

# Mary Cassatt

1844 – 1926



(cuh-Saht) American

82



Mary Stevenson Cassatt was born in Pennsylvania into the upper-middle-class. Her father, Robert Cassat (later Cassatt, as their ancestral name had been Cossart), was a successful stockbroker and land speculator.

Katherine Cassatt, educated and well read, had a profound influence on her daughter. Mary grew up in an environment that viewed travel as integral to education; she spent 5 years in Europe. While abroad she learned German and French and had her first lessons in drawing and music. Her first exposure to French artists **Ingres**, **Delacroix**, **Corot**, and **Courbet** was likely at the Paris World's Fair of 1855 (11). Also exhibiting were **Degas** and **Pissarro**, who would be her future colleagues and mentors.



Although her parents objected to her becoming a professional artist, Cassatt (15) began studying at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. Twenty percent of the students were female; most viewed art as a socially valuable skill.

Mary was one of very few who were determined to make art their career. She continued studying from 1861-1865 (17-21), throughout the Civil War.

*The Mandolin Player* was Cassatt's first painting accepted by the Paris Salon. She submitted works for over ten years, with increasing frustration.

Returning to the U. S. in 1870 (26), as the Franco-Prussian War started, Cassatt lived with her family. Her father resisted her chosen vocation, and paid for her basic needs, but not art supplies.

Placing two paintings in a New York gallery, Cassatt found admirers but no buyers and was also dismayed at the lack of paintings to study. She considered giving up art, as she was determined to make an independent living.

She wrote in an 1871 letter,

"I have given up my studio, torn up my father's portrait, and have not touched a brush for six weeks nor ever will again until I see some prospect of getting back to Europe. I am anxious to go out west next fall and get some employment, but have not yet decided where."

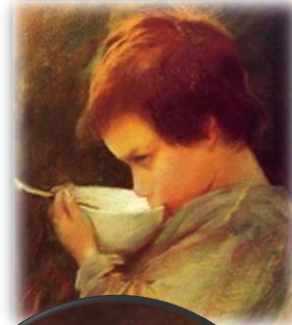
*Self Portrait*, 1878 (34).

*Child Drinking Milk*, 1868 (24).

*Portrait of a Lady of Seville*, 1873 (29).

1873 (29): *Portrait of Madame Sisley*, *Toreador*.

*Offering the Panel to the Bullfighter*, 1872-73 (28-29).



*The Mandolin Player*, 1872 (28).





She traveled to Chicago to try her luck but lost some early paintings in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 (27). The Archbishop of Pittsburgh commissioned her to paint two copies of paintings in Italy. In excitement she wrote, "O how wild I am to get to work, my fingers faely itch & my eyes water to see a fine picture again." With Emily Sartain, a fellow artist, Cassatt set out for Europe once more.



Within months of returning to Europe, her *Two Women Throwing Flowers During Carnival* was well received in the Salon of 1872 (28) and purchased. After completing her commission for the archbishop, Cassatt traveled in Spain.

There she painted a group of paintings of Spanish subjects, including *Spanish Dancer Wearing a Lace Mantilla*.

In 1874 (30), she decided to live in France. Her sister, Lydia, came and shared her apartment. Mary valued Lydia's company. Neither she nor Lydia married. Mary had decided early that marriage would be incompatible with her career. Lydia, who Mary often painted, suffered from bouts of illness. After Lydia's death in 1882 (Mary=38), Mary was temporarily unable to work.

Cassatt continued to criticize the politics of the Salon and its conventional taste. She saw that works by female artists were often dismissed unless the artist had a friend or protector on the jury, and she would not flirt with jurors to curry favor. When one of two pictures she submitted in 1875 (31) was refused, only to be accepted the following year after she darkened parts of it (*The Cup of Tea*), her cynicism grew.

In 1877 (28), both her entries were rejected, and for the first time in seven years she had no works in the Salon.

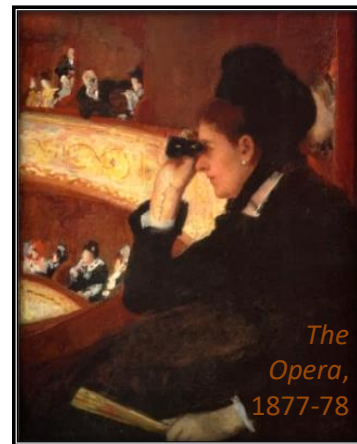
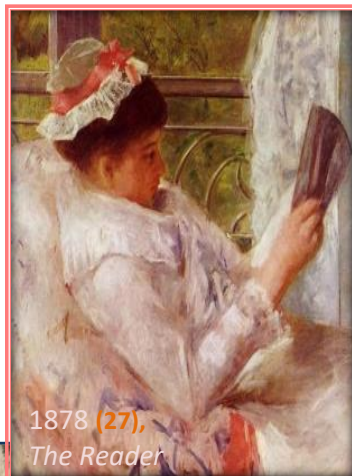
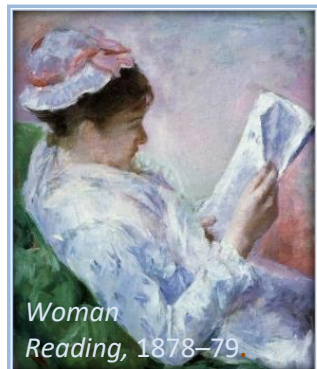
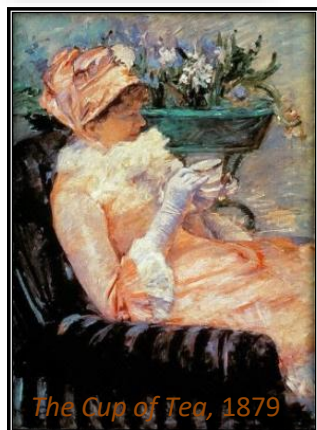
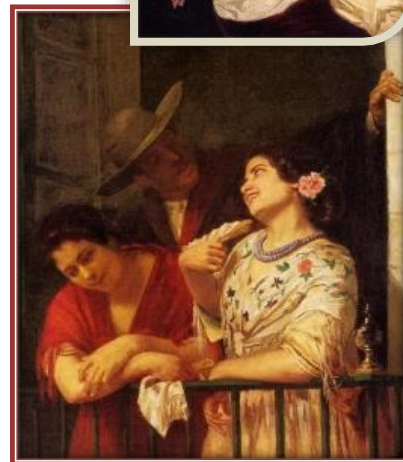
At this low point Edgar Degas invited her to show with the Impressionists, who had been receiving the wrath of the critics for years. The only other female member, Berthe Morisot became Cassatt's friend.

