

Mary Cassatt:

An American (Impressionist) In Paris

“Self Portrait,” ca. 1880



HA 217 A

Art History III: Art of the Modern World

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12 December 2010

“One of the greatest of all the women painters, of course, is Mary Cassatt, the American artist, born in 1844, died 1926, a painter both powerful and tender, purposeful and brave, a feminist before her time, a woman of principle, energy and dedication.” (Novelist Fay Weldon on Mary Cassatt)¹

As someone who had only a superficial knowledge of art history prior to taking this course, I associated Impressionist Art primarily with French male painters: namely Degas, Manet, Monet, Pissarro, and Renoir. After further research, it’s refreshing to learn that Impressionism was more than just blurry paintings of landscapes and city scenes created by a misfit band of male artists in response to Paris’ socio-political upheaval during the late 19th century. These artists revolutionized traditional concepts of color, gender, class, subject, and visual perception. “What was most unusual about the Impressionists was the strong presence of women,”² not only as the subjects of paintings, but as the artists who painted them. Mary Cassatt is one of the two female Impressionist painters highlighted by the course text³ and the *only* American. Many people, including Anne Dayez-Distel, former curator of the Impressionism collection at the Louvre in France, hold Cassatt “responsible for the tradition of the Impressionist in America.”⁴

“Mary Cassatt Self-Portrait” (ca. 1880) is one of only two known by the Pittsburgh-born artist and is housed at the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. The other, “Portrait of the Artist” (ca. 1878) is apart of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s

¹ “Women on Form: 3rd Edition.” *Sunday Herald*. 9 Nov. 2003. ProQuest Newsstand, ProQuest. Web. 11 Dec. 2010.

² Willette, Dr. Jeanne S. M., “Impressionism: Class and Gender.” [Weblog entry.] Art History Unstuffed. Wordpress. 22 Oct. 2010. <http://www.arthistoryunstuffed.com/impressionism-class-and-gender/>. Web. 12 Dec. 2010.

³ Kleiner, Fred S. *Gardner’s Art Through The Ages*. 13th ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2011. Print. pp. 821-31.

⁴ *Mary Cassatt, Impressionist from Philadelphia*. WNET/13. Writ. Dorothy Monet. Dir. Perry Miller Adato. Chicago: Home Vision, 1977. VHS.

collection in New York. Both were watercolors painted after she moved to France, befriended Edgar Degas, and begun exhibiting her work with French Impressionists.⁵

I have viewed “Mary Cassatt Self-Portrait” both in person and online. Acquired in November 1976, it is included in the exhibit “Eye Contact: Modern American Portrait Drawings.” Her chosen medium was gouache and watercolor over graphite on paper. The image dimensions are 32.7 cm x 24.6 cm (12 7/8” x 9 11/16”), which is not terribly large in comparison to the myriad of other portraits in the gallery.

At first glance, it is very clear that this is a classic portrait painted in the Impressionistic style (visible angular brushstrokes, bright color, marked light and shadow, and an overall open composition). The subject is ordinary, yet provocative: a feminine looking artist, Mary Cassatt, dressed in the formal attire of an upper class woman (including a bonnet and scarf). One would think that because this is a self-portrait, she is actually painting herself drawing, but that is unclear because her “sketch is concealed from view.”⁶ In this singular, captured scene, she is seated at what could possibly be an easel or sketchpad (marked by the blue and brown/gray lines moving at a slight angle on the right-hand side of the painting) and looks somewhat coyly at her audience. Ms. Cassatt is realistically proportioned, however she is lacking a right hand (the left is barely defined).

In terms of technique, it appears almost as if Cassatt painted this as a free-hand sketch and the three Impressionist qualities of “abbreviation, speed, and spontaneity”⁷ are distinct. The deliberate brush strokes and direction of the paint show a flow of movement throughout the painting. Cassatt masters the use of complementary colors side by side and in

⁵⁻⁶ “Mary Cassatt Self-Portrait.” *Catalog of American Portraits: Portraits Search*. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. <http://npgportraits.si.edu/eMuseumNPG/code/emuseum.asp>. Web. 12 Dec. 2010.

⁷⁻⁸ Kleiner, Fred S. *Gardner's Art Through The Ages*. 13th ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2011. Print. p. 824.

doing so “the colors intensify each other.”⁸ The bright yellow color in the upper left-hand region of the painting represents some sort of light, possibly sun, floating in from a window. The lighter blue below could be an area of shadow, where less light is coming in. Her bonnet and head help separate the light from a wall spattered with sporadic green brush strokes demarking wallpaper or some other conscious design. The strategic placement of lighter colors in the upper right-hand corner and darker colors in the lower left-hand corner balance the picture’s overall weight. To the untrained eye, this painting might appear unfinished, but the way the color dissolves into the background is indicative of Impressionist painting. Finally, the general mood of the painting is calm and inviting.

In an effort to substantiate my observations of the painting, I performed an online search and came across audio profile transcripts for the paintings featured in the aforementioned “Eye Contact” exhibition. Wendy Wick Reaves, Curator of Prints and Drawings at the National Portrait Gallery, called the painting “radical” and suggested that Ms. Cassatt “appraises us rather than the other way around.”⁹ Reaves also notes, “she is projecting herself here as a working artist, not the subject, a modern professional woman, earning her own living, independent of husband and family.”¹⁰ Reaves’ conclusions provide an interesting theory behind what Ms. Cassatt was trying to achieve with her compelling second self-portrait.

⁹⁻¹⁰ Reaves, Wendy Wick. “Eye Contact: Modern American Portrait Drawings Transcripts.” *Audio Profiles from the National Portrait Gallery*. Web. <http://www.npg.si.edu/docs/ectranscript.pdf>. 12 Dec. 2010.