

Mary Cassatt and 19th Century Mother

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The late 19th century was a time of radical shift for women and what was expected of them. It signaled an important time for women's suffrage, bringing women from the shadows of private life and into the working world. Mary Cassatt's depictions of motherhood and the modern woman visualizes this change, as well as helps us gain insight into the pressures that women would have felt during this time. Although childless herself, Cassatt focuses her creative energy on the depictions of something timeless and universal, the bond between mother and child; she illustrates that feminism isn't against child bearing, but rather tangential to it. By examining the context of the time, Cassatt's biography and her works, we can begin to paint a picture of the loaded meanings they had in their day and why they remain relevant.

Mary Cassatt was born in 1844 to a wealthy family in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. By the tender age of eleven, she had decided that she would become an artist.¹ One of the main contributing factors to this declaration, were her family's frequent trips to Europe to expose the children to art and culture that was not available in the United States at this time. Considered the first American Impressionist, Mary Cassatt studied art both formally and informally.² She started her education at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art in 1861, in a time when it was not accepted for women to become artists.³ This was one of the only schools at the time that accepted women, and Cassatt took full advantage of this. Directly after her studies, she was determined to go to France to study art. She believed that this more open society would allow her to be who she wanted.⁴ Paris allowed her to study from the masters in the Louvre alongside other artists like Thomas Eakins.⁵

¹ Video, *Mary Cassatt - A Brush With Independence*, Directed by Jackson Frost, Performed by Anne Archer, 57 minutes, USA: HVC Entertainment, 2003.

² *Ibid.*

³ H. W. Janson, *Study Guide: History of Art*, H.W. Janson, Anthony F. Janson, Revised Fifth Edition. Vol. II (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998), 710.

⁴ Video, *Mary Cassatt - A Brush With Independence*, Directed by Jackson Frost, Performed by Anne Archer, 57 minutes, USA: HVC Entertainment, 2003.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Shortly after moving to France, Cassatt was accepted into the salon in 1868, but her outspoken nature about the lack of accepting new ideas and excluding women quickly drove her away from the academic style.⁶ She quickly found herself in the midst of independent art circles (like Impressionism) with artists like Degas and Manet.⁷ She fought for the true depiction of women her entire life, striving for realism and considering herself a painter of women instead of a woman painter.⁸ Never married and never a mother, it is a peculiarity that Cassatt focused so much on a subject that she could seemingly never directly relate to. Her depictions serve as a representation of her love of family life, and a reminder of what she may have felt her own inadequacies were.⁹

Cassatt depicted mothers and children in a traditional realm, but she celebrated their right to choose the situations the direction their lives took. How she structured her life is a prime example on her views of early feminism. Cassatt went against what was expected of her to become an artist and failed to become a mother, highlighting her belief that women deserve their own agency and choice in their life path. She is depicting that these views of female agency aren't in opposition to child rearing but highlighting the mother's role in the domestic life if that's what she chooses.

⁶ Video, *Mary Cassatt - A Brush With Independence*, Directed by Jackson Frost. Performed by Anne Archer, 57 minutes, USA: HVC Entertainment, 2003.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Video, *Mary Cassatt, Suffrage, and Modern Women*, Performed by Paul Fisher, Museum of Fine Arts: Boston, 86 minute, December 29, 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVRa8TJX-IM&t=4448s>> (March 2018).

⁹ Video, *Mary Cassatt - A Brush With Independence*, Directed by Jackson Frost, Performed by Anne Archer, 57 minutes, USA: HVC Entertainment, 2003.

Mary Cassatt's first depiction of the mother and child theme was a painting titled: *Mother about to Wash her Sleepy Child* (1890).¹⁰ This depiction focuses on the gaze between the mother and the child;



Mary Cassatt, *Mother about to Wash her Sleepy Child*, 1890

the viewer is left to examine their connection. The color tones of blues, whites, and fleshy pinks create a balanced and complementary color palette. The mother's right hand is dipped into a bowl of water, and her left hand is holding a sleepy or fussy child donned in a white nightgown. This painting, as with most depictions of the mother and child, is something that we can relate to and imagine from our past or present reality; it is depicting an everyday scene from 1890 American life.

