



# Degas Cassatt

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Fig. 1 Mary Cassatt, *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair*, 1878, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

FROM THE MOMENT MARY CASSATT (American, 1844–1926) made her debut in 1879 with the group of artists known as the impressionists, her name has been linked with that of Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917), and with good reason. Cassatt stated that her first encounter with Degas’s art “changed my life,” while Degas, upon seeing Cassatt’s art for the first time, reputedly remarked, “there is someone who feels as I do.” It was this shared sensibility as much as Cassatt’s extraordinary talent that drew Degas’s attention.

The affinity between the two artists is undeniable. Both were realists who drew their inspiration from the human figure and the depiction of modern life, while they eschewed landscape almost entirely. Both were highly educated—indeed known for their intelligence and wit—and from well-to-do banking families. They were peers, moving in the same social and intellectual circles. Cassatt, who had moved to France in 1874, first met Degas in 1877 when he invited her to exhibit with the impressionists. Increasingly frustrated with the restrictions of the Salon (the state-sanctioned annual exhibition) and the whims of its selection jury, Cassatt was ready to break with the art establishment and join forces with the group of radical artists. This decision marked the beginning of a friendship that would endure until Degas’s death in 1917. Although their close working relationship lasted only a decade, they continued to admire and support each other well after their art headed in different directions.

#### EXPERIMENTATION AND EXHIBITION

The period leading up to Cassatt's debut with the impressionists in 1879 was one of keen experimentation for both artists. They worked closely together during this time, exploring new and unconventional media. The most intriguing work to result from this intense dialogue was *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair* (fig. 1), which was painted in collaboration with Degas (see sidebar). With its loose brushwork and light palette, it is arguably Cassatt's first true impressionist painting.

The 1879 impressionist exhibition proved to be a watershed in both artists' careers. For her debut, Cassatt exhibited a dozen works, including *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair*, while Degas, one of the organizers, showed twenty-five according to the 1879 catalog. Both made bold choices. Cassatt opted to exhibit certain works in colored frames and Degas featured works in unusual formats, such as a group of painted fans that combined an appreciation for Japanese art with his preferred subject of the ballet. They used unconventional materials as well. In his *Portrait after a Costume Ball (Portrait of Mme Dietz-Monnin)* (fig. 2), Degas juxtaposed broad strokes of metallic paint and areas of distemper (pigment mixed

Fig. 2 Edgar Degas, *Portrait after a Costume Ball (Portrait of Mme Dietz-Monnin)*, 1879, distemper with metallic paint and pastel on canvas, The Art Institute of Chicago, Joseph Winterbotham Collection. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago



Fig. 3 Mary Cassatt, *At the Theater*, 1878/1879, pastel and gouache with metallic paint, Collection of Ann and Gordon Getty



with glue) with passages of delicately handled pastel, creating a richly textured, dynamic surface. The introduction of metallics into this painting may well have been inspired by Cassatt's own pursuit of similar effects; in *At the Theater* (fig. 3), for instance, she incorporated metallic paint with gouache and pastel. One critic noted that Cassatt, like Degas, was "part of that band of seekers" who "sacrificed herself to *détrempe au pastel*, glue and colored frames," an astute, though perhaps not entirely flattering comment on their shared experimentation. Both artists, however, were singled out favorably by reviewers, and for Cassatt it was an auspicious start to her association with Degas and the impressionists.

#### "LE JOUR ET LA NUIT"

Energized by the critical and financial success of the 1879 exhibition, Degas proposed a journal of original prints entitled *Le Jour et la nuit* (Day and Night). It was to be a celebration of black-and-white imagery and the contrasting qualities of light and shadow. Degas recruited several of his fellow impressionists

Fig. 4 Edgar Degas, *At the Café des Ambassadeurs*, c. 1879, etching, softground, drypoint, and aquatint (state iii/v), Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts. Image © Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, USA (photo by Michael Agee)



Fig. 5 Mary Cassatt, *In the Opera Box (No. 3)*, 1879–1880, softground etching, drypoint, and aquatint (state iii/vii), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Henri M. Petiet, confirmed by his estate. Photograph © 2014, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



as contributors, from the experienced printmaker Félix Bracquemond to such relative newcomers to printmaking as Camille Pissarro and Cassatt. The participants worked diligently throughout the autumn of 1879 and the early months of 1880, but the proposed journal was never published.

Collaborating on the project, however, was a transformative moment for Degas and Cassatt. Degas, who had some prior experience as a printmaker, served as instructor and mentor for Pissarro and Cassatt. He introduced them to softground etching, a technique that produces the effect of a chalk or pencil drawing. One example, *At the Café des Ambassadeurs* (fig. 4), depicts a subject Degas knew well: a performance at one of Paris' popular café-concerts. He framed his composition carefully by introducing strong architectural shapes—the railing below, the sweeping curve of the awning above, and the pole to the right. He then evoked the nocturnal setting by etching dozens of horizontal lines, which resemble brushstrokes, throughout the background.

