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Mary Cassatt

On May 22, 1844 in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, Mary Cassatt was born into a well to do banking family to become the fourth of five children. As a child, she and her family traveled through Europe living in places such as Paris, Heidelberg and Darmstadt and received schooling in the same places as well (Pollock. 13). The Cassatt family came back to Pennsylvania in 1860 and a year later Mary attended the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art where she received constant criticism for wanting to become a female artist (Matthews. 15).

In 1866 Mary decided to leave the United States to pursue her ambitions of becoming a professional painter back in Europe. She studied under Jean Leon Gerome in Paris and in 1868 was paid off for her hard work. The Salon of Paris, a yearly exhibition of the finest art in France, accepted her painting *The Mandolin Player* to be displayed because of its elegance and her apparent knowledge of Renaissance Masters. Two years later in 1870 she was again accepted by the Salon for her painting *Une Contadina di Fabello* and then went to study under Charles Bellay in Rome until leaving to go back to America at the end of the year (Barter. 31).

Living in her parent's house proved to be a challenge for Mary as her father was very disapproving of her wishes to become an artist and he refused to buy her art supplies or pay for any models. She was very disheartened by this and even showed her displeasure by painting the family maid over a portrait of her father (Barter.24). She had almost given up painting altogether when the Bishop of Pittsburgh commissioned her for

her first paying job to copy Correggio's *Coronation of the Virgin* (fig.1) for the newly built St. Peter's Cathedral for \$300(Barter.25,26).

She then traveled to Parma in excitement of her new independence to study the original. Once she was finished, Mary went on to live in Madrid where she was influenced by Spanish artists such as Velázquez picking up his fine and simple style. Her piece *During the Carnival* (fig.2) was done during this time and depicted women during Mardi Gras festival in very non-conservative gestures. It exhibited new influences from Spain and her mastery of paint led it to be accepted by the Salon in 1872 along with another painting titled *Bacchante* (fig.3) which depicts a woman following the Roman god of wine(Pollock.92). Goya and El Greco also influenced Cassatt and that can be seen in paintings like *Offering Panal to the Bullfighter* (fig.4) where she exhibits an attention to detail with somber palette, visible brushstrokes and a loose portrayal of the male figure (Barter.93). Their influence can also be seen in her painting *Toreador* (fig.5) which is another example showing her willingness to disregard the standards for female painters in that the man is portrayed in a very direct yet casual gesture (Broude).

Mary moved to Paris in 1873 to take up permanent residence and although she was still doing a few commissioned portraits, decided to become a modern painter. In 1877 her style made a change when she saw the work of Degas through a window while walking down the street (Barter. 45). She soon befriended him and joined the ranks of the Impressionists –artists who used large, visible strokes, vibrant colors with an emphasis on light and true-to-life subject matter. In her painting *The Loge* (fig.6), she demonstrated her new-found style which can be seen in the large brushstrokes. Although the lighting in the painting was given poor review, it is thought to be accurate with that of actual theatre

lighting (Barter. 45). The women in the painting are shown looking away from the viewer towards the stage to emphasize the relationship with their environment rather than their roles as objects of beauty. In the portrait of her mother titled *Reading 'Le Figaro'* (fig.7), Cassatt took the advice of Degas and painted only a portion of the figure in the frame. She also demonstrated the use of mirrors, which add space to the painting as well as creating a vertical anchor to this painting. Another thing to notice in this painting is the newspaper held by the sitter, which stresses that women are not just interested in fictional novels but are active members in society. *Lydia Cassatt* (fig.8), a portrait of her sister is also shown reading a newspaper to emphasize that women are interested in more than just fanciful things and are contributing and concerned members of society; a the basis for the growing feminist movement going on at that time. Both Cassatt's mother and sister are portrayed wearing what was considered common clothing, again to depict women in a very real and unromantic manner. The hands and casual gestures are also something to be noticed. Depicting women's hands in paintings as anything less than elegant and having such unconventional gestures of the body was a bold stride for Cassatt and it caused some negative reviews (Pollock. 200). Aside from a few commissioned portraits, the vast majority of the sitters for Cassatt's work were family, friends and acquaintances.

In Paris during the 1880s, there was popularity in Japanese woodblock prints, which embodied the use of bold lines, patterns, asymmetrical composition and flattened shapes(Barter 96). Paintings such as *Tea* (fig.9) show the influence of these prints on Cassatt in patterns of the furniture and the striped wallpaper, which draws the eye and emphasizes the figures. The depiction of the women drinking tea in common clothing is

yet another view of women in everyday routine to once again draw attention away from their conventionally glamorized beauty.

The 1890s proved to be a time of change for both the view of children in Europe and Cassatt's subject matter. Due to the lack of their overall health in Europe, children were beginning to be looked at as something to be treasured rather than hurried along toward adulthood and she took to painting mothers and their children (Pollock. 209). In her piece *Mother and Child* (fig.10), Cassatt painted the two subject's bodies' almost full view to show the physical contact of caretaking and the influence of pattern from the Japanese prints is still evident in the dress. The hands of the mother are also shown and are purposefully proportionally larger to stress the importance in work that women do (Pollock. 187). Her piece titled *Child in Straw Hat* (fig.11) is thought to be a rarity due to the lack of a mother. It received poor review due to the improper yet realistic gesture of the child, which only helps to show the innocence by the lack of self-consciousness given in the stance and expression. Another rarity for Cassatt is the piece *Alexander J. Cassatt & Son, Robert Kelso Cassatt* (fig.12) because the figures are both male. The feminist movement encouraged fathers to become more involved with their children's upbringing and she shows this through her painting of her brother and nephew. The black in both the suit of the son and father joining to make one as well as the likeness in faces and alignment of the eyes all put stress on the togetherness and emotional bond between the father and son (Barter. 220).

During the 1890s, she also experimented with making woodblock prints emulating the popular Japanese prints. In *The Fitting: 7th Stage* (fig.13), the influences of

pattern, flattened shapes and bold lines are blatantly evident as Cassatt blends in a very direct and realistic view of women.

Cassatt's work towards the end of her career was a mixture of work in painting and oil pastels for the most part but she still kept true to her subject matter (Matthews. 207) which can be seen in her work *In the Garden* where the influences of Italian Renaissance Masters can be seen by the shadows on the skin in hues of greens (Barter 216). This can also be seen in the piece *The Banjo Lesson* (fig.14) which shows a woman teaching a younger girl music to underline the feminist ideals that women should become educated.

Cassatt lived out the rest of her days in France and was able to see women vote in America before her death in 1926. She is remembered for putting her footprint in the world of art as a woman who gave voice to the overlooked in society through new and unconventional means and being instrumental in the breakthrough of modern art.



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