

THE IMPRESSION OF HUMOR:  
MARY CASSATT AND HER RENDERING OF WIT

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by  
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the [thesis] entitled

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To my son, Maddox Bennett Thornton

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## INTRODUCTION

During the nineteenth century in France and America the art world proved to be a much different place for male and female artists. In fact, female artists had a hard time breaking through the staunchly gendered male institution. Social traditions demanded women to be well mannered, modest, and obedient, three traits that opposed the fundamental practices of academic artistic training. For example, a woman's exposure to a nude model compromised her moral stature. Therefore, women were socially excluded from academic art schools, crippling their presence within the artistic community. Without the ability to visually study the human anatomy, as male artists did, female artists were strictly limited in their subject matter and technique (if they wished to exhibit within the academic arena). For example, harsh brushstrokes, characterized as unfeminine prohibited a woman's participation in the academic artistic community.

Jane Mayo Roos discusses the Academy's gender division in her article "Girls 'n' the 'hood: Female Artists in Nineteenth-Century France" by illustrating the sex of who exhibited at the Salon of 1869 and their accolades.<sup>1</sup> As Table 1 illustrates, men dominated in overall numbers as well as overall awards. As Roos explains, 'hors concours' identifies artists that received the maximum number of medals; 'exempt' denotes artists who received at least one medal; and 'non-exempt' indicates artists who did not receive any medals. Roos's data clearly demonstrates the division within the French art world: 2262 male artists exhibited that year as opposed to 317 women.

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Morowitz and William Vaughan, Ed., *Artistic Brotherhoods in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, Aldershot, England: Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000.

However, it also shows that the Salon *accepted* 317 women. Not to mention that even five of those women won more than one medal. While five women out of 317 reflects a mere 2%, the fact that those five women succeed in a male dominated institution and thrived begs the question of “how”. This thesis proposes a different look at one of the female artists of the nineteenth century that, like the women of the 1869 Salon, broke through the glass ceiling and achieved success in the fine art world, Mary Cassatt.

Though Cassatt’s entry to the Paris Salon was rejected in 1869, she flourished in many that followed.<sup>2</sup> An investigation into Cassatt and the sheer acknowledgement of her accomplishments places her within the art historical canon. One of the key factors of her fame is that she used her position between two cultures to her advantage. She combined American ambition within the cultivated practices of Parisian life. She stepped outside the boundaries of the socially conceived female artist while maintaining a socially acceptable stature professionally, artistically, and personally.

The end of the Civil War (1865) signaled a change in American artistic practices for female artists. An unprecedented number of women flooded academies, ambitious and eager to develop their skills. In turn, the traditional ideals and practices of nineteenth-century art shifted drastically. By the turn of the century women created tight networks of female artists that produced paintings, sculptures, drawings, and photographs that transcended the conventional concepts of “female art.” As Kristen Swinth states, “women’s growing presence triggered a reaction that decisively reshaped not only the art

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<sup>2</sup> After the Salon rejected her 1869 Salon entry Cassatt complained to her mentor (and jury member) Gerome. He confided in her that her entry was merely too late that “...if [she] had come twenty four hours sooner he would have got [her] picture through!” (Cassatt to Eliza Haldeman, Aug. 17, in Mathews 1984, p.62).

world but also the concept of culture in highly gendered terms.”<sup>3</sup> By the 1890’s nearly 11,000 women artists were practicing professionals, opposed to 414 thirty years earlier. Cassatt took advantage of these opportunities in American artistic culture, as well as the changes in European art, where she lived the better part of her adult life overseas.

Cassatt’s oeuvre exemplifies the modern female painter in the late nineteenth-century artistic world, not necessarily because of her presence and practice, but because of her subject matter. Due to social conventions and expectations, female artists were restricted to representing private spaces, as discussed by Griselda Pollock in 1988 in her book, *Vision and Difference*.<sup>4</sup> Cassatt’s work shows three basic areas of observation: mother and child relationships; female interior spaces; and garden scenes. Within these strictly drawn lines, Cassatt breaks traditional conceptions of the female artist through her use of wit. Cassatt uses wit not only as an anecdote for the truth found within the act of perception, but as a critical tool. Cassatt’s use of wit places her in a seat of power, much like the male flâneur and his use of wit. It allows the “joke teller” to take authority of a subject so entirely that he or she is able to pass judgment in the form of a witty remark or in this case, a representation.<sup>5</sup> Through wit, Cassatt establishes herself within the aristocratic irony of the flâneur.

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<sup>3</sup> Swinth, Kristen, *Painting Professionals: Women Artists & the Development of Modern American Art, 1870-1930*, [Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001].

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that the male artists worked without restrictions, but rather the gendered dynamic came to a head with the growth of 1860’s female presence into the artistic world.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Speier, “Wit and Politics: An Essay on Laughter and Power,” in *The American Journal of Sociology*, [University of Chicago Press. 103:5 (1998): 1352-1401].

During the nineteenth century, the flâneur was staunchly connected to the male artist, even more specifically, the Impressionist artist. T.J. Clark outlined the social and cultural contexts of the flâneur and his practices of detached observation in his groundbreaking 1984 book, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*<sup>6</sup>. Clark argues that the Impressionists were reacting to the urbanization of Paris. He opens with the quote: “This book is about Impressionist painting and Paris.” The inclusion of the simple title of the main city foreshadows his approach, a new, more culturally aware art historical attempt at inserting modern nuances in the frame of modern thought. Clark’s main argument focuses on the cyclical nature of the “spectacle” and its relation to class and commodification. He asserts, like Meyer Shapiro, that Impressionist art is inseparable from its subject matter--the spectacle of modern life. Clark’s definition of the modern spectacle, thus becomes a staple of this work. The term is loosely grasped through its connection with the energy of the city, as well as the “commodification of social practices.”<sup>7</sup> The performance of goods and services then defines the modern spectacle. For example, a man and a woman promenading through the streets display their wealth. They wear their finest clothes to walk the city solely for the purpose of being seen. Their clothes, a product of a service bought and paid for, is then a symbolic display of their wealth and money; they are therefore, by definition, part of the spectacle. Clark’s reason for this distinction is then illustrated in the acts of the artist as observers of this spectacle. He fundamentally argues that due to this preoccupation with the modern

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<sup>6</sup> T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*, Revised Edition, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

urbanization of Paris (i.e. Haussmannization) the social ramifications can be seen in the artist's need to react to the spectacle; which in turn self-proclaims them as non-participating fractions of society.

Griselda Pollock reacts to Clark's inseparable social history of late-nineteenth century art in her 1988 book, *Vision and Difference*. The fundamental nuance that Pollock derived from Clark was the idea that an artist reacts to their social and cultural phenomenon. Pollock takes Clark's argument to further stipulate the relation of what a woman was seeing as a spectacle and placed it as the reason for women's pre-occupation with "female subject matter" such as mother and child scenes as well as garden depictions. She argues that their social sphere predisposed these artists to their subject matter. Pollock argues that Impressionism attracted female artists specifically because it legitimized domestic social life as a subject matter.

While producing one of the most cited sources in feminist discourse, Pollock in turn, has overshadowed scholarship and separated Cassatt and Berthe Morisot from their male Impressionist counterparts, specifically in her chapter on the feminine and masculine social spheres. While gender divisions are important to understanding the social contexts of Cassatt's work, they limit a comprehensive view of her life, her art, and her contribution to art history. For example, in her chapter on male and female spheres, Pollock introduces Cassatt's work, *Little Girl in Blue Armchair*, by stating:

The spaces of femininity operated not only at the level of what is represented, the drawing-room or sewing-room. The spaces of femininity are those from which femininity is lived as positionality in discourse and social practice.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art*, [London and New York; Routledge, 1988]:92-93.

Pollock defines this painting solely within a context of male and female spheres, ignoring its social commentary and witty play on social norms. She characterizes it only as a spatial representation of femininity and an altered viewpoint of perspective. By placing Cassatt in the strictly female category of art historical scholarship, a great disservice has been done to her work and her overall contribution to nineteenth-century and twentieth-century art. By divorcing Cassatt from the title “female” or “feminist” artist, a new, more liberated, figure appears.