Cassatt continued with these themes in her painting, *The Child's Bath* (1893), another depiction of the motherly task of bathing her child. This painting features a palette of richer, more vibrant colors like reds, purples, cool whites, greens and sharp blacks. The composition is full of patterns, which are found in the wallpaper the floor, and the mother's dress. It is even fleshier than *Mother about to Wash her Sleepy Child*, this was significant because it could



Mary Cassatt, *The Child's Bath*, 1893



¹⁰ Jay Roudebush, *Mary Cassatt* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), 20.

be sexual, children were not often depicted in this manner. When this painting was presented, it received very bad reviews on the grounds of being a 'humble task'.¹¹ This was critiqued as a scene for the middle class. At this time, upper-class individuals would have had maids or servants to do this kind of work. The fleshy rawness of this image was vulgar and shocking for those of its time.¹²

Cassatt's theme of depicting the mother and the child continued in arguably her most famous work, *The Boating Party* from 1893.¹³

This painting is believed to be a direct, feminist interpretation of Manet's painting, *Boating* (1874). Cassatt's painting features blues, yellows, greens, pinks, and flesh tones depicting a man with his back to us, rowing hard on the lake. The focus of her painting is the mother and child at the front of the boat. This painting illustrates a mother protecting a wiggling child in a moving boat. In contrast, Manet's painting shows a man not engaged in work, and a rather passive woman.

The man, shown in white, contrasts



Mary Cassatt, *Boating Party*, 1893



Édouard Manet, *Boating*, 1874

¹¹ Video, *Mary Cassatt, Suffrage, and Modern Women*, Performed by Paul Fisher, Museum of Fine Arts: Boston, 86 minute, December 29, 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVRa8TJX-IM&t=4448s>> (March 2018).

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Video, *Mary Cassatt - A Brush With Independence*, Directed by Jackson Frost, Performed by Anne Archer, 57 minutes, USA: HVC Entertainment, 2003.

against the water; the woman appears in blue in the bottom left third of the picture plane. With Cassatt being so outspoken on topics of feminism, it is subtly implied that she was commenting on the women's suffrage movement, shedding light on the woman being the moral head of the household and foreshadowing the feminist movement that would begin a few years later.

Cassatt's close friends, such as Degas and Manet, were known for being outwardly misogynistic. Degas, although close friends with her, thought that women were problems that needed to be taken care of.¹⁴ This outlook of even her inner circle can be critical to understanding Cassatt's need to depict women with agency and dignity, even in the domestic sphere. Up to this point, she had fought against the sentimental to depict the mother and child in a way that was before unseen, showing the mother as busy, working, and proud of her child.¹⁵ The early 20th century marked a shift for Cassatt, as her depictions became increasingly sentimental. This shift in sentimentality was an effort to market to an American audience.¹⁶ Sentimentality was then a sign of a woman's strength, and a symbol of high moral value. "I sold my soul to the dealers, that's all. It was the dealers who stole my life," Mary Cassatt wrote in one of her letters near this time.¹⁷ Whether or not she enjoyed this period of art in her life, she continued depicting mothers with their children in a sweet manner while remaining to give agency, dignity, and purpose to her subjects.

Children Playing with a Cat (1908) reflects Cassatt's shift towards a greater sentimentality in her later career. Instead of focusing on a direct connection between the mother and child, a playful scene with siblings playing is depicted. The painting features a vibrant palette of purples, yellows, and blues

Mary Cassatt, *Children Playing with a Cat*, 1908 and depicts a mother who holds a naked baby as he or she plays

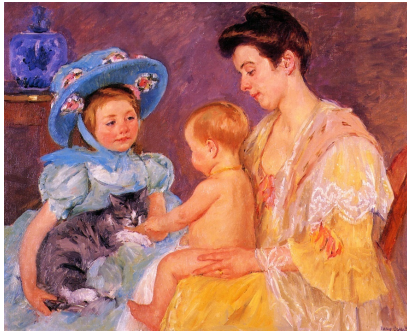
¹⁴ Video, *Mary Cassatt, Suffrage, and Modern Women*, Performed by Paul Fisher, Museum of Fine Arts: Boston, 86 minute, December 29, 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVRa8TJX-IM&t=4448s>> (March 2018).