Despite her lack of training, Cassatt proved extraordinarily adept at printmaking. She embraced softground etching in particular. Working side by side with Degas, she quickly mastered the basics and began to explore more complex, innovative techniques. In an early state of her highly accomplished *In the Opera Box (No. 3)* (fig. 5), produced for *Le Jour et la nuit*, Cassatt combined multiple techniques. She focused on the contrast of light and dark, obscuring the woman's face entirely in shadows. Her features reappeared in later states of the print, though Cassatt left subtle evidence of her process visible.

#### MARY CASSATT AT THE LOUVRE

Cassatt once remarked that she posed for Degas "only once in a while when he finds the movement difficult and the model cannot seem to get his idea." He produced only one true portrait of Cassatt (cover), preferring to depict her in scenes of modern life. One such scene, the etching now known as *Mary Cassatt at the Louvre: The Etruscan Gallery* (fig. 6), was Degas's own planned contribution for *Le Jour et la nuit*. The particular theme of Cassatt strolling through the museum clearly fascinated Degas, resulting in not just the etching, but a rich body of work produced in a range of media over a number of years. Encompassing two prints, at least five drawings, a half-dozen pastels, and two paintings, the series marks one of Degas's most intense and sustained meditations upon a single motif.

As the setting for this series, Degas selected the Musée du Louvre. It was no idle choice, as Cassatt's gender and class

## UNRAVELING CASSATT'S "LITTLE GIRL IN A BLUE ARMCHAIR"

In a letter written in about 1903, Cassatt recounted the history of her *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair*—Degas not only advised her as she painted it, but also “worked on the background” himself. The idea that he picked up a brush and painted on Cassatt’s canvas has intrigued scholars for years, but the exact nature of his intervention has been largely speculative. Recent cleaning, restoration, and technical analysis have been instrumental in identifying Degas’s role.

Under magnification, strokes of grayish, almost silvery-brown paint not found elsewhere in the picture are apparent in the corner of the room beyond the furniture. Evidence of intentional abrasion of the surface in this area also suggests the presence of a different artist’s hand. Similar paint handling can be found in a number of Degas’s works from this time, but is completely absent in Cassatt’s work. Infrared imaging (see below) reveals

that Cassatt had initially used a horizontal line to mark the edge of the floor and a single back wall that was parallel to the picture plane. Degas made the space more dynamic by adding a corner, creating a junction of two walls and thus introducing a diagonal that expanded the room spatially. The use of such wide-angle diagonals to define interior architecture was common in Degas’s work, but unprecedented for Cassatt.

When Degas proposed adding a corner, Cassatt had to make adjustments. She repositioned the armless couch in the center of the picture, heavily reworking it to align with the now sloping wall. She also explored the best position for the dog. The infrared image indicates that she had tried placing it on the floor, seated in front of the reworked couch. But she opted for her original arrangement and returned the dog to its upholstered perch, where it now slumbers comfortably.



Infrared reflectogram composite of *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair* (fig. 1) with Cassatt’s original demarcation (solid line) and Degas’s alteration (broken line)

restricted the kinds of public spaces she could visit within the bounds of propriety. While the backstage dressing rooms and raucous café-concerts frequented by Degas were off-limits to her, the Louvre was a common space they could share equally as peers—and it was one that spoke to their mutual appreciation for art and its tradition. In the series, Degas depicted her as an elegantly dressed museum goer, wholly absorbed in her study of art. Nearby, a seated companion (perhaps Cassatt’s sister Lydia) looks up from her guidebook. Cassatt, with her back turned fully to the viewer, balances against the umbrella in a pose that highlights the curve of her body and underscores her air of assurance.

Although the precise relationship between the various works in this series is not known, Degas most likely began with drawings and pastels of individual figures that served as references for the series as a whole; other drawings were produced expressly in preparation of the first etching (fig. 6). In a second etching and a subsequent pastel (fig. 7), Degas altered the original composition: he adopted a narrow, more compressed format and changed the setting to a paintings gallery. He also explored the subtle variations of pattern and texture that could be achieved through different media.

