

Notes on Portrait of Mary Cassatt
by Edgar Degas (1834-1917)

On the occasion of a preview by Mrs. John F. Kennedy
of an Exhibition of the Collection of
Mr. and Mrs. André Meyer

National Gallery of Art

June 10 through July 8, 1962

In a collection devoted to masterpieces of European painting, one picture has a particular connection with America. It is a portrait by one of France's greatest artists, Degas, of an American painter, Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) of Philadelphia. In the foreword to the exhibition catalogue, John Walker, Director of the National Gallery of Art, has written:

Mary Cassatt was one of the most remarkable Americans of the nineteenth century, a prophet largely without honor at home, the only American artist to understand the independents in Paris of her day, a close friend of Degas, and a great influence on the collection of art in America.

Mr. Walker describes the Portrait in the same foreword as "one of the great masterpieces of portraiture of any age." It was painted about 1884.

The National Gallery of Art has six paintings by Mary Cassatt on exhibition, all in the Chester Dale Collection. Of these, one is The Morning Toilet, which Degas bought from Mary Cassatt for his own collection. After having once ridiculed Mary Cassatt for setting herself up as a judge of which painters had "style" and which did not, Degas later exclaimed, on seeing this study of an awkward, plain girl, "What design! What Style!", and kept the picture in his private collection until he died.

Another Mary Cassatt painting at the Gallery, the large Boating Party, is widely considered one of her greatest achievements. Showing the influence of Manet and the flat patterns of Japanese prints, it puts her favorite theme, that of mother and child, in a dramatic open-air setting.