

Japanese Influences on Mary Cassatt (1844-1926)

About the Artist

Mary Cassatt was born May 22, 1844 in Allegheny City which is now a part of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. When she was five years old her family moved to Philadelphia, the city she would regard as her American home. We do not know exactly when she decided to become an artist, but we suspect it must have been quite early.

When she was seven, the family moved to Paris and spent the next few years in France and Germany. They returned to Philadelphia in 1855. Experiences visiting the art museums in Paris must have had an impact on the young woman who would emerge as not only a significant American painter, but as one of art history's most important artists.

At the age of seventeen, during the year that saw the beginning of the Civil War, Cassatt enrolled in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. It was the country's most respected school of art, and she studied there for four years. She studied the traditional curriculum of the school which included drawing from casts of antique sculpture, life drawing, and painting copies of master paintings. She felt that copying Old Master paintings was the best way to learn, so she moved to Paris in 1866 in order to spend time in the museums there painting and sketching.

With the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, Cassatt returned to Philadelphia, but after the war she went back to Europe where she settled permanently in Paris in 1872. It was then that she met Louisine Waldron Elder and persuaded her to purchase a pastel by Degas. This work would become the first Impressionist piece to come to the United States and was the first acquisition of what would become the H.O. Havemeyer Collection, one of the collections that would later be given to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

By 1873, Mary Cassatt was exhibiting and selling her work. She had discovered the work of Degas shortly after settling in Paris. Later, she reminisced about how important the discovery of his work had been for her saying, "It changed my life." At the Paris Salon of 1874, he noticed her work. His response was, "Here is someone who feels as I do." Cassatt and Degas began a relationship that would last for the next forty years. They were both from upper class families and had much in common. They were both devoted to showing the life of their own day, honestly and unsentimentally, using brilliant colors and daring compositions.

She did not like the name "Impressionist" and always called herself and her colleagues "Independents." For several years her work had been accepted by the Salon, but when Degas encouraged her to join the Independents, she began to show her work with theirs.

In 1877, Cassatt's mother, father, and sister moved to Paris to live with her. Much of the next eighteen years was spent nursing them through long and finally fatal illnesses. She carried out all of the duties of an unmarried Victorian woman in caring for her family, but the demands of her position greatly reduced the amount of art she was able to produce.

Cassatt began, however, to receive recognition in the late 1870s and 1880s from the French critics. Her brother Alexander visited her in Paris with his children, and she painted the first of a series of paintings of mothers and children. This would be a theme she would explore for the rest of her career.

In 1890, Cassatt visited an exhibition of Japanese woodcuts at the Beaux-Arts Academy in Paris. She was so intrigued by the prints that she decided to do a set of prints in her own personal style. These prints are some of her most well-known works and are considered by many to be her most beautiful creations. They show women at simple daily activities. After seeing the prints, Degas is recorded to have said, "I am not willing to admit that a woman can draw that well."

During the later years of her life, Cassatt became instrumental in encouraging wealthy Americans to purchase Impressionist paintings and old master paintings, as well. She wished to see important works brought to collections in the United States. Because of her influence, many important works of art were brought to this country.

Cassatt was a strong advocate of women's suffrage. She expressed herself honestly and strongly, a trait that was not always appreciated. As she grew older, and her circle of relatives and friends died, she was increasingly alone. She developed diabetes and cataracts and eventually had to stop painting. She became bitter and difficult, and in her outrage at the barbarity of World War I she expressed her hope that women's suffrage would bring an end to all wars. Proceeds of an exhibition of her work in New York were donated to the suffrage movement, and in 1926, at the age of eighty-two, Mary Cassatt died.

About the Art

Although her work is often categorized with that of the Impressionists, Mary Cassatt's work has her own very personal characteristics. She was a master of drawing and was as skilled with pastel drawing and printmaking as she was with painting. Her prints show a strong influence from the Japanese prints exhibited in Paris in 1890.

Cassatt's paintings were mostly of women and children. Occasionally she would paint a man, perhaps a member of her family, but she did not do still lifes or landscapes, except as they might be incidental in the figure paintings. The women Cassatt painted are shown doing the ordinary activities of their day: pouring tea, sealing a letter, reading a paper, sewing, or sitting in a garden. These women are being themselves. They are not presented for the sake of a male viewer or buyer. The world of women during this period was ordinarily hidden from view of the outside world. This world is revealed to us in Cassatt's works.

Cassatt's mother and child paintings unsentimentally present to us an honest example of the loving relationship that exists in those hidden moments shared between mothers and their children. She seems to have preferred to show simple women who had responsibility

for the care of their child rather than the upper-class women whose children were cared for by nannies or nursemaids. Though she did not call herself an Impressionist, like them, Cassatt wanted to portray the life of her own time showing people in the modern world. The Impressionists used broken color and loose brushwork to give a feeling of immediacy and spontaneity, much like one might catch an "impression" with a camera shot. While Cassatt, like the Impressionists, presented her subjects from unusual angles or as cropped images like those from a photograph, she did not approve of the dissolving forms in Monet's dabs of color. She was more interested in solid drawing to indicate the permanence and stability of her forms.

References:

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