Cassatt’s artistic agenda was not founded in feminist theory. While a feminist reading can be ascertained from her works, I argue that this limited reading does not offer a comprehensive representation of her work and its possibilities. In addition, it does quite the opposite by predisposing the interpretations of her paintings to a limited category strictly associated with gender politics. Not to say that this is inappropriate, but rather this kind of reading does not present the only answer to the questions Cassatt’s work raises. By recognizing and identifying the humor, and more specifically, wit, in Cassatt’s work, her “domestic” renderings become part of the art world in which she worked and circulated—the world of the Impressionist flaneur.

Pollock continues her investigation of Cassatt in her 1998 book, *Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women*.<sup>9</sup> In this text Pollock makes, what seems to me, a monumentally slanted approach to Cassatt’s work. She begins her investigation at the “mid-point” of Cassatt’s career, 1893, arguing that it “allows us to discern the dominant themes as well as the key moments of change that define the body of work united under

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<sup>9</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1998.

the name ‘Mary Cassatt.’”<sup>10</sup> Pollock treats Cassatt’s *Modern Woman* mural for the Woman’s Building and the World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago in 1893 (fig. 1). Pollock takes this work as the pivotal moment in Cassatt’s career; claiming it serves as the culmination of all her previous works and a foreshadowing of all her work to come. Launching her book from this “mid-point” allows Pollock to mold Cassatt’s *oeuvre* around a feminist agenda. However, her eagerness to place Cassatt within a feminist category causes her to take liberties with her biography that should not have been overlooked when categorizing an entire career.

Pollock’s choice of the mural is problematic for a host of reasons. To begin with, this work was commissioned, meaning, this was not a painting that Cassatt conceived of herself. As a commissioned work, it was subject to the patron’s needs and wishes. The director of the exposition, Bertha Palmer, had advised Cassatt on what they were looking for in order to comply with the surrounding intellectual “decoration.” The subject matter of *Modern Women* was to compliment Mary Fairchild MacMonnies’ *Primitive Women*, the mural for the north tympanum of the hall of honor (Cassatt’s mural was designed for the south tympanum)(fig. 2). Moreover, Cassatt’s letter to Louisine Havemeyer in the summer of 1892 suggests Cassatt pursued the project more as a chance to annoy Degas than make a particularly feminist statement:

I am going to do a decoration for the Chicago Exhibition. When the Committee offered it to me to do, at first I was horrified, but gradually I began to think it would be great fun to do something I have never done before and as the bare idea of such a thing put Degas in a rage and he did not spare every criticism he could think of, I got my spirit up and I said I

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<sup>10</sup> Pollock, Griselda, *Vision and Difference*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998.p.35.



would not give up the idea for anything. Now one only has to mention Chicago to set him off.<sup>11</sup>

The comedy of this quote is really found in the fact that it seems it was the sheer desire to irritate Degas that solidified Cassatt's participation in the exposition rather than a strong desire to demonstrate her feminist agenda. As biographer and Cassatt expert, Nancy Mowll Mathews explains that even though it might be considered rather flattering to place Cassatt into the image of the "modern woman," it is unlikely that Cassatt herself would have appreciated such a staunch categorization. Mathews further establishes that while Cassatt supported the suffrage movement in her teens, she "turned her nose up at exhibitions of 'women's' art and refused to travel with her mural to Chicago in 1893 or serve on a jury for the Woman's Building."<sup>12</sup> Cassatt worked within the social norms of her day to break with tradition.

In this thesis, I look beyond a gendered interpretation of Cassatt's work. As her letters and biographies indicate, Cassatt was a complex figure that many of her contemporaries had a difficult time understanding:

Personally and professionally Cassatt maintained a veneer of conventionality that masked the essential contrariness of her nature. From a young age, Cassatt confused and offended people who expected a mild, ladylike personality in such a well-bread, well-dressed woman.<sup>13</sup>

With this in mind it is not my intention to try and discover the woman behind her work, but rather, to establish an alternative view of her work. As demonstrated in the previous letter to Havemeyer, Cassatt possessed a keen sense of humor. She found delight in the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.38.

<sup>12</sup> Mathews, Nancy Mowll, Review in Women's Art Journal, Vol. 21. 2, (2000-2001):44-46.p.45

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.45

intellectual surroundings of the art world and expressed these notions through her well-bread cultivation of wit. I will not attempt to argue that there is wit in every instance of Cassatt's work since that type of overarching classification would contradict my endeavor. I will show that Cassatt's wit establishes her as an active member in Impressionist movement as well as the art community as a whole. She is not just a "female" artist but as an artist in her own right, one of distinguished intellectual stamina and observational skill. Given the prominence of Pollock's ideas about Cassatt, as well as their critical limitations, this thesis seeks to reposition the interpretations of her paintings into a broader constellation of ideas appropriating her as a late nineteenth-century artist. Fundamental to those is the idea of her use of wit and the potential for understanding her paintings as a commentary on modern life.

In Chapter one, I define the distinction between wit and humor in the nineteenth century. Wit and humor have become somewhat synonymous in today's culture; however, these two forms of social presentation were practiced and perceived differently in nineteenth century France and America. Irony and satire are two key indicators of how wit and humor were utilized in the social arena. Stipulating that irony is to wit as satire is to humor. During the nineteenth century the distinction between wit and humor was immensely important. Indeed, wit exemplified a person's social position and intellectual superiority. Chapter one distinguishes the many facets of what wit was comparatively to its social structure in the nineteenth century as it pertains to class and intellectual hierarchy. By defining Cassatt's relationship to wit socially and culturally, Chapter one illustrates how it influenced her work and why she cultivated it herself.

Chapter two examines how Cassatt used wit as a social and artistic critical tool through a close analysis of *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair* (1878) (fig. 3). The chapter begins with a detailed look at how children were treated visually in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century through French and American history, in order to illustrate the social traditions Cassatt reacted to in her work. These notions of childhood are then observed within *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair* (1878) unveiling Cassatt's use of wit as a critical statement towards child portraiture. The final addition to this chapter is the inclusion of how the French artistic practices of the flâneur and his "acts of perception" influenced the fundamental reality of her wit and reaction to social norms and preserved stereotypes.

Chapter three shows how Cassatt employed wit to comment on, and participate in, the contemporary art world. This chapter argues that Cassatt located herself in a distinct artistic community. Indeed, her paintings contributed to a witty *conversation* with other works, showing her as an intellectually engaged artist that fed off the modern movement's reliance on social commentary. She created a witty play between the works of Courbet, Degas, Renoir, and Manet. These visual conversations indicate that Cassatt's place in the cannon should not be predicated on her success as a "woman artist," but rather, her status as an artist.

Chapter four attempts to create a sound understanding of the scholarship that surrounds Cassatt and her work. The objective within this chapter focuses on what Cassatt had rendered herself, rather than the implication of what today's society or even the last decades experiences created. Many scholars have tried to contextualize Cassatt's later works with her early paintings while struggling to provide an alternative to simply deducing them as sentimental. By referring to the first painting presented in this thesis,

*Modern Woman* (1983), I will show that Cassatt's body of work should be characterized by her continual participation in contemporary artistic practices. By comparing this work to those of contemporary artists such as Puvis, demonstrates a continued use of wit through artistic "conversation" and as social critique. As Nancy Mowll Mathews' explains:

... 'in art what we want is the certainty that one spark of original genius shall not be extinguished, that is better than average excellence, that is what will survive, what it is essential to foster.' While we can not escape the fact that each generation interprets art and artists for its own ends, it is important that when it is our turn, the interpretation be as rich and complex as possible. It is our best chance of insuring that 'the one spark of original genius' is not extinguished in well-meaning public service.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, the job of the scholar is to keep the integrity of the work through the work itself.

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<sup>14</sup> Mathews, Nancy Mowll, Review in *Women's Art Journal*, Vol. 21. 2, (2000-2001):44-46.

