

Mary Cassatt



Mary Cassatt (American, active in France, 1844–1926), *Portrait of the Artist*, 1878, watercolor, gouache on wove paper laid down to buff-colored wood-pulp paper, 23 5/8 x 16 3/16 in. (60 x 41.1 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Edith H. Proskauer, 1975, 1975.319.1

Mary Stevenson Cassatt was born in 1844 in Allegheny City (now Pittsburgh), Pennsylvania. Although she was the American daughter of an elite Philadelphia family, she spent much of her childhood and later life in France. Between 1860 and 1862, she studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. In Paris, she received classical artistic training under the tutelage of the great Academic painter Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904), learning to paint by recreating the works of the Old Masters. When she was 24, one of her paintings, *The Mandolin Player* was accepted to be shown at the 1868 Paris Salon, which was the official exhibition of the Academy of Fine Arts. Due to the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War two years later, the artist left Europe for a brief hiatus in Philadelphia.

Cassatt returned to Europe in 1871 and studied printmaking in Parma, Italy, while also continuing to copy Old Masters paintings in order to learn their techniques. She traveled to Spain, Belgium, and Holland to study the works of Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), and other artists. Returning to Paris in 1874, Cassatt continued to work and show her paintings at the Paris Salon, gaining recognition among artists and patrons in the city. Three years later, Edgar Degas (1834–1917) invited her to join a group of artists independent from the Paris Salon—later known as the Impressionists—which also included Claude Monet

(1840–1926) and Camille Pissarro (1830–1903). Cassatt, the only American affiliated with this group, developed an especially close working relationship with Degas. Cassatt’s involvement with the Impressionists profoundly influenced her work by motivating her to revise her technique and shift her attention from form to color and light. Degas shared her interest in portraiture and encouraged her experimentation in printmaking. While Cassatt developed as an artist, she made many portraits of her family, especially her sister, Lydia. She also developed her signature subject matter: pictures of mothers and their children, primarily within domestic settings, characterized by great intimacy and tenderness.



Mary Cassatt (American, active in France, 1844–1926), *The Mandolin Player*, 1868, oil on canvas, 36 x 29 in. (91.44 x 73.66 cm), Private Collection

The artist’s focus on the lives of women, often depicted in their homes engaged in intellectual activities such as reading a book or newspaper, demonstrates a commitment to portraying them with rich inner experiences, which was distinct from their roles as wives and mothers. As a female artist, she offered a unique insight into the private lives of women, particularly in the upper class, and she lends significance to their domestic world.

Cassatt was also an influential advisor to American art collectors. Her social position as the daughter of a prominent Philadelphia family connected her to many upper class patrons, and she convinced friends, most notably Louise Elder Havemeyer (1855–1929), to buy the work of the new French painters. Cassatt’s influence helped the Havemeyer family to amass one of the greatest collections of Impressionist art in America, much of which now belongs to The Metropolitan Museum of

Art. Cassatt encouraged these patrons to bequeath their collections to institutions and is therefore highly responsible for the accessibility of Impressionist works in museums today.

In her later years, the artist focused primarily on printmaking, drawing inspiration from Japanese traditions, which influenced her approach to composition and color. She was attracted to the simplicity of Japanese prints, which were more readily available in Europe after Japan reopened trade with the West in 1853. Cassatt worked primarily with drypoint and color aquatint, both printmaking intaglio techniques, and she exhibited a series these prints to great acclaim in 1891. Cassatt embarked on a tour of Egypt in 1910, which exhausted her both physically and artistically. There, she felt “crushed by the strength of this Art.” She confessed, “I fought against it but it conquered, it is surely the greatest Art the past has left us ... how are my feeble hands to ever paint the effect on me.” In her later years, the artist was plagued with health problems, and by 1914, nearly blind, she stopped painting. Her final decade was marked by a dedication to the women’s rights and suffragette movement, and she showed a series of paintings benefitting the cause in 1915. She died in Paris on June 14, 1926.