¹⁵ John Walker, *National Gallery of Art* (Washington, D.C. New York: H.N. Abrams, 1984). 562.

¹⁶ Video, *Mary Cassatt, Suffrage, and Modern Women*, Performed by Paul Fisher, Museum of Fine Arts: Boston, 86 minute, December 29, 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVRa8TJX-IM&t=4448s>> (March 2018).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

with a young girl who holds a cat. Cassatt was trying to market her work to a new audience: America.



This was difficult considering that Americans did not get the training and exposure Europeans did to subtle themes.¹⁸ This may be one clue as her reason for shifting to more direct depictions of the mother, child, and their connection.

Mary

Cassatt was controversial for her time, not only because she was a painter of contemporary women, but also because she was the first American Impressionist and was outspoken about her feminist ideology. “Women should be someone and not something,” she once said.¹⁹ Cassatt’s depictions of motherhood were a direct reflection of social and political events of the time. Her works also incorporated groundbreaking science, medicine and psychology. Cassatt’s work was a reflection of what



Mary Cassatt, *Portrait of Alexander J. Cassatt and His Son, Robert Kelso Cassatt*, 1884

was important to her: a healthy, moral family life and women’s ability to be depicted without men. In many of her depictions, the mother is the implied moral head of the household. Cassatt depicts this by stressing the importance of the bond between the mother and the children she paints.²⁰ At this time, it was common for women to feel as if they had to be separate from a man if they wanted their own lives. It is very probable that she felt she must remain single to achieve her artistic goals and remain in the

¹⁸ Video, *Mary Cassatt, Suffrage, and Modern Women*, Performed by Paul Fisher, Museum of Fine Arts: Boston, 86 minute, December 29, 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVRa8TJX-IM&t=4448s>> (March 2018).

¹⁹ Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt* (2005). “Mary Cassatt”, Chaucer Pr

²⁰ Video, *Mary Cassatt - A Brush With Independence*, Directed by Jackson Frost, Performed by Anne Archer, 57 minutes, USA: HVC Entertainment, 2003.

male-dominated Impressionist group. Lacking a family of her own, Cassatt used her paintings as a valid reason to spend large amounts of time with her parents, brother, sister, and nephews while they were around. This stresses the importance Cassatt placed on family bonds.²¹

Cassatt was active at the height of the women's suffrage movement in the latter part of the 19th century. She was often considered an early feminist, although the term was not coined until 1910.²² The women's movement sought to improve women's power in society; they fought for better wages so that not all women were forced to marry and become dependent on their husbands. At the time, if there were jobs available for women, they were dangerous, had low wages, and there was often no room for advancement.²³ In many situations, it was more favorable to marry than be subjected to these conditions in exchange for independence. In Cassatt's time, the cult of true womanhood was often of the upper class. This cult perpetuated the idea that women should be submissive to men; they were discouraged from intellectual pursuits and were kept chaste for marriage.²⁴

²¹ Video, *Mary Cassatt - A Brush With Independence*, Directed by Jackson Frost, Performed by Anne Archer, 57 minutes, USA: HVC Entertainment, 2003.

²²Susan Cruea, "Changing Ideals of Womanhood During the Nineteenth-Century Woman Movement," Bowling Green State University, 2005.

<<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/78a3/4b180d4d91559fdcb46b44275d52ca387e16.pdf>> (March 2018): 187.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Susan Cruea, "Changing Ideals of Womanhood During the Nineteenth-Century Woman Movement," Bowling Green State University, 2005.

<<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/78a3/4b180d4d91559fdcb46b44275d52ca387e16.pdf>> (March 2018): 189.



Mary Cassatt, *Lydia Reading the Morning Paper (no. 1)*, 1878

Although Cassatt depicted women with their children, she gave them a new kind of agency over themselves and their families. Cassatt brought women out into the public sphere, when traditionally they were confined to the private space. Often depicting women practicing skills or reading newspapers showed that these women were both literate and aware of their time, which was problematic for the ideal of the wife and mother that was subservient to their husbands always.²⁵ Showing her women with strong, capable, ungloved hands was another sign of the growing strength and power women had. The clothing her models wear was always fashionable, implying that the women were choosing what they were wearing rather than having a man decide for them.²⁶ Men would often decide on clothing that was more traditional and would not attract attention to their wives. She personally lived a life that went against these traditional societal standards and was able to lay a foundation for other female artists to come.