## CHAPTER 1

### *Humor vs. Wit: The Varieties of Self-Preservation*

Wit and humor are often linked as synonymous entities grounded in the broader category of things “comedic.” Their strict definitions lead to a much more complex association with the act of perception. Wit, cultivated by the upper-class notions of intellect, often finding its release as a social critique, while humor reveals a more expansive definition grounded in the practices of satire. Both categories are inspired by self-preservation, either by an intellectual assertion of power or as a defensive retort.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, wit exemplified an individual’s intellect. Strongly associated with knowledge, wit manifested a person’s high social status within a cultural hierarchy. During the eighteenth century, the use of wit shifted from an expression of status to an intellectual declaration. The original personification of humor and wit stemmed from “satirical warfare.” In 1873, the British novelist, Walter Besant, placed satire within the confines of humor: “satire..., of which humor is a branch, is the weapon of the weak. It is an acknowledgment of helplessness.”<sup>15</sup> Besant directly linked the use of satire to the oppression of its user, stating that it began when man began to be oppressed, as a kind of defense mechanism for individuals who felt threatened.

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<sup>15</sup> Besant, Walter, *The French Humorists: from the twelfth to the nineteenth century*, London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1873. p.1.

The link between humor and satire then became a kind of intellectual promiscuity. In other words, the user indiscriminately wielded his/her scornful intentions to whoever posed a threat. Satire was considered a means of survival; it was not used to promote one's intelligence or even comment on social injustices. It served as a form of release, a way in which an individual could smite their opponent through verbal and literary practices. In 1890, F.R. Fleet alluded to these dictions between wit and satire:

...of inquiries into the nature of humour, I know of none before the present century, previous to then, more especially, we may say, in the times of Dryden and Pope, humor was used less as a subject for philosophical speculation than as a weapon of literary warfare.<sup>16</sup>

Fleet introduced the main division between humor and wit through his classification of "philosophical speculation" and "a weapon of literary warfare." He argued that wit and satire are distinguished between intellectual usage and self-preservation. Humor was not a cultivation of one's intellectual observations but rather a tool used in order to preserve one's idyllic self.

This structure, while opposing one another, is not the main differential in the practice of wit or humor. The ways in which wit and humor are cultivated solidifies their fracture from one another. Wit draws from one's intellectual reaction to social situations, whereas satire draws from one's emotional experiences or personal knowledge. Wit, rooted in the pursuit of philosophical debate and discovery, is cultivated through the intellectual connections of one's experiences as an expressive tool; not as a form of self-defense but as an assertion to one's intellectual superiority. Humor draws from one's insecurities, frailties, awkward personifications, and serves as a comedic release from

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<sup>16</sup> Fleet, F.R., *A Theory of Wit and Humour*, Port Washington, N.Y. and London: Kennikat Press, 1890.p.4

oppressive situations. The most important link between these two forms of comedy lies in the fact that they both work to preserve the self. This factor makes these two forms so confusing when faced with specific definitions; the formal properties are very similar yet, distinctly separate from one another.

The most effective way to analyze the forms of wit and humor is through their respective subcategories of satire and irony. These two ‘subcategories’ or extensions of humor and wit help identify their presence and use within the context of nineteenth century social practices. Wit’s connection to intellectual training is clear in Fleet’s description of its association with the risible phase:

It is true the witting production of a risible phase of appreciable value to the intellectual sense implies excellence...whether the risible phase be exhibited in the inventor’s own person or fictitiously ascribed to another person, real or imaginarily. But this excellence is in another department of procedure than that of the risible phase, the department, namely, of invention of phase, thus pleasing the intellectual sense on account of their novelty.<sup>17</sup>

Something “risible” elicits an outward expression of pleasure through laughter.

According to Fleet an ironic or witty observation may not result in an outward reaction such as laughter, but it will call attention to one’s intellectual superiority as it highlights acts of perception that extend beyond the common observation. Its power rests in its presentation and the overall “excellence” of the observation or representation. The pleasure found in irony or wit is rooted in the “account of [its] novelty.”

Irony, most closely related to the nineteenth-century notions of wit, is a juxtaposition of two opposing concepts in order to comment on a larger notion. Its

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<sup>17</sup> Fleet, F.R., *A Theory of Wit and Humour*, Port Washington, New York, and London, Kennikat Press, 1890. P.13-14.

emphasis on commentary divorces it from humor and aligns itself within wit. Literary scholar Candace Lang's further elaborates on the distinction between irony and humor:

The ironic text is primarily 'expressive,' by which I mean that it is intended to transmit a message, communicate an idea, or express a thought or sentiment. It is no different from the non-ironic, 'sincere' (for want of a better word) text, insofar as it is based on the same notion of language considered as a medium, a form a supplement whose sole function is to represent a preexistent idea or concept.<sup>18</sup>

The ironic text, unlike the humorist practices, requires a form of expression. It creates a relationship to and comments on that reality. The humorist text, on the other hand, is not concerned with expression or with a language of form.

In recent years literary theorists have pronounced works as "ironic" because of what Lang identifies as their "unreadability." The irony for mentioned here is within the classical sense, "...as a disparity between essence and appearance, or meaning and expression."<sup>19</sup> This juxtaposition of the humorist versus the ironist does not create a negative or positive outlook on either perception or practice, but creates the idea that these two forms of personal relief stem from different intentions and, thus, result in drastically different receptions. This can be further explained by the notion that "the humorist conceives of that author as a product rather than as a producer of his text."<sup>20</sup>

The humorist is ultimately tied to the social perception of himself and his work, while the

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<sup>18</sup> Land, Candace D, *Irony/Humor: Critical Paradigms*, Baltimore and London; John Hopkins University Press, 1988.P.5.

<sup>19</sup> Lang, Candace, *Irony/Humor: Critical Paradigms*, Baltimore and London; John Hopkins University Press, 1988. P.5-6.

<sup>20</sup> Lang, Candace, *Irony/Humor: Critical Paradigms*, Baltimore and London; John Hopkins University Press, 1988. P.7.



ironist tries to situate himself outside the realm of modernity as a silent commentator. Within literature and the visual arts “humor is a textual phenomenon, and need not be intended, whereas irony implies an intender. Irony is to be interpreted or translated; humor can only be commented or rewritten.”<sup>21</sup>

This relationship between irony and humor can be seen more clearly in an action/reactionary mode. For example, Cassatt is to irony as Honoré Daumier is to humor. Cassatt presents a *perception* of modern social truths while Daumier presents a *product* of social reality. Take for example, Cassatt’s *Cup of Tea* (1879) (fig. 7) and Daumier’s *Types Parisiens* (1841) (fig.8). Both provide a commentary on contemporary social practices, yet Cassatt’s work does not function within wit without an interpretation, while Daumier presents a catalyst for commentary. In other words, Daumier’s lithograph presents a social reality that does not need interpretation in order to understand.

Cassatt’s work, grounded in naturalism, relies on the perceived knowledge of the viewer by identifying the truth of the figures. Yet she places said viewer in the role of the observer (which is ultimately the place of the artist themselves). The role of the artist as an observer of modern society or practices locates Cassatt’s work within the realm of a “perception of social truths.” She takes the representational notions of life and presenting them in an ironic manner. In *Cup of Tea*, Cassatt represents two women participating in normal social activities of the upper-class; drinking tea with one another. The woman centered, represented as the visitor, has left her hat and gloves on. The woman on the

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<sup>21</sup> Lang, Candace, *Irony/Humor: Critical Paradigms*, Baltimore and London; John Hopkins University Press, 1988. P.7.

right, represented with neither of these accessories; therefore, perceived as the hostess. This is meant to project the idea of a visit between these two women. Yet, the witty remark is held in the perceived awkward silence of the moment as well as the conveyed boredom of the hostess; seen as wit through the juxtaposition of a perceived truth to the truth in reality. The perceived truth or social conception of a good lady/ hostess was: attentive, well engaged, and not awkward. The “truth in reality,” represented here, shows that not all visits were socially robust or energetic.<sup>22</sup> Through *interpretation* the viewer becomes an observer of a social truth.

