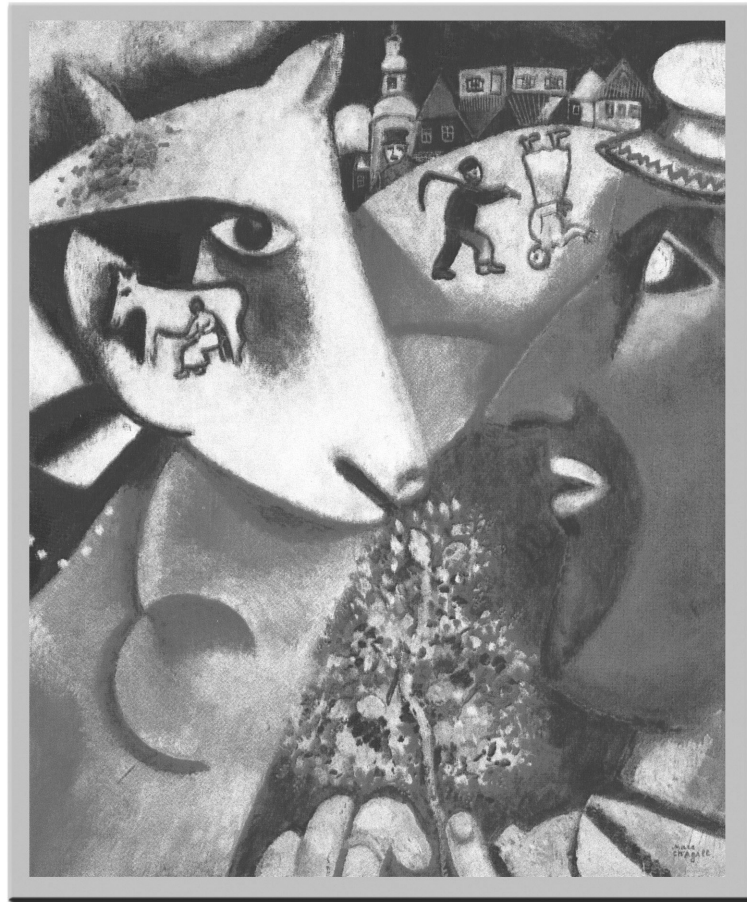


# Short Lessons in ART HISTORY

**Artists and Their Work**

Revised  
and Updated

Phyllis  
Clausen  
Barker



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# Mary Cassatt

1845 – 1926

**A**NOTHER PAINTER in the Impressionist style was a woman and an American. Her name was Mary Cassatt. She was born in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania on May 22, 1845. Her father had various business interests and was inclined to move about. The family moved to and from various cities in Pennsylvania. In 1851, when Mary was seven, Robert Cassatt took his wife, Katherine, and their children to Europe. They lived first in Paris and then in Germany. The son, Robert, died in Darmstadt, Germany in 1855. The family then moved back to the United States and settled in Philadelphia. In the fall of 1861 Mary was 17. She decided to become an art student at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, one of the few art schools in the country at that time. After four years there she knew that she had gone as far as possible with the instruction offered.

Mary had made up her mind to study in Europe. Her father believed that no young woman of good family and means should even think of a career, particularly one in art. Mary was as strong-willed as her father, and finally received his permission to go. It was arranged for her to live

with friends of the family. She studied at the Chaplin studio, but after a while thought she could work better on her own. During the war between France and Prussia, Mary was told to come back to Philadelphia.

By 1872 she returned to Europe. She wanted to study the old master painters of Italy and spent some time in Parma. There she also learned engraving, studying with the man who was head of the engraving department of the art academy. Later in her life her prints were an important part of her work. She traveled to Spain, where she was influenced by the paintings of Rubens in the Prado.

Mary Cassatt had lived in Paris off and on since she was seven and probably felt more at home there than anywhere else in Europe. That city had become the center of the art world, and she chose to settle there. Her parents lived there with her during her middle age. Sometimes one or more of her brothers, and always her sister, Lydia, stayed with Mary and their parents. She had the problems of her mother's poor health and her sister's illness. She had to take time from her work to find areas to live where they were comfortable and



Figure 39  
*The Boating Party*, 1893–1894  
 Mary Cassatt

where their health might improve. Some stories of her life assume that the family was wealthy. This is not altogether true. While they were better off than many Americans, her father was not always successful in his business dealings. Living in Europe allowed them to live better than they might have in America.

Mary was influenced by the Impressionists as well as by other artists. Most artists do find that their work reflects the work of those whom they admire and study. But they want to develop their own personal style, and that is what Mary spent her life doing. Her best-known paintings are those

of women and children, for example, *The Boating Party* (see Figure 39). This theme had been suggested to her by the painter Edgar Degas, a longtime friend and advisor. Mary had met Degas and other Impressionists and had exhibited her work with theirs in their first independent exhibition. Throughout her life she upheld their ideas and she, too, rebelled against the Salon system, believing there should be no awards or medals for art. Late in her life, when she refused an award, she said that she felt awards of money were more sensible but should be given only to young painters or students.