Cassatt admired Degas,

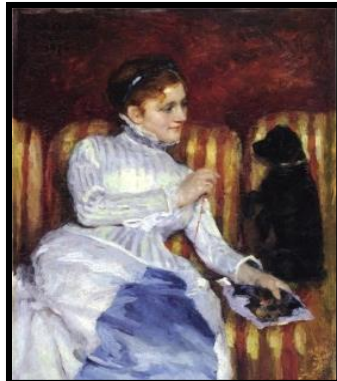
whose pastels made a powerful impression on her when she had encountered them in a dealer's window. "I used to go and flatten my nose against that window and absorb all I could of his art; It changed my life. I saw art then as I wanted to see it."

*Two Women Throwing Flowers During Carnival*, 1872 (28). *Spanish Dancer Wearing a Lace Mantilla*, 1873 (29). *The Flirtation - A Balcony in Seville*, 1872 (28).

<- (She apparently didn't like this picture very much).







She accepted Degas' invitation enthusiastically and began preparing for the next Impressionist show in 1879, just after the World's Fair. She felt comfortable with them and joined their cause with passion, declaring: "**We are carrying on a despairing fight & need all our forces.**" Unable to attend cafes with them (because of being an American woman), she met



with them privately and at exhibitions. Her style gained a new spontaneity. Previously a studio-bound artist, she began carrying a sketchbook while out to record scenes.

Mary's father continued to insist that her studio and supplies be covered by her sales, which were still meager.

Degas' influence showed in her increased pastel and draftsmanship proficiency and she was introduced to etching, for Degas was a master.



She learned not to expect too much from his fickle, temperamental nature.

The Impressionist exhibit of 1879 (35) was the most successful to date, despite **Cézanne, Manet, Renoir,** and **Sisley** being absent as they were attempting again to gain recognition at the Salon. Cassatt displayed eleven works, including *Lydia in a Loge, Wearing a Pearl Necklace*.



Although critics claimed that Cassatt's colors were too bright and that her portraits were too accurate to be flattering to the subjects, her work was not savaged as was **Monet's**, whose circumstances were most desperate. She used her share of the profits to purchase a work by **Degas** and one by **Monet**.



*Young Woman on a Striped Sofa with her Dog, 1875 (33). Elsie Cassatt Holding a Big Dog, 1880 (36). Lydia in a Loge, Wearing a Pearl Necklace, 1878 (34).*







In 1886 (42), she provided two paintings for the first Impressionist exhibition in the United States. Cassatt's style evolved, moving away from Impressionism to a simpler, more straightforward approach. She began to exhibit her works in New York galleries. After 1886, she no longer identified herself with any art movement and experimented with a variety of techniques.

In the 1890s Cassatt had a very busy, creative time. She had matured and was more diplomatic (less blunt) in her opinions. She became a role model for American artists.

After 1900 (56), Cassatt concentrated almost exclusively on mother-and-child subjects. To help her child models sit still, she had Mark Twain's books read to them.

In 1891 (47), she exhibited a series of colored drypoint and aquatint prints inspired by Japanese artists who had exhibited in France the year before. Cassatt was attracted to the simplicity and clarity of Japanese design, and the use of blocks of color. She used primarily light pastel colors and avoided black (a "forbidden" color among the Impressionists).

Her family in America gave her little recognition and she was overshadowed by her brother, Alexander, president of the Pennsylvania Railroad from 1899 until he died in 1906 (Mary=62). They had been close.

A trip to Egypt (1910-66) impressed her with the beauty of its ancient art. Diagnosed with diabetes, rheumatism, neuralgia, and cataracts in 1911 (67), she did not slow down, but after 1914 (70) she had to stop painting, being almost blind. She'd fought for women's suffrage. Cassatt died in 1926.



1880 (36)  
Elsie in a Blue Chair



1884 (40)  
Children on the Beach



Under the  
Horse Chestnut Tree,  
1898 (54).



Breakfast in Bed, 1897 (53).



R: Mother Berthe Holding Her Baby, 1900 (56). Tea, 1880 (36). The Boating Party, 1894 (50).

L: Portrait of Alexander Cassatt and His Son Robert Kelso, 1885 (41). Auguste Reading to her Daughter, 1910 (66). Young Mother Sewing, 1900 (56).

Main source of document: Wikipedia.