Daumier’s *Types Parisiens*, however, takes the interpretation out of its equation. Daumier’s humor, found in the commentary that his work elicits, does not represent a social ideal, but a product of a modern life. The lithograph depicts a family of three; a man, woman, and young boy. The caption reads: “Twelve years and a half and three first prizes, Happy Parents!”<sup>23</sup> However, the parents do not demonstrate “happiness.” The boy walks a few steps ahead of his parents, looking exhausted and unhealthy with sagging skin and sunken eyes. Such a presentation of a child, which will be discussed further later, contradicts the traditional manner in which children were visually perceived. This sharp juxtaposition of traditional conceptions of childhood versus the haunting depiction presented here places Daumier’s commentary within a more satirical format,. His work does not interpret modern life as much as critique it directly. Working in caricature, Daumier controversially asserts his statement through an identified politically

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<sup>22</sup> This aspect of my argument is in somewhat disagreement with Nancy Mathews. Mathews states in her 2000 review of the *Modern Woman* exhibition that “Cassatt not only embraced the Impressionist’s disdain for the perfect painted surface, she went so far as to preserve little awkwardness in drawing and color that subverted the ‘good manners’ she depicted in her tea parties and garden reveries.” P.45

<sup>23</sup> [Douze ans et demi et trios premiers prix. Heureux parents!] Daumier, *Married Life: Twenty Four Lithograph*, New York; Pantheon Books, 1944.

opposed medium. Daumier's works do not demonstrate an intention based on interpretation, but rather suggests a need for commentary by his viewers. This kind of quotation is further support that Daumier's works are not intended to be 'interpreted' but commented on.

Daumier's representation of the parents reiterates this notion of a sharp and abrasive commentary on upper-class characters. The parents, depicted as unimpressed, oppose the purportedly "Happy Parents". They calmly walk down the city street with stern facial expressions far removed from their surroundings, their class status demonstrated in their dress. The man wears a fine coat, tie, vest, and top hat, all the indications of a financially set gentleman. The woman's face, framed by a black bonnet and the books her husband carries, emphasize her sour, almost disgusted, look. Daumier creates a caricature of the upper-class for a middle to lower-class audience. His work *reacted* to the pretensions of the upper class and his *reaction* constitutes the print's humor. The work of art, therefore, was the reaction itself and, thus, the humor. As Lang specified earlier by stating, "irony is to be interpreted or translated; humor can only be commented or rewritten," Daumier and Cassatt present these notions in the nature of their concepts. Cassatt's work requires an interpretation while Daumier's requires a comment or reaction.

### **Cultural Influences of Wit**

Cassatt's cultivations of wit can be illustrated through a close look at her upbringing in the United States and her cultural milieu in France. In the nineteenth century it was widely accepted that a female could not and should not exhibit the basic

capacity for wit or humor. A writer for the “genteel” *Graham’s Magazine* explained this point of view in 1842:

Women have sprightliness, cleverness, smartness, though but little wit. There is a body and substance in true wit, with a reflectiveness rarely found apart from a masculine intellect... We know of no one writer of the other sex, that has a high character for humor. ... The female character does not admit it.<sup>24</sup>

It was considered unladylike for a woman to participate in witty conversation. Witty play distinguished a male participant’s intelligence and served as a kind of class distinction. This stems from the idea that the more one read, the more leisure time one possessed, the more witty one could be. If one were able to combat a witty remark with an even wittier play, one’s intellect was given precedence.

At this time in American history humor took its first steps in developing a wide spread practice. Articulated as the period when Samuel Clemens became Mark Twain, Jim Smiley told stories of his celebrated frog and American Regionalism (steeped in humor) appeared as a kind of release from everyday toil.<sup>25</sup>

Even though contemporary essays and commentaries restricted wit to the male sphere, the practice of wit points to a different historical reality. Popular culture did cite female comedians as “boyish” and “unattractive,” as in the 1868 publication of *Little Women*. One of the main characters, Jo, serves as a prime example of how society saw a

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 884.

<sup>25</sup> Howells short story of a man that uses a frog to win “races” is a prime example of the kind of Regional humor that was beginning to establish itself as a defined genre in 19<sup>th</sup> century American Literature. This period can also be described as spawning from a kind of “boarder warfare between two cultures, vernacular and refined.”

female that participated in practical jokes, slap stick comedy and puns: boyish, willing to cut off their hair and abrasive. The most well-known of these women was Lotta Crabtree. She was the first woman to do comic “break-downs” and minstrel routines. She learned her trade touring the California mining camps, what Habbeger defines as the “seedbed of so much American humor.”<sup>26</sup> Crabtree even managed to get “top billing” in the San Francisco music halls at highly masculine theatres, where she attracted mainly male audiences. By the end of the sixties, Crabtree was well-known in the East as well. She cultivated her humor through rebellion and deliberately played with gender politics and its social constructs. She smoked cigars, showed her stockings, and specialized in “hoyden” (not siren) roles. Her comedy strictly broke from traditions and by doing so drew a new line in the distinction of acceptable practices.<sup>27</sup>

In order to exploit and oppose accepted gender norms, Crabtree employed “slapstick” or lower-class humor. This is not surprising given her first exposure to American humor in the mining camps. The humor she saw within this context originated from a lower or working class mode; commenting on the social injustices felt by the lower class. This kind of humor is most concretely connected to writings like that of Jim Smiley’s celebrated Frog, or Crane’s telling of an old inebriated man’s drunken “frailties.” This kind of juxtaposition of the vernacular and the refined illustrates a great distinction of humor cultivation within a social construction. The kind of humor one practiced, much like the cloths one wore or the leisure time one had, defined one within a social hierarchy.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 890.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 889-890.

Crabtree's use of humor appealed to a particular audience: male. By identifying the sex of her audience the reception of her comedy demonstrates her class as a working girl rather than a distinction of intellect. Crabtree's presentation did not assert her high status but utilized her reception as an object of consumption from capital gain. The distinction further demonstrates the differences between wit and humor. While lower class humor cannot be excluded from social practices, the upper class cultivation of wit as a past-time defined an age and social hierarchy. A lower class pun was more of a dialect or local color tool for humor, while wit was a social assertion in power.

As part of the upper-class, Cassatt cultivated a wide variety of experiences that an otherwise, less fortunate, individual would not. American wit during this period, as well as in the French Parisian practices, was an identified past-time for the upper-class or bourgeoisie society. Opening statements by F.R. Fleet highlight the class distinctions between wit and humor:

In describing this book as a work on wit and humour, I have employed the words in the common acceptation and in their most comprehensive sense; using the term wit to describe all those ideas to which the word may with any propriety be applied, including what is known as bad and indifference wit, and humour as applying to all risible ideas whatsoever, some of which would be universally accepted as humour, some whose title to the name, while more or less valid, is less unquestioned, while the remainder usually pass by such names as ludicrousness, incongruity, grotesqueness, buffoonery.<sup>28</sup>

Fleet defines humor as (a more accepted definition) "ludicrousness, incongruity, grotesqueness, [and] buffoonery," and applies it to all forms of risible ideas and therefore, the lower class. Wit, in contrast, referenced a more intellectual arena. By linking the

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<sup>28</sup> F.R. Fleet, *A Theory of Wit and Humour*, Port Washington, [New York, and London: Kennikat Press, 1890]: 6.

non-risible phrase with wit rather than humor, Fleet underscores that wit is a cultivation of irony, and other with non-risible practices. Irony is therefore, most commonly found as an “act of perception.”<sup>29</sup> Practices of wit were utilized in high society as commentaries on current events, modern society, or literature. Discussions were grounded in one’s knowledge of these subjects and their use of wit displayed their full intellectual capacity. The individual who demonstrated ironic and detached critique most eloquently earned societal admiration.

While comedian Lotta Crabtree may not be the prime example of a cultivation of wit, she does demonstrate the female figure as a participant within the social structure of nineteenth-century America in relation to humor. Julia Newberry’s diary from 1869 to 1871 provides evidence of the female participation in a more upper-class cultivation of wit. In a 1870 entry, Newberry comments on her disapproval of a girl who “had evidently a great deal of book-knowledge, but seems lacking in what young girls almost always possess, namely, fun, humour, sarcasm & enthusiasm.”<sup>30</sup> Newberry alludes to a female’s participation of perception through humor by tying book-knowledge to humor. She critiques the woman who has the means in which to make a witty comment (a ‘well-bread’ woman) and yet, does not take the opportunity to demonstrate such refinement. Newberry flatly reverses the idea that American women were not supposed to have a sense of humor. She reintroduces us to the basic practices of humor and wit in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Among upper-class women, they were expected to be

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 130.