Mary Cassatt (American, active in France, 1844–1926), *Young Mother Sewing*, 1900, oil on canvas, 36 3/8 x 29 in. (92.4 x 73.7 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, H.O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H.O. Havemeyer, 1929, 29.100.48

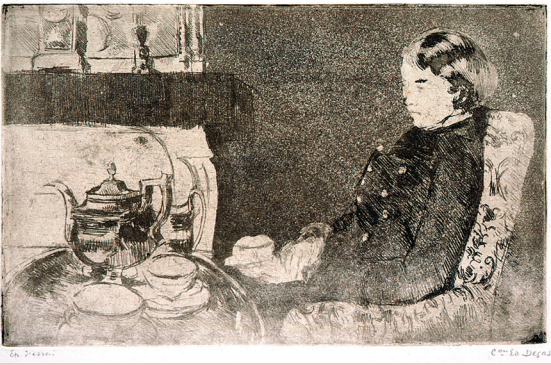
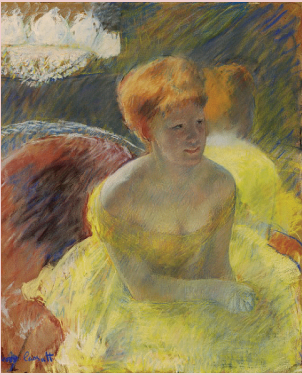


Mary Cassatt
(American, active in France, 1844–1926)
Woman Reading
1878–79
oil on canvas, 38 3/4 x 31 in. (98.4 x 78.7 cm)
Museum purchase, 1943.38

A forceful artist with a highly personal style, Mary Cassatt was a master of the domestic scene. She was pioneering in her approach to the private moments of everyday life. Cassatt took an active interest in Impressionist techniques, including the application of color theory, quickly applied brushstrokes, and innovative figure-ground relationships, which can all be observed in *Woman Reading*. The influence of photography and Japanese prints can be seen in the cropped composition and the alignment of the figure along a strong diagonal. This is one of many paintings by Cassatt depicting a woman reading. It is exemplary of the artist’s interest in sharing the rich lives of modern women within their domestic domains. Some scholars have identified the woman in this painting as Lydia, Cassatt’s sister, who often sat for portraits. However, recent research suggests the sitter is more likely a Swedish model, whom the artist hired to pose for other paintings. Indeed, Lydia rarely sat for her sister’s portraits before 1880, when she was diagnosed with Bright’s disease.



Mary Cassatt (American, active in France, 1844–1926), *[The Artist's Mother] Reading "Le Figaro"*, 1878, oil on canvas, 40 7/8 x 32 7/8 in. (104 x 83.7 cm), Private Collection



IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): Mary Cassatt (American, active in France, 1844–1926), *At the Theatre (Lydia Leaning on Her Arms, Seated in a Lodge)*, ca. 1879, pastel on paper, 21 13/16 x 18 1/8 in. (55.45 x 46.05 cm), The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Purchase: acquired through the generosity of an anonymous donor, F77-33; Mary Cassatt (American, active in France, 1844–1926), *Lydia at Afternoon Tea*, ca. 1883, soft-ground etching and aquatint, 8 1/8 x 14 1/4 in. (20.64 x 36.2 cm), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Wallis Foundation Fund in memory of Hal B. Wallis, AC1996.27.1

Discussion Questions

- Why was it important for Mary Cassatt to portray females in domestic settings?
- How did Cassatt’s compositions embody the “New Woman?”
- How did Japanese artistic conventions inform Cassatt’s work?

Teachers: go to www.joslyn.org/education for this poster’s related academic standards and lesson plans.

Timeline

1840

1844 Mary Stevenson Cassatt was born on May 22 in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania

1850

1851 Lives in Europe with her family

1855

1855 Visits the Paris World’s Fair

1858

1858 Returns to Philadelphia with her family

1860–1862

1860–1862 Studies at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

1867

1867 Moves to Paris to continue her studies

1868

1868 *The Mandolin Player* becomes her first artwork accepted for the Paris Salon

1870

1870 Returns to US when the Franco-Prussian War starts; moves back in 1871

1872

1872 Travels to Parma, Italy to study printmaking

1877

1877 Degas invites her to join the Impressionists

1879

1879 Exhibits with the Impressionists for the first time

1879–1880

1879–1880 Prepares prints for *Le Jour et La Nuit*, a journal that was not realized

