



“I have had a joy from which no one can rob me — I have been able to touch some people with my art.” **Mary Cassatt**

Mary Cassatt, *The Boating Party* (detail), 1893/1894, National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection

Impressionist Connection

Early in her career, Cassatt explored different styles of painting. Soon, however, she began to observe and paint the scenes around her in Paris, exploring the subject of modern life. But Cassatt was not a bohemian artist. She was comfortable in her own social milieu, and it is this world—populated by family, friends, and their children—that she depicted. Ladies seated in the theater, women reading or taking tea in homes or gardens, mothers washing and swaddling babies, and children playing were the subjects that were part of her everyday world.

Her ability to capture a moment in time caught the attention of Edgar Degas, who invited Cassatt to



Mary Cassatt, 1914 (detail).
Courtesy of Frederick Sweet's
research materials on Mary
Cassatt and James A. McNeill
Whistler, 1872–1975, Archives
of American Art, Smithsonian
Institution

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An American in Paris

Mary Stevenson Cassatt (1844–1926) is best known for her portrayals of mothers and children. She became a successful professional artist at a time when it was very difficult for a woman to do so.

Born in Pennsylvania into an affluent family who believed in education for women, Cassatt also had the experience of attending school and traveling in Europe during her childhood. This early exposure to the art and culture of Europe had a major impact on the young Cassatt.

After training in studio art in Philadelphia, Cassatt wished to return on her own to Paris, then the center of modern art. Her parents needed a lot of convincing, since this was a highly unusual undertaking for a twenty-year-old, upper-class woman. They eventually agreed, giving her an allowance and using their social connections to help their daughter get settled. Once there, Cassatt studied on her own, traveling to museums across Europe and training in the studios of established artists. (The main art school of Paris, the *École des Beaux-Arts*, did not yet accept female students.)

exhibit with the Impressionists in 1879. The Impressionists depicted fleeting moments in both nature and ordinary human activity and experimented with bright colors, loose brush strokes, and innovative angled viewpoints. These techniques reflected a dynamic new approach to painting.

Among these artists, Cassatt was the only American—and one of only three women. Her artistic talent, understanding of French language and culture, and independent thinking earned her the respect of this selective group, whose membership included Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, and Alfred Sisley.



3 Cassatt's Children

Cassatt transformed seemingly conventional subjects with her fresh vision. Her singular ability to portray children honestly—fully absorbed in their own worlds—is demonstrated by the three works illustrated here: *The Boating Party*, *Children Playing on the Beach*, and *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair*. A restless baby squirms in her mother's lap, a toddler awkwardly grips a shovel and bucket, and a young girl sprawls in a large armchair. The “emotional truth” Cassatt arrested was heightened by her striking arrangements of keyed-up color and flattened space, over which brushstrokes seem to dance.

left: Mary Cassatt, *The Boating Party*, 1893/1894, National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection

above: Mary Cassatt, *Children Playing on the Beach*, 1884, National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection

book nook

These books about Mary Cassatt can be found at your local library or bookstore.

Quiet Time with Cassatt

By Julie Merberg and Suzanne Bober
baby – preschool

Mary Cassatt: Family Pictures (Smart About Art)

By Jane O'Connor, illustrated by Jennifer Kalis | ages 4 – 8

Mary Cassatt (The Life and Work of)

By Ernestine Giesecke | ages 4 – 8

Mary Cassatt: Impressionist Painter

By Lois V. Harris | ages 4 – 8

Mary Cassatt (Getting to Know the World's Greatest Artists)

By Mike Venezia | ages 4 – 8

Suzette and the Puppy: A Story About Mary Cassatt

By Joan Sweeney | ages 4 – 8

First Impressions: Mary Cassatt

By Susan E. Meyer | ages 9 – 12

Mary Cassatt: Portrait of an American Impressionist

By Thomas Streissguth | ages 9 – 12

Mary Cassatt: The Life of an Artist

By Carolyn Casey | ages 9 – 12

The Essential Mary Cassatt

By Georgette Gouveia
ages 12 and up

try this!

activity



Explore Mary Cassatt's *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair*

Look closely at this painting: describe what you see.

Consider how the girl might feel: Which words best describe her mood?

Wonder: What might she be thinking about?

Pretend that this painting is a scene from story:

Who is the girl?

Where is she?

Why is she sitting on this chair?

What was she doing earlier in the day?

What will she do next?

Think about life in the nineteenth century: Children didn't have televisions, computers, or stereos. How do you think children entertained themselves?

Imagine you could talk with this girl: what would you ask her?

above: Mary Cassatt, *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair*, 1878, National Gallery of Art, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