<sup>30</sup> Julia Newberry, *Julia Newberry’s Diary*, [New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1993]; 89. It should be noted here that Julia Newberry was a woman of upper-class high society, which can be seen through the sizable endowment her family had left to the Newberry Library.

experts in the field of wit and able to demonstrate a clear appreciation of a cleverly designed witty remark.

Cassatt participated in the flourishing culture of wit in nineteenth century America. The importance of wit to Cassatt became even more pronounced as she became acculturated into French society. American upper-class notions of wit coincided with Parisian social practices. The parallels between the wit of the American upper-class and the French cultivation of wit present two arenas in which Cassatt lived and worked. In both America and France, the cultivation of wit enabled the humorist to exert social power through the practices of intellectual jest and subversion.

Born in 1844 to Robert and Katherine Cassatt, Cassatt was born to a life of privilege. Both of her parents came from wealth and by the time Mary was born, her family was comfortably set within social and financial success that stemmed from their ancestral wealth and was consolidated through their own dedication to hard work. By the age of twenty-three Robert Cassatt had started his own investment business, the firm Cook & Cassatt, while also heading a firm of “forwarding merchants” Irwin, Cassatt, & Co.<sup>31</sup> By the time Robert was in his early forties, his success had led his family to financial independence.

Katherine Cassatt was also part of the social elite. Her father was a banker and provided her with the best education possible. Katherine was educated in an American woman’s home who had been raised in France. She in turn, imparted her “Continental”

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<sup>31</sup> Mathews, Nancy Mowll, *Mary Cassatt: A life*, New York: Villard Books, 1994.p. 5.



education onto her student.<sup>32</sup> Katherine's father died when she was sixteen, but his investments, particularly in land across the river in Allegheny City, allowed her to come to her marriage with ample funds. As biographer Nancy Mowll Mathews explains,

Robert and Katherine Cassatt, with all their family history and entanglements, stood just slightly apart from the rest because of his open enjoyment of business and her French upbringing. Both husband and wife dressed impeccably and their home always had more luxuries and antiques than those of their friends and relatives.<sup>33</sup>

Through Katherine's dedication to education, Mary received the same elite schooling that mirrored her mother's. She was fluent in Latin, German, and French before she turned fifteen and had traveled to Europe more than once within this time frame. She was exposed to French Parisian society as early as she could remember, and therefore, their distinct cultivation of wit. This, combined with the growing presence of wit within the upper-class society members in America, gave Cassatt a foundation in wit that was unrivaled in her social sphere.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.5.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.6.

## CHAPTER 2:

### “Acts of Perception”: *The Little Girl in the Blue Armchair*, 1877-78

The fundamental basis of wit is its “act of perception.” It comments on and critiques what an individual has observed. By looking at Cassatt’s use of wit, her works become more than simple genre settings dictated by her gender; they become cultivated practices of wit and acts of perception. If we look at Cassatt within a strictly gendered lens, it would be easy to consider her paintings “sentimental” genre scenes representing women’s life and work. The word “sentimentality” is defined in opposition to “sentiment.” In nineteenth century painting, it became common practice to equate women’s art to “sentimentality,” which unlike the word “sentiment” –related to description-became an accusation used to create a hierarchy of the gendered arts. If an artist demonstrated “sentimentality” to their subject matter she was most likely connected to genre practices and therefore, not associated with the avant-garde or even “high/intellectual” art. However, when we look at Cassatt’s work through her use of wit, her paintings become key participants in the Parisian avant-garde art scene. She does not present “sentimentality” but examples of avant-garde work that are rooted in a critique of the modern spectacle.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, by taking a close look at a particular work of Cassatt’s *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair*, we can place her within the category of a critical observer.

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<sup>34</sup> For more information on this subject turn to Anne Higonnet’s essay “Pictures We Like to Look At,” 1999.

The simple humor and light hearted wit demonstrated in Cassatt's portrait *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair* (1878) (fig.3) becomes clear when it is situated within the Impressionist cannon.<sup>35</sup> Cassatt's portrait presents an ironic representation of the young girl, an image quite distinct from traditional representations of girlhood. During the seventeenth-century Puritan ideals of children dominated the overall representation of them as miniature adults, "beset by evil and in need of redemption through work and religious faith."<sup>36</sup> For example, in *Young Boy in Armor* (17<sup>th</sup> century) demonstrates the presumption that children were perceived as "miniature adults" (fig.9). The young boy, dressed in the full soldier attire, stands as if he were a seasoned warrior. Needless to say, this presentation of high stature would only come to soldiers of a more advanced age, who would have had the life experience of numerous battles to feel such a confident demeanor or outward appearance.

Representations of children changed as conceptions of childhood shifted with the investigations and theories presented by John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. With the age of Enlightenment in full bloom, these philosophers challenged the culturally accepted norms of children. Locke and Rousseau proposed that childhood was a distinct stage of human development that determined the moral and psychological person in adulthood. In turn, the Romantic painter began to represent children as innocent, and uncorrupted by the immoral predisposition of adulthood. As art historian Curtis Carter elaborates, "innocence" as connoted

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<sup>35</sup> I would like to note that I am not using the term "simple humor" as a judgment value, but rather in order to distinguish the difference between the more openly expressed values of wit opposed to the more discrete uses that I will be discussing in a moment.

<sup>36</sup> Carter, Curtis L, *Children in Art: A Century of Change*, Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Patrick and Beatrice Haggerty Museum of Art, 1999. P.9-10.

naturalness, purity, simplicity, guiltlessness, inexperience, playfulness, and a state of being untouched by evil and free of sexual intent or understanding.<sup>37</sup>

The reign of innocence lasted another century and then became reserved only for the upper class. Toward the end of the nineteenth-century and the beginning of the twentieth, romanticized images were replaced by formalist preoccupations with the rise of the Modernist movement. Artists did not abandon their representations of children or social concerns surrounding their education; however Modernism redirected the artists' focus to more realistic depictions of the natural surroundings of children. Carter argues that the realistic representations of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* images of children documented the effects of war and urban poverty on children in post-war Europe. The subject matter had turned to a hyper-reality rather than a Romantic irrationality. Carter states, "In this context, children's images function as a form of social commentary thus mirroring the adverse social and economic travails of children in changing society."<sup>38</sup> While Cassatt's representation of the little girl in the Blue Armchair does not depict the poverty of France during 1870 or the trials and tribulations of what it meant to be a child during the nineteenth-century, she does provide a social commentary on how these children were perceived and represented in visual culture.

Cassatt's own commentary on modern representations of children can be seen in her caricature of childhood printed in *Le Journal Amusant* in June 26, 1875 three years

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<sup>37</sup> Carter, Curtis L, *Children in Art: A Century of Change*, Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Patrick and Beatrice Haggerty Museum of Art, 1999. P.10.

<sup>38</sup> Carter, Curtis L, *Children in Art: A Century of Change*, Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Patrick and Beatrice Haggerty Museum of Art, 1999. P.12.

prior to *Little Girl in Blue Armchair* (fig.10). The caption of the caricature reads: “What I like about childhood is its naïveté.” *Le Journal Amusant* was a popular weekly newspaper that printed the work of some of the most famous caricaturists including: Daumier and Gustave Doré. It was most known for its works that criticized modernization, politics, and social hierarchy. Many of the caricatures within the periodical balanced the line between wit and humor. Given the visual critical history within this publication the context of Cassatt’s subject matter can then be related to a form of critique on the way children have been represented as idealized innocence.

Cassatt’s caricature illustrates her engagement with contemporary visual culture, the ways in which children had been represented, and how this perception was beginning to shift. Cassatt’s caricature alludes to the two dominate models of children in visual representations: the innocent and the erotic. Her wit is rooted in her commentary on childhood “naïveté.” Near the turn of the century, scholars were again beginning to change the fundamental representation of the Romantic child into one that was well aware of his/her “adult” counterparts. These children were exposed to a large variety of horrors during the Franco-Prussian war and the re-establishing Paris of their time. The idea that they would then be unaffected and continue to be innocent bystanders was no longer plausible. Children were beginning to be seen as objects of consumption themselves.