1886

1886 Exhibits for the last time with the Impressionists as her painting style shifts

1890

1890 Views the Japanese print exhibition in Paris; begins work on a set of 10 color etched prints

1891

1891 First solo exhibition at Durand-Ruel’s gallery in Paris; begins advising American art collectors

1900

1904 Receives the Legion of Honor for her art contributions

1908–1909

1908–1909 Final visit to the United States

1910

1910 Travels to Egypt; stops painting until about 1912

1914

1914 Receives the Gold Medal of Honor from the Pennsylvania Academy; stops painting due to blindness

1915

1915 Exhibits 18 works in New York in support of the women’s suffrage movement

1920

1926 Dies on June 14 in Paris

1930

BACKGROUND IMAGE: Mary Cassatt (American, active in France, 1844–1926), *Young Girl at a Window*, ca. 1883–84, oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 25 1/2 in. (100.3 x 64.7 cm), National Gallery of Art, Corcoran Collection (Museum Purchase, Gallery Fund; Frame: Museum Purchase), 2014.79.9

The “New Woman”

In the late 1800s, a new feminist ideal emerged in the concept of the “new woman,” which broadly contributed to the advent of the suffrage movement. Due to the changing industrial landscape of the time, women of this generation had greater freedom with access to education and employment as well as to cultural institutions than those previous. The “new woman” enjoyed increased autonomy in the spheres of art, literature, and theatre. Mary Cassatt received an invitation to paint a mural in one of the half-moon recessed walls of the Woman’s Building at the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893. At the time, it was rare for female artists to receive such a commission in the United States, though it was more common for women to achieve artistic fame in France. In 1893, Cassatt wrote a friend to say, “Women do not have to fight for recognition [in France] if they do serious work.” The mural, entitled *Modern Woman*, is comprised of three panels, each depicting allegorical figures engaged in symbolic activities, like picking the fruit of knowledge in the center panel. The images provide insight into the constraints placed upon women of the time and the ways in which Cassatt pushed against them. The mural was not a critical success at the time, with one connoisseur bemoaning the lack of male figures by writing that the resulting work “seems too trivial and below the dignity of a great occasion.” Cassatt also recalled, “An American friend asked me in a rather huffy tone the other day, “Then this is woman apart from her relations to man?” I told him it was.” Cassatt’s steadfast refusal to bend to the pressures of the art world at the time supported her investment in issues of women’s equality throughout her life, but also highlight her frustrations at the limitations of her own situation. As an artist, she exhibited in prestigious salons with her fellow Impressionist artists, yet was still blocked from visiting the cafes and other cultural venues her male peers frequented. In her domestic scenes, she infused images of women’s private lives with importance. Thus, Cassatt subtly evoked the intellectual and independent “new woman” in her portraits.



IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): Mary Cassatt (American, active in France, 1844–1926), *On a Balcony*, 1878–79, oil on canvas, 35 1/2 x 25 5/8 in. (89.9 x 65.2 cm), Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mrs. Albert J. Beveridge in memory of her aunt, Della Spencer Field, 1938.18; Mary Cassatt (American, active in France, 1844–1926), *A Woman and a Girl Driving*, 1881, oil on canvas, 35 5/16 x 51 3/8 in. (89.7 x 130.5 cm), Philadelphia Museum of Art, Purchased with the W.P. Wiltach Fund, 1921, W1921-1-1; Mary Cassatt (American, active in France, 1844–1926), *The Lodge*, ca. 1878–80, oil on canvas, 31 7/16 x 25 1/8 in. (79.8 x 63.8 cm), National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection, 1963.10.96

Cassatt & Degas: A Great Friendship



Mary Cassatt first encountered Edgar Degas’ work in 1875, when she saw some of his pastels in a Parisian art dealer’s window: “I used to go and flatten my nose against that window and absorb all I could of his art,” she wrote. “It changed my life. I saw art then as I wanted to see it.” Eventually she met Edgar Degas after both of her entries to the 1877 Paris Salon were rejected—meaning she would not be showing in the exhibition for the first time in seven years. He invited Cassatt to join the Impressionists, who had been exhibiting their work outside of the official Salon since 1874. Although she could not frequent cafes with the other Impressionists (nineteenth-century society discouraged women of her class from being in public without a chaperone), she joined their group and first showed with them in 1879. Following that exhibition, Degas asked Cassatt to collaborate with other artists on a journal of prints entitled *Le Jour et le Nuit (Day and Night)*. Degas, who was the most experienced printmaker among them, introduced the others to new printmaking techniques, such as soft-ground etching.