Art often functioned to instruct viewers in how to behave. In the late 1890s, the American population began to drop because people needed fewer children on farms due to the Industrial Revolution. However, there was still societal pressure to have more children. At the same time, divorce rates began to spike between 1870-1920.²⁷ Often, art would encourage certain behaviors due to societal shifts. Was Cassatt promoting and glorifying motherhood to encourage women to have more children?

²⁵ Video, *Mary Cassatt, Suffrage, and Modern Women*. Performed by Paul Fisher. Museum of Fine Arts: Boston, 86 minute, December 29, 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVRa8TJX-IM&t=4448s>> (March 2018).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ "The Role of the Wife and Mother," Loyola University of New Orleans, 2009. <<http://people.loyno.edu/~kchopin/new/women/motherhood.html>> (March, 2018).

Was she depicting that which she would never have herself? Regardless of this shift, Cassatt remains providing agency to the female subject and depicting them in a way different from her male colleagues.

Most important to Cassatt's painting were the new discoveries in medicine and science. Her paintings were instructive regarding the new developments in 'Scientific Motherhood.' This was the use of expert knowledge to make parenting choices.²⁸ The Industrial Revolution led many people believe that women no longer valued families as they had historically, but the true shift may have been caused instead by mothers going from producers of maternal knowledge to consumers. This altered women's identities because they were no longer doing what they were told or thought that was best, but rather following what experts recommended to raise their children.

Before new studies in the late 19th century, it was believed that children were just smaller adults.²⁹ The revolutionary thought that childhood was a distinctly separate phase combined with new ideas emerging from modern psychology and psychoanalysis, which bred a perfect climate for Cassatt's depictions of motherhood. The connection between mother and child was stressed, rather than forcing children into independence before they were ready.³⁰ The mother was no longer responsible for the harsh task of disciplining their miniature adult for not behaving correctly. The crisis that mothers were facing was the new criteria required to be a 'good mother', a shift towards a more personable and loving approach.³¹ Cassatt embodies these new parenting ideals by romanticizing the maternal and stressing the loving bond between mother and child. The upper classes' use of wet nurses was being called into

Mary Cassatt, *Mother Rose Nursing Her Child*, 1900

²⁸ Mary Virnoche, "Scientific Motherhood," Humboldt State University, 2009.
<<http://users.humboldt.edu/mvirnoche/scimotherhood.pdf>> (March, 2018).

²⁹ Video, *Mary Cassatt - A Brush With Independence*, Directed by Jackson Frost, Performed by Anne Archer, 57 minutes, USA: HVC Entertainment, 2003.

³⁰ Mary Cassatt, *Suffrage, and Modern Women*. Performed by Paul Fisher, December 29, 2016.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVRa8TJX-IM&t=4448s> (March 2018).

³¹ Mary Virnoche, "Scientific Motherhood," Humboldt State University.
<<http://users.humboldt.edu/mvirnoche/scimotherhood.pdf>> (March 2018).

question; instead, it was becoming more favorable for mothers to nurse their children themselves. Cassatt created many works that depicted the act of breastfeeding, emphasizing the bond that is fostered by this intimate action. Using the exposed body, in a non-sexual way, to symbolize a connection between mother and child.



Mary Cassatt was a revolutionary painter of women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, who focused on returning the agency to the subject of the painting and depicting mothers as the moral head of the household. She depicted the strength of maternity and the importance of family. She tapped into something to which nearly everyone can relate, the bond we have with our mothers. By examining the social and experimental context of her work, it is apparent that Cassatt challenged the boundaries of what was appropriate while expressing progressive ideas to the masses. She did this by depicting women in a new light with more to offer than a pleasing sight for the male gaze, she gave her subjects agency. As the first American Impressionist, she brought modern art to America and made sure that Americans were collecting art that contained important moralizing messages. Mary Cassatt used formal and informal training to learn the traditions in painting, subvert it, and produce work relating to the maternal, showing that feminism isn't against child bearing, but rather tangential to it. The strength of her female figures is what allows her work to still be relevant and powerful over a century later.

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