A branch of this perceived notion of the child expands itself into the erotic. This reading would fit into the reality that the artists of this time are creating a kind of reaction to the way in which these figures had been idealized, specifically referencing the real notions of child pornographic tendencies. One of the most representative images in this

class is William Adolphe Bouguereau's *Child at Bath (petite fille assise au bord de l'eau)*, 1886 (fig. 11). While all the classical signs of idealization are present, the unmistakable iconographic reference to Venus situates Bouguereau's rendering into either a commentary of such social practices or an example of it. Given Bouguereau's work is contemporary with Cassatt's, some connection could be made with the way in which Cassatt could be referencing Manet's *Olympia* (1863) (fig.12). As Art Historian Harriet Scott Chessman emphasizes, the erotic undertones of Cassatt's 1878 *Little Girl in Blue Armchair* and locates its erotic referent in Manet's prostitute *Olympia*. Chessman argues that the child's sexual availability is found in her indiscrete presentation. Higonnet even suggests that "Cassatt looks at children's bodies as erotic objects. Clothed or not; Cassatt's children represent the physical pleasure women and children give each other, which includes visual pleasure as well as the pleasure of touch."<sup>39</sup> This reading would place Cassatt within the category of "sentimentality," rather than "sentiment." By establishing that Cassatt's works are a personification of a woman's physical and mental connection between themselves and their children, Higonnet reads these paintings as Cassatt's manifestation of sentimentality through a kind of self-indulgent emotion. Thus, her work is placed within the simple category of sentimentality rather than a more complex analysis of modern social concepts. This limited scope would further deteriorate a link between Cassatt and any other artist except female contemporaries, ultimately locating her work within a feminine art rather than an Impressionist work.

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<sup>39</sup> Carter, Curtis, *Children in Art: A Century of Change*, Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Patrick and Beatrice Haggerty Museum of Art, 1999. P.16.

Cassatt's portrait *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair* (fig.3) demonstrates a clear understanding and even contempt for the social traditions surrounding the representation of children. Traditionally, portraits idealized the sitter, placing him or her in a surrounding that was complimentary to them physically as well as intellectually. In contrast, Cassatt's child is not presenting her social station, but rather depicting boredom. This is not to say that the little girl in Cassatt's work is mindless, but she is bored, uninterested and unengaged to an extent that becomes a witty play of the perceived notions of upper-class femininity.

The use of the dog plays a dual role, as both a reference to previous work as well as link to the social condition of child portraiture.<sup>40</sup> As Anne Higonnet explains that the genre painting that surrounded child portraiture at the time represented five basic scenes: (1) children dress-up in costumes or play clothes; (2) children depicted with animals or pets, (3) children as cupids, angels, or angel cupid hybrids, (4) mothers and babies, and (5) children imitating their predetermined role of society, or gender role. Cassatt's portrait therefore belongs within the second category—children depicted with animals or pets. Even though this young girl is placed within the company of her dog, she does not engage with the animal. This disengaged reaction to one another plays on the caricature nature of depicting boredom. Traditionally, children that were represented with their animals were depicted with an excitement or playful nature in mind. For example, Alfred De Dreux's *Innocence Between Two Thieves* (1859)(fig. 13), presents a little girl interacting with her dogs. She sits on a large white dog eating some kind of treat. As a playful gesture or humor found in the innocence of the painting, the white dog she sits on,

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<sup>40</sup> This "reference to previous work" will be discussed at length in Chapter three.

as well as a black dog to the left, eye her snack. The scene presented to the viewer is a playful notion of a little girl's interaction with her pets. Unlike Dreux's work, Cassatt represents a child that finds no joy with her pet.

The juxtaposition of the little girls matching socks and exposed petticoat further demonstrate Cassatt's play with expected social conventions. Cassatt makes a conscious decision to represent the little girl's matching socks and dress, as indicating her upper-class attention to presentation. Ironically, the girl's elegant clothing and presentation of social class is undermined by her pose and the exposure of her undergarments. The irony here, being that great care had gone into dressing this girl in order to create an image that would reflect her high status and good upbringing. Cassatt turns this notion of the social "image" upside down by representing the girl in a socially unacceptable manner, and in reality how the little girl most likely was.

Cassatt's work *Little Girl in Blue Chair* cultivates and culminates her use of wit as an act of perception. The overall ironic and witty commentary presented in this portrait stems from the realization that the viewer is presented with an unexpected view of reality. At first glance the viewer's impression rationalizes that this little girl is inside a private setting, an intimate space that allows for her "unladylike" presentation. With first impressions the viewer can take this as an intimate portrait between a mother and her child. However, after taking in the background, the viewer is soon introduced to a paradox. The background of the portrait shows an oversized couch along with another chair rather awkwardly posed in relation to the seated figures. The expansive room includes little adornment. No tables are present and no references to a living space are provided. The absence of these items situates this work into a more conceptual



contemplation of the composition. By disassociating the perceived notions of where the girl is to the questionable reality the viewer is placed in a kind of limbo between the real and the perceived. This play with foreground and background ambiguities can also be seen the work of Degas and Manet, two of Cassatt's male contemporaries and friends.

In nineteenth century France, especially within the Impressionist movement, male artists often thought of themselves as flâneurs; Degas and Manet were no exception. As Robert Herbert and Clark elaborate, male intellectuals separated themselves from the spectacle of modern life and prided themselves on their keen "acts of perception." Importantly, these acts of perception were associated with the practices of social wit. One of the most outstanding characteristics of the flâneur is his lack of participation within the spectacle and even use of wit and perception as a critique of that spectacle of modern society.<sup>41</sup> The flâneur was an outside observer of modern society; he wore fashionable attire, strolled the city, read all the current events and was well read in classical traditions, and his wit was unrivaled. The common representation of the flâneur also asserts itself within personification of the dandy, which in turn directly relates back to his use of wit and the way in which he seemed to see himself within the modern spectacle.<sup>42</sup> By cultivating the acts of perception, the flâneur separated himself into two entities, one that

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<sup>41</sup> The spectacle that I am referencing here is from the definition T.J. Clark introduces in his book *The Painting of Modern Life* (1984). In which he defines as the modern day "practices" and participation in modern society.

<sup>42</sup> The inclusion of the dandy within the characteristic classification of the flâneur seems, to me, a contradiction. The flâneur prided himself on how he was separated and really "above" the modern spectacle and modern society, yet it is this classification that truly characterizes what the flâneur was, not through its simple definition as a man that was excessively concerned with his appearance, but with the unidentified contraction of such statements. If the flâneur was truly separate from the spectacle why then would he be concerned with such things as fashionable clothing, intellectual criticism on events that you pride yourself on not participating.

was within the present state (as an inevitable member/ participant of the modern spectacle) and one that was *outside* his present state. This “outside” presence was revealed in his keen abilities of observation. This definition of the flâneurs’ acts of perception is synonymous with Candace Lang’s notions of the “ironic project”:  
“to split oneself in two to be at once oneself and another, to know oneself through dispassionate, impassive observation.”<sup>43</sup> Lang is associating irony with the idea that it is a detached “dispassionate, impassive observation.” This link between the irony and the art of observation further demonstrates how wit became associated with the act of perception..

Even though the definition of the flâneur is strictly associated with men, his activities and otherwise modern perspective can also be seen in Cassatt’s *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair* (1878) (fig. 3). There is no word for a female who practiced the art of observation as the strictly male flâneur, but female participants in this form of modern society did exist.<sup>44</sup> While it was not appropriate for civilized women to stroll the city streets as a flâneur, she observed the modern spectacle *within* the walls of society. This kind of perceived modernity is how Cassatt most effectively associated within the concept of the flâneur.

This aspect of her work is important due to her constant involvement within a male dominated society and field. She would have had a daily encounter with this kind

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<sup>43</sup> Lang, Candace, *Irony/Humor: Critical Paradigms*, Baltimore and London; John Hopkins University Press, 1988. P.9.