Although the journal was never completed, the two artists became close working partners throughout the process. Cassatt and Degas occupied studios within a short walking distance of one another and visited often to compare work and offer critique. Because their relationship was conducted largely in person, few textual records exist, making it difficult to understand the precise nature of their friendship. However, they certainly admired each other as artists and benefited greatly from the exchange of discourse and ideas. For example, in the 1880s both artists experimented with new media, including tempera and metallic paint. Also, Cassatt modeled for Degas, appearing in more than eight of his sketches and one unfinished portrait. These sketches often present Cassatt at the Louvre, studying the work of the Old Masters—indicating her intellectual rigor and cultural knowledge. Degas also encouraged Cassatt’s experimentation, pulling her away from the traditional Academic form of painting and towards a more Impressionist style. Cassatt and Degas remained close friends and collaborators for more than forty years. IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917), *Mary Cassatt*, ca. 1880–1884, oil on canvas, 28 7/8 x 23 5/8 in. (73.3 x 60 cm), National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation and the Regents’ Major Acquisitions Fund, Smithsonian Institution, NPG.84.34; Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917), *Mary Cassatt at the Louvre: The Etruscan Gallery*, 1879–1880, soft-ground etching, drypoint, aquatint, and etching, 17 x 12 in. (43.2 x 30.5 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1919, 19.29.2



Japonisme and Ukiyo-e



After more than 200 years of seclusion and nearly nonexistent trade with the West, Japan reopened its borders to Western commerce in 1858. Europe was flooded with Japanese art objects, which influenced the artwork produced at the time. The Impressionists, in particular, were attracted to Japanese artistic conventions, including color, composition, and pattern. Woodblock prints, called ukiyo-e [yooy KEE oh ey], meaning “pictures of the floating world,” became popular in Europe. This European fascination with Japanese art objects became known as “Japonisme” [JAP oh nis mah].

Mary Cassatt incorporated many conventions of ukiyo-e into her own work, although she executed her prints using metal intaglio plates rather than woodblock. After visiting an exhibition of ukiyo-e prints in Paris in the spring of



IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): Mary Cassatt (American, active in France, 1844–1926), *The Letter*, 1890–91, color drypoint and aquatint on laid paper, 17 3/16 x 11 15/16 in. (43.6 x 30.3 cm), National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection, 1963.10.251; Mary Cassatt (American, active in France, 1844–1926), *The Lamp*, 1890–91, color drypoint, softground etching, and aquatint, 17 1/4 x 12 in. (43.8 x 30.5 cm), National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection, 1943.3.2762; Mary Cassatt (American, active in France, 1844–1926), *The Bath*, 1890–91, color drypoint and aquatint on laid paper, 17 3/16 x 12 in. (43.7 x 30.5 cm), National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection, 1963.10.248



1890, Cassatt wrote a friend, “Seriously, you must not miss [the exhibition]. You who want to make color prints, you couldn’t dream of anything more beautiful. I dream of it, and don’t think of anything else but color on copper.” As a result, she produced a set of ten intaglio prints employing the simplicity in composition and flat colors found in ukiyo-e prints. The simplicity of composition and color of these prints make them some of Cassatt’s most highly regarded work. According to renowned Cassatt scholar Adelyn Breeskin (1896–1986), these prints “now stand as her most original contribution... adding a new chapter to the history of graphic arts...technically, as color prints, they have never been surpassed.”



MARY CASSATT
American, active in France, 1844–1926

WOMAN READING
1878–79, oil on canvas

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM® OMAHA, NEBRASKA
Museum purchase, 1943.38