

Information on

Mary Cassatt

American, 1844–1926

Suite of 10 color aquatints, ca. 1891:

Afternoon Tea Party *The Lamp*

The Bath *The Letter*

The Coiffure *Maternal Caress*

The Fitting *Mother's Kiss*

In the Omnibus *Woman Bathing (The Toilette)*

Drypoint, soft-ground etching, and aquatint

Gift of Margaret Batts Tobin

1980.39, 1978.23, 1980.40, 1980.37, 1978.22, 1978.24, 1978.25, 1980.38,

1977.25, 1979.4



Growing up in Pennsylvania and in Europe

The fourth of five children, Mary Stevenson Cassatt was born on May 22, 1844, in Allegheny City near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She had one sister and three brothers. Her mother, Katherine Kelso Cassatt, learned about art and culture in the home of a woman who had been raised in France. Mary's father, Robert Simpson Cassatt, started his own shipping business for buying goods such as farm produce, furs, and other materials, which came from states west of Pennsylvania. He then resold them to buyers in the East. When Mary was three years old, her father was elected mayor of Allegheny City. Two years later her father retired and the family moved to the Philadelphia area.

In 1851, the Cassatt family sailed for England and later went to Paris, France, where they lived for two years before moving to Germany for another two years. Mary's parents knew that their children would receive a more thorough education in Europe. They also sought medical care for Mary's nine-year-old brother, Robbie, whose bone disease was getting worse. While in Europe, Mary visited art museums, including the Louvre in Paris, and learned to speak French and German. Two days after Mary's 11th birthday, Robbie died. The family returned to Pennsylvania, leaving her sixteen-year-old brother in Germany to complete his engineering studies. They bought a large country house near Philadelphia, and later moved back and forth between this house and another residence in the city, where Mary's father eventually opened an investment company.

Becoming A Professional Artist

In 1860, Mary Cassatt began to take art classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. She met other art students and became close friends with Eliza Haldeman. Both young women were determined to become professional artists. Eliza's father strongly forbid this pursuit, writing, "You will get married and settle down into a good housekeeper like all married women and send off your paints into the garret!" (Matthews, 1994). Cassatt's parents, however, had always encouraged their children to develop their interests and talents. In 1865, 22-year-old Mary Cassatt and her friend Eliza followed their dreams by going to Europe. Over the course of her life, Cassatt would return to America often and for extended periods; she also traveled throughout Europe, eventually making her home in Paris. After studying with artists who painted traditional academic portraits and landscapes, Cassatt began to submit her paintings to the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, hoping the jury would select them for the annual Salon. Not until 1868 was a Cassatt painting, *The Mandolin Player*, chosen for the Paris Salon. Over the next decade, the jury did not always accept her paintings and she, along with other innovative artists, criticized the jury system and Academy standards.

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Joining the “Intransigents”

Cassatt greatly valued the works of one of these innovative painters, Edgar Degas. From the time of their meeting in the early 1870s, Cassatt and Degas admired each other’s paintings and were lifelong friends, despite their fiercely independent natures. His personality was abrasive and irritable, while Cassatt had an uncompromising dignity and pride. Influenced by Degas’s works, she experimented with brighter colors, flatter forms, and figures shown in unusual poses from off-center angles.

In 1877, Degas suggested that Cassatt join the so-called “intransigents,” who were becoming known as the Impressionists. He exhibited his own work in their independent exhibitions, though he did not want to be called an Impressionist. By exhibiting with the Impressionists, Cassatt left behind the largely anonymous community of women artists for the opportunity to achieve recognition. As her friendships with the Impressionists evolved, Cassatt’s brush strokes became more spontaneous. In this atmosphere of experimentation, she created works in pastel, gouache (opaque watercolor), and metallic paint.

Degas and Cassatt used similar colors and both chose theatrical settings for many works. While his subjects were performers, hers were members of the audience. At the end of 1879, the two artists began working closely on black-and-white etchings for the 1880 Impressionist exhibition. Their experiments with printmaking were forerunners for Cassatt’s ten color aquatints made in the early 1890s, a set of which are owned by the McNay.

À la Japonais: “. . . you couldn’t dream of anything more beautiful”

In the spring of 1890, Cassatt and other artists were enchanted by an exhibition of more than 700 Japanese works of art in Paris. She visited the exhibition often and wrote to her friend Berthe Morisot, “You who want to make color prints you couldn’t dream of anything more beautiful” (Barter). Cassatt particularly admired the 18th-century Japanese master Kitagawa Utamaro, whose woodcuts explored the moods of women through pose and gesture. A few months later, Cassatt began her own series of color prints, inspired by the bold lines, subtle evocative colors, and background patterns she saw in Utamaro’s woodcuts. She minimized facial features, emphasizing the universality of her theme. She even used some of the same activities Utamaro showed: women washing and dressing themselves, combing their hair, bathing children, and drinking tea.

Unlike the Japanese prints, Cassatt’s ten prints of women’s daily lives and ordinary activities are not woodcuts, but aquatints with drypoint. She drew the images on copper plates through an acid-resistant coating, and then etched the lines and tonal areas of the plates in an acid bath. Some lines were drawn directly on the plate with a drypoint needle. Cassatt selectively inked the plates, using not just one color per plate but carefully applying various colors to different parts of the images. When printed, the images approximated the color effects of the Japanese prints. About 25 sets of the ten aquatints were made, each slightly different because of the inking process used. The ten aquatints, completed in 1891, make up a magnificent suite unlike anything that had been achieved by Western printmakers at that time. Since Cassatt printed so few, complete sets are rare and the McNay is fortunate to have all ten.

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Afternoon Tea Party



Maternal Caress



In the Omnibus



The Bath



The Coiffure



Woman Bathing



The Lamp



The Letter



The Fitting



Mother's Kiss

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Women's Power, Independence, and Motherhood

Mary Cassatt is chiefly associated with images of women and children. By 21st-century feminist standards, Cassatt's women fall into the traditional roles of motherhood and domestic responsibility. In her own day, Cassatt's portrayals of women, especially in a mural she painted for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, emphasized women's power and value in these roles apart from their relationships with men—a radical idea at the time. Cassatt wrote to a friend about the mural, "An American friend asked me in a rather huffy tone the other day, 'Then this is a woman apart from her relations to man?' I told him it was. Men. . . are painted in all their vigor on the walls of other buildings" (Barter). Though she was not supportive of the women's suffrage movement of the late 1800s, Cassatt's pursuit of her profession matched the rigor of any of her male contemporaries.

In 1926, Cassatt died at the age of 82. Her paintings and prints are displayed in major art museums around the world. During her life she worked vigorously for the success of all of her fellow Impressionist artists, yet was extremely modest about her own paintings. The dealer Ambroise Vollard wrote:

. . . what a difference where her own painting was concerned! What an aversion from 'pushing' her work in public. One day at an exhibition, [visitors] were fighting for and against the Impressionists. "But," said someone, speaking to Mary Cassatt without knowing who she was, "you are forgetting a foreign painter that Degas ranks very high." "Who is that?" she asked in astonishment. "Mary Cassatt." Without false modesty, quite naturally, she exclaimed, "Oh, nonsense!" "She is jealous," murmured the other, turning away.

Sources Worth Consulting

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