<sup>44</sup> One of the most celebrated females that seemingly broke the barriers of the definitive male practice as a flâneur was Marie Bashkirtseff. An excellent source to look into for a further examination of her influence on this topic would be her journal published in 1913. A number of entries within this text also demonstrate a keen use of wit. See also Janet Wolff.

of social practice and would undoubtedly participate in these kinds of observational critiques of the modern spectacle. When analyzing her work of the *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair* a direct link to this kind of observational quality is most definitely apparent. By taking into account the witty undertones presented within this work, a clear distinction of Cassatt as a critic and observer becomes unmistakably clear.

Cassatt's *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair* plays within the notions of child portraiture while upending them. By representing a bored, unengaged, elite young "lady" Cassatt challenges the way in which children have been traditionally depicted as playful, well-dressed (with the proper maintenance), and above all, innocent. On the other hand, Cassatt employs the traditional iconography of a good genre painting of children by depicting a young, idealized upper-class girl with her dog. Yet, by altering the girl's posture and overall presentation, this work acts as a visual and social critique. This characteristic of working within the confines of social tradition in order to present a social assessment through wit fundamentally characterizes Cassatt's oeuvre.

## CHAPTER 3:

### Cassatt the Impressionist

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there was a growing trend among artists to quote previous works, either to provide critique or to display admiration. pervious works. This *conversation* within art circles shows the art world as a functioning *community*. With the growing dissatisfaction of the French Academy and the traditional guidelines of the Salon, artists began to comment on well established traditions and artistic practices by quoting those traditions and techniques in their own works. Not unlike previous generations, the modern era sought to create an art form that better expressed the artistic manifesto. While the “manifesto” changed from generation to generation, group to group, the set idea was to create the “true form of art.” Through the nineteenth and twentieth century this ideal form of art was expressed through the representation of everyday life. Whether one looked at the progression of Courbet’s work or that of Manet, or even for our sake, that of Cassatt, the modern world was presented to the viewer as a perceived reality. Each representation grew from a previous work and was grounded in the observed non-sentimental reality of the artist.

For example, Courbet critiqued the traditional notions of academic subject hierarchies in his representations of modern life. Traditionally, the size of the painting demonstrated the importance of the subject matter. Historical paintings, or works that represented historical subject matter, were considered at the top of this scale with the largest accepted canvas size, while genre painting, or subject matter that glorified

everyday peasant life (usually) was placed at the lowest and smallest end of the spectrum. Rather than presenting everyday life as a genre painting or a small insignificant representation of a romanticized norm, Courbet magnified the realities of the lower class and presented them with the importance of historical significance through their large size. Take for example, Courbet's *Stone Breakers* (1849) (fig. 15). By rendering this work at the colossal size of 5.41 by 8.43 feet, Courbet took the traditional connotations of significance and changed them, elevating everyday life and the lower class to the rank of history paintings. This work (both within the size of the painting as well as the subject matter) quotes past practices in order to present a new representation of the artists "manifesto": the reality of life should be at the heart of artistic significance.

The ironic use of tradition to critique academic art and the culture it cultivated is magnified through Manet's subject matter. Manet becomes a key figure when discussing the works of Cassatt. In the beginning of her career, Cassatt struggled with the politics of the Salon, judging the institution harshly for its subjective qualifications and the role of a student's mentor, jokingly referring to it as Paris' "moral depravement."<sup>45</sup> Her intellectual stimulus only truly began to develop when she moved to the countryside of Paris only after a year within the academic system of the Salon. For the next two years Cassatt and Eliza Haldeman move from small village to small village on the outskirts of Parisian life. Cassatt became enamored with the heroic everyday life of these country peasants. There is no physical evidence for these early works other than the written references in letters and correspondence. Yet, through letters we see a developing interest in modern life coming from Cassatt. It is then no surprise that in late May of 1868 that

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<sup>45</sup> Mathews, Nancy Mowll, *Cassatt and her Circle: Selected Letters*, New York; Abbeville Press, 1984.p.38

Cassatt begins her work under Thomas Couture. This hastened move to the Paris countryside is ironically set directly following her inclusion in the 1868 Salon exhibition. The Salon was a problematic issue for many artists practicing at this time in France. It gave them an authoritative recognition that their careers needed while an acceptance into an exhibition provided them with a great ego boost. Artists wrestled with working in the academic mode while trying to expand into more intellectual avenues as can be seen within Cassatt's oeuvre as well as such artists as Manet. While these artists distained the Salon they were drawn to its authoritative voice and continued to submit paintings in response to their overwhelming need for praise and acceptance or validation. While Haldeman and Cassatt both celebrated their acceptance within the Salon, it was overshadowed by what they considered a more lenient jury that year. The disdain for the Salon and its practices only grew for Cassatt perhaps pushing her to a more independent style as seen through the work of Thomas Couture (while at the same time furthering her interest in the representations of modern life). Thomas Couture also mentored Edouard Manet. These are the connections that begin our interest in the influence of Manet and are only solidified by Cassatt's explained reaction to her invitation to exhibit with the Impressionists in 1877 to her biographer Achille Segard:

Degas asked me not to send to the Salon again but to exhibit instead with his friends in the Impressionist group. I accepted with joy. Finally I could work with an absolute independence without being concerned with the ultimate opinion of a jury. I already knew who my true masters were. I admired Manet, Courbet, and Degas. I hated conventional art. I began to live...<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Segard, Achille, *Un peintre des enfants et des mères, Mary Cassatt*, Paris; P. Ollendorff, 1913.p.7-8.

This early exclamations of whom she admired led her in an entirely new direction. While it is true that the social spheres limited her subject matter to interiors it is not the sole characteristic of her work, and not necessarily an entirely truthful categorization.

As early as 1868, Cassatt pulls away from the academic world and turns to a more radical representational mode. This coupled with the declaration that she admired some of the most radical figures in Modern art and the avant-garde--Manet, Courbet, and Degas--shows a distinct link between her work and what these artists had been doing at this time. Her artistic intentions become clearer when we see her paintings as conversations with those of her colleagues.

The most frequently attributed influence on Cassatt is, understandably, Edgar Degas. He was the first to approach Cassatt and was her closet confidant in the years that followed.<sup>47</sup> His stylistic rendering of sharply cropped paintings and vast backgrounds link the two artists stylistically. However, these are not the only formal similarities between the two artists. For example, *L'Étoile* (1876-77) (fig.16) demonstrates the Degas' preoccupation with life behind the stage. While he presents the dancing figure in the center of the canvas, the subject matter lies in his haunting figures that lurk behind the curtains. These half appropriated figures hide their identity, yet they create a sense of importance within the compositional plain through this mysterious presence. Like Degas, Cassatt draws from the social connotations of the public setting, rather than presenting the work of art on stage, the true art form is found within the setting around them; the

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<sup>47</sup> These connections can be most notably seen in the year of 1879, after the last Impressionist Exhibition. Newspapers and critics saw Degas and Cassatt as the fundamental block of the Impressionist group, while at the same time these two were somewhat of the glue that held the group together through numerous tribulations.

spectacle of the theatre. The expansive background as well as the ambiguity of its presence is what heightened Degas and Cassatt's references to the social norms as they are seen within the spectacle of modern life. By placing the viewer within an unfamiliar representation of a familiar setting, these artists call on the viewer's perceptions to interpret the space found within the work as an altered ideal.

Cassatt's "loge series" (as I will reference it) spanned from 1877-1881, with most of the works created during 1879. Within this series the modern spectacle of the theatre is reflected through the inclusion and exclusion of a mirror. As seen in figures 17-28 there is a distinct split in regards to how these figures are presented to the viewer. This configuration of subject matter can also be tied to the inclusion and exclusion of a mirror. For example, Cassatt does not include a mirror in: *At the Opera* (1877), *A Corner of the Loge* (1879), *Theatre* (1879), *At the Performance* (1879), as well as *At the Theatre* (1879-80). While she includes a mirror behind the sitter in: *At the Theatre* (1878-79), *Woman in a Loge* (1878-79), *At the Theatre* (1879), *Two young Ladies in a Loge Facing Right* (1879-80), *Woman at the Theatre* (1879-80), *Woman in a Loge* (1881-82)(pastel) and *Woman in a Loge* (1881-82)(oil) all include a mirror behind the sitters (a red arrow indicates the mirror in the image reference section). A juxtaposition of these images points to the ways in which women actively or passively participate in the modern spectacle. The works that include the mirror represent the women as participants within the spectacle. They are fashionably dressed and well engaged within the setting and social connotation and expectations of the loge. These women are represented as presenting themselves to the viewer by depicting them in a full front position and without any facial blocks such as opera glasses or fans. This means that the subjects are aware of



their objecthood. They are presented to the viewers as well as the “theatre goers” as women to be observed. By including the mirror Cassatt allows the viewer to see the women “in the round” and included the beholder in a more general critique of the audience who looks at her as an object or spectacle in her own right. The reflection of the audience within the mirror reinforces the idea that this woman partakes in the modern spectacle. Her reflection is then mixed and included within the reflection of the audience, creating a cycle of viewing.