Fig. 6 Edgar Degas, *Mary Cassatt at the Louvre: The Etruscan Gallery*, 1879–1880, softground etching, drypoint, aquatint, and etching, retouched with red chalk (state ix/ix), The Art Institute of Chicago, Albert Roullier Memorial Collection. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago

Fig. 7 Edgar Degas, *Mary Cassatt at the Louvre: The Paintings Gallery*, 1885, pastel over softground etching, drypoint, aquatint, and etching, The Art Institute of Chicago, Bequest of Kate L. Brewster. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago



Fig. 8 Mary Cassatt, *The Visitor*, c. 1881, softground etching, drypoint, aquatint, etching, and fabric texture (state vi/vi), Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts. Image © Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, USA (photo by Michael Agee)



#### COLLECTING AND EXCHANGES

Degas and Cassatt collected and championed each other's work. He amassed nearly one hundred works by Cassatt—more than he acquired by any other contemporary artist. Her prints represented the bulk of his collection. Degas clearly admired not only the prints themselves but also the artistic and technical process through which they were created, as evidenced by his possession of multiple states of the same print. *The Visitor* (fig. 8) is a prime example. In addition to the drawing used to prepare this soft-ground etching, the catalog of Degas's estate sale lists a "unique series of thirteen states" of Cassatt's print. She may well have sent them to him as she was revising the image on the copper-plate—pulling impressions of the print and keeping him up to date on her progress.

In contrast to Degas, Cassatt was quite modest in her own collecting habits. She preferred instead to act as a liaison between her fellow impressionists (Degas in particular) and wealthy American collectors of her acquaintance. She owned only a few impressionist works, but among them were at least six by Degas, more than by any other artist. Cassatt, however, did not retain her personal collection. Late in life she discreetly sold the works she had accumulated, including those by Degas, placing most of them very carefully with American collectors she knew and trusted.

#### BEYOND 1886

The final impressionist exhibition in 1886 marked a turning point in Degas and Cassatt's relationship. Although their friendship endured until his death, their interactions diminished as they began to move in different directions. For Cassatt, the most noticeable change was in subject matter. Depictions of mothers and children, which had begun to appear in her work in the early 1880s, came to dominate during the latter part of her career and now stand as her most popular images. Her style also evolved: As *Young Women Picking Fruit* (fig. 9) reveals, Cassatt's colors became bold and her patterns elaborate, while the energetic brushwork of her earlier impressionist paintings grew more controlled and her figures gained a new solidity. In the late 1880s and 1890s, Degas's art underwent a radical stylistic transformation.

Fig. 9 Mary Cassatt, *Young Women Picking Fruit*, 1891, oil on canvas, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Patrons Art Fund. Photograph © 2013 Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh



Fig. 10 Edgar Degas, *Forest in the Mountains*, c. 1890, monotype, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Louise Reinhardt Smith Bequest. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/ Art Resource, NY



His compositions became increasingly simplified, his colors more vibrant, his paint handling broader and more expressive. He also devoted much of his energy to reworking earlier canvases.

One shared preoccupation of the 1890s was color print-making, but here, too, each artist adopted a distinct approach. Enraptured by an exhibition of Japanese wood-block prints she saw in Paris in April 1890, Cassatt undertook a series of colored etchings in which she adapted the flat planes of color and crisp delineation of the Japanese prints to depict scenes in the everyday life of upper middle-class Parisian women. Inspired by a visit he made to Burgundy in October 1890, Degas began work on a series of landscape monotypes (fig. 10). He produced about fifty of them, applying colored oil paints directly to a glass or metal plate and printing a single impression each time. Spontaneous, expressive, and verging on true abstraction, these “imaginary landscapes” (as he described them) were the very antithesis of Cassatt’s meticulous color prints.

Despite the occasional estrangement, Degas and Cassatt remained devoted friends. Their health issues and failing eyesight made encounters rare. Nevertheless, even as late as 1914, Degas made the effort to attend an exhibition of Cassatt’s work in Paris. She was deeply moved by his death. It “is a great deliverance,” she wrote, “but I am sad...he was my oldest friend here, and the last great artist of the nineteenth century.”

Cover Edgar Degas, *Mary Cassatt* (detail), c. 1879–1884, oil on canvas, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, Gift of the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation and the Regents' Major Acquisitions Fund, Smithsonian Institution. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution/Art Resource, NY

*The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington.*

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Narrated by National Gallery of Art Director Earl A. Powell III, with commentary by Kimberly A. Jones, associate curator of French paintings; Ann Hoenigswald, senior conservator of paintings; and Kimberly Schenck, head of paper conservation. Available at the entrance to the exhibition for \$5; reserve for groups at 202.842.6592

#### **CATALOG**

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated, 176-page catalog, *Degas/Cassatt*, by Kimberly A. Jones, exhibition curator, et al. Published by the National Gallery of Art in association with DelMonico Books • Prestel Order at [www.shop.nga.gov](http://www.shop.nga.gov) Softcover \$35, Hardcover \$50

#### **PUBLIC SYMPOSIUM**

*Degas and Cassatt: Different Perspectives*  
October 5, 2014  
11:00 am–3:00 pm  
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Philippe Entremont, pianist; music by nineteenth-century French composers

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