Some believe that Mary Cassatt and Degas were romantically involved, but there is no evidence of this. She was a very proper woman of a very proper time in history, the Victorian era. Codes of behavior then were strict, especially for girls and women. She was more concerned with her progress as an artist than with anything else, though her obligations to her family were important. She lived at a time when it was unusual for a woman to work for a living if her family could support her or if she had married. She was irritated if people said such things as “Good painting—for a woman,” or “How can a woman paint so well?” She worked hard. Each morning she was in her studio by eight. By evening, when daylight was gone and she had to depend on artificial light, she worked on her printmaking. Printmaking did not depend as much on daylight as painting did.

Mary’s family was pleased that her art could bring in the money that it did, but they never really appreciated what she did. She was devoted to her parents and saw to it that they had any help they needed. She willingly took time from her work to find houses or apartments that suited them. She was also always devoted to her brothers and sister, nephews and nieces. Some of the relatives did not get on well with Mary; she had a sharp tongue and usually

said just what she thought. This became even more true as she grew older.

The first paintings exhibited by Mary Cassatt were in that April exhibit by the Impressionists in 1879. *La Loge* shows a young woman in a theater. The colors are rich and dramatic: The woman with red hair wears a pink gown. The critics were complimentary. Before long she began to be

recognized for her work. The portrait *Miss Mary Ellison* (see Color Plate 13) is a noteworthy work from this period in Cassatt’s career. She exhibited in the Salons of 1872, 1873, and 1874. In 1875 one of her entries was rejected but accepted at the next Salon after she toned down the color. She was rejected the next year and never submitted entries again. She painted in oils and did **pastels**, engraving, etchings and aquatint. *The Letter* (see Figure 40) is a well-known etching with aquatint.

Mary Cassatt also helped influence artistic interests at this time. She had helped her brother

find paintings by the best artists for his private collection. She also bought a number of paintings for herself. Since she knew Americans who were visiting Europe, many of whom were wealthy, she could advise them in their collections of art. When these paintings were brought back to America, more people could learn about some of



Figure 40  
*The Letter*, 1891  
Mary Cassatt

the best art in Europe. Many of these works of art found their way into museums.

Except for a few visits to America, Mary Cassatt spent her adult and professional life in Europe. She might have traveled to America more often if air travel had been possible. (She became violently seasick on several of her voyages.) She did love to travel by car, though. In 1906 one of her wealthy friends gave her a car. She hired a driver and traveled over much of Europe.

By 1893 Mary had bought and moved into a house in the country. After the death of both her parents, she no longer had the responsibility of looking after them and had more freedom to live as she liked. She had made many friends over the years: other artists, politicians, and wealthy Americans who traveled to Paris. In the community where her chateau, or country house, was located, she contributed to the village school, helped young women find work, and often “borrowed” children and mothers to model for her pictures. She felt strongly about the rights of women at a time when such ideas only flickered on the horizon. She liked children and got on well with them. She found that babies were good models, if held in a woman’s arms. Toddlers were a bit too active to be good models. Older children modeled well, and apparently liked working with her. Ample goodies and rewards probably helped.

Mary Cassatt’s style was thoroughly developed by her middle years. At about this time Japanese

prints had been introduced in Europe and were popular. Mary’s prints were influenced by the Japanese block prints. In 1893 her work was exhibited by the Durand-Ruel galleries, some 98 pieces including *A Cup of Tea*, *At the Opera*, and *The Bath*.

The artist’s health gave her problems as she grew older. She developed diabetes. By 1915 cataracts began to affect her eyesight. In spite of several operations, her sight was failing. Her disposition, which had never been particularly sunny, became more irritable. She had passed the peak of her artistic powers, and did not get along well with those left in her family. The work of the newer artists such as Matisse, van Gogh, and Picasso horrified her. Cézanne’s work was as “modern” as she could tolerate.

With her servants taking care of her, Mary Cassatt spent her last years in her country home. She was frustrated by her loss of sight and by illness.

During World War I she was evacuated to Grasse, where she had a vacation home. The waste of war further depressed her spirits. Her life came to an end on June 14, 1926. She was 82. Pictures that were left to the remaining members of her family were at first just considered family heirlooms. Her nieces and nephews were surprised later to find out how valuable Aunt Mary’s artworks were.

## Glossary

**Cassatt** pronounced cas-saht’

**Degas** pronounced day-gah’

**pastels** mediums made from powdered pigments mixed with a binder and formed into chalk sticks