in 1893), with whom she developed a lasting friendship. Among the artists she knew were van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso and Modigliani.

She painted portraits, landscapes, still lifes and, especially, female nudes. Her images are unforgettable in vibrant and powerful colors reminiscent of the Post-Impressionist and Fauve styles. Her use of color and her bold representations of female sexuality challenged the traditional male constructions of femininity. Valadon's powerful renditions of women's bodies probably arose from her own experience as an artist's model and circus performer. Even if Valadon received no formal art training, she was able (through her close associations with prominent artists) to develop a re-gendering of women's bodies and strength. The self-absorption and vitality of her subjects, for instance, are in stark opposition to the essential passivity of females nudes that had until then been the traditional manner of representing womanhood.

In 1915, she had her first one person exhibition, which became a critical as well as a commercial success. Her later exhibits were also successful. Yet bourgeois society was shocked by Valadon's art, especially her candid and earthy nudes -which, like her sexual conduct, defied convention.

Valadon's personal life attracted as much attention as did her art. She had well-known affairs with the painter Puvis de Chavannes, the composer Erik Satie, the painter Renoir. After an attempt at respectability in a marriage to the banker Paul Moussis with whom she lived for fourteen years, she fell in love with André Utter; an artist twenty-one years her junior. He became the love of her life (Suzanne was nearly fifty when she married Utter and returned to a precarious bohemian existence). They had several joint art exhibitions and he also posed for a number of Valadon's works, including the painting Adam and Eve.