This image of the woman staunchly opposes the representations that do not include a mirror. Unlike the women that are depicted with a mirror, the women who are not, demonstrate a detachment from the viewer as well as the spectacle itself. These women are presented in dark or conservative dress. They are turned in a  $\frac{3}{4}$  or profile position *away* from the viewer, and are actively engaged in looking. This final aspect of these women participating in the *act of looking* rather than *being looked at* draws a clear distinction between these two categories within the same series. As the women who are depicted *within* the spectacle, the women who Cassatt consciously represents without the accompaniment of a mirror are observers *of* the spectacle. This series embodies the fundamental characteristic of a witty remark; a juxtaposition of two separate entities in order to create a commentary and jest at the social structure of Parisian life.

Cassatt’s investigation into this specific critique of what began with *The Loge* or *At the Opera* (1877-78) (fig. 17). Similar to other continued works without a mirror, the woman is not adorned with fashionable clothes or accouterments, and she is turned away from the viewer. The presence of her opera glasses hinders a direct connection between viewer and subject. Here, Cassatt presents the woman practicing the act of perception or

observational past-time of the flâneur. Importantly, she is not only opposing the traditional sense of how women were represented within this social setting, artistically, but socially as well. In the place of the mirror, Cassatt introduces a witty remark on the social institution of the Opera setting by placing a male viewer in the background of the work. Rather than placing the mirror as a reflective mechanism of the nature of the social event, Cassatt places the viewing man, almost falling out of his seat, as a witty statement of the social condition. While numerous feminist scholars, including Pollock, latch onto this work as a sole representation of Cassatt's commentary on the social practices of looking, the witty undertones of this painting have been overlooked. Rather than simply categorizing this work as a personification of the male audience member being the object of the gaze, it can also be a presentation of an enthusiastic male viewer that has lost all sense of good-taste by falling over himself to see this woman. Cassatt is playing with the ideals of the uncivilized within a civilized space. Much like Degas, Cassatt is drawing attention to the "behind the stage" realities of the opera but doing so in a witty remark towards the male participant. Cassatt's intense work within this subject can also be seen as an artistic *conversation* between herself and Renoir.

In 1874, Renior's contribution to the first Impressionist exhibition was his *The Loge* (1874) (fig.29). This work likely served as the catalyst for Cassatt's later works. It presents the female sitter as a knowing participant in the act of being observed. She is rendered as if there is an ease of presentation.<sup>48</sup> While Cassatt's female figure is presented with, not necessarily a naivete, but with an air of indifference. It would be easy and within the constructed scholarship to proclaim that this work presents a feminist

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<sup>48</sup> Pollock, Griselda, *Vision and Difference*, London and New York; Routledge, 1988.p.57.

agenda to its viewers and ultimately comments on the role of women in the public sphere, yet, it is this commentary that Cassatt creates between Renoir's rendering of this subject and her own that suggests a witty play of observation. Rather than placing this work within the limiting category of "feminist" art, it is much more openly placed within the concept of conversation.

This aspect is clearly delineated by a later work by Renoir, titled *The First Outing* (1875-1876 (fig.30)). This work not only relates more closely to Cassatt's first rendering of the subject matter in time (*The First Outing* 1875-76, *The Loge* 1877-78), but also in the compositional structure. Both women are depicted in all black, placed on the right side of the painting, surrounded by balconies, and while intently looking forward. In both, the background includes a male figure looking up at the young girl (fig. 31). While Renoir's representational style verges on abstraction, the eyes of the male figure have been distinctly rendered. The main structure of this individual's face has been given more detail, while not much, than the other surrounding people. Even within these observations and similarities, that fact that Renoir had followed his previous *Loge* setting with this one that creates an undeniable conversation through Cassatt's work. The women presented within Renoir's painting and Cassatt's are still subjectively different. Cassatt's women that are more directly connected to Renoir's *The First Outing* (the works that do not include a mirror) are not presented as naïve or unaware of their presentation like Renoir's. But rather, they are presented as the female manifestation of the flâneur. However, it is the acknowledgment of Renoir's juxtaposition that creates the reality of Cassatt's quotation or expansion of this theme.

In addition to Renoir, the prominent use of the mirror in Cassatt's Loge series also introduces a two-way "conversation" between Manet and Cassatt. This connection between the two Impressionists starts early in Cassatt's career and is, what I will argue, the most important influence rather than Degas. Cassatt most frequently reacted to Manet while displaying the most pronounced instances of her rendering of wit in these conversations. After Cassatt's acceptance into the Impressionist group she started a rather ambitious work that demonstrates her excitement of the time. In her work *Little Girl in Blue Armchair* (1878) (fig. 3) she takes on a number of thematic representations that can be connected to an energetic need to establish herself within the already recognized canon of the Impressionists.

By taking apart the apparent humorous undertones within this work, an entirely new point of view regarding Cassatt opens up. By detaching the limited view of socially gendered spheres a more in tuned artist emerges, one that is directly associating her work within the Impressionist canon of her male contemporaries, most notably within this work: Manet. This comparison goes much deeper and alludes to Cassatt's admiration for Manet and disdain for traditional artistic practices. Days before the opening of the 1873 Salon des Refusés, friend and colleague Emily Sartain wrote to John Sartain that Cassatt "is entirely too slashing,--snubs all modern Art,--disdains the salon pictures of Cabanel Bonnat and all the names we are used to revere."<sup>49</sup>

Many of the techniques used within Manet's works, including *Luncheon on the Grass* (1863) (fig.32) and *Olympia* (1863) (fig. 12), to critique academic art traditions can

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<sup>49</sup> Nancy Mowll Mathews ed., *Cassatt and her Circle: Selected Letters*, [New York; Abbeville Press, 1984]: 118.

also be seen in Cassatt's work. Most striking is the use of modeling. As in both Manet's works *Olympia* and *Luncheon on the Grass*, Cassatt implements an odd use of modeling in *Girl in the Blue Armchair* as seen in figure 4. The girl's legs are oddly detailed in a manner that suggests both a dirty surface and a delicate rendering of three dimensionality (fig.4). This aspect juxtaposed to the flatness of her arms, specifically the left, reiterate Manet's use of conflicting representations of the form as a painted surface.

A less controversial inclusion is Cassatt's dog in the adjacent left side of the canvas. Scholar Harriett Scott Chessman argues that the dog is, in fact, serving as a kind of signature of Cassatt's, taking into account the inclusion of the dog in a number of paintings as well as it being situated directly above her signature.<sup>50</sup> I would add that the inclusion of the dog in such a central position within the work may also be a quotation of Manet's work as well as the overall history of animals in the art historical cannon. Manet uses his surprised cat in *Olympia* (fig. 12) as a kind of commentary to the traditional practices as, I would suggest, Cassatt is doing here.<sup>51</sup> Unlike the cat, Cassatt's dog is sleeping, which reiterates the humorous undertones of the little girl's boredom. As explained earlier, the piece itself has little in regards to additional adornment and figures; the painting is almost entirely made up of these two figures and the vast absorbent

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<sup>50</sup> Harriett Scott Chessman, "Mary Cassatt and the Maternal Body," in *American Iconology: New Approaches to Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature*, [New Haven and London; Yale University Press, 1993]: 250. Chessman also draws a connection to Manet through the "erotic connotations" of the little girl's exposed legs and *Olympia*. This view of the female child is understandable given the change in scholarship and overall presentation of children in this time period, yet to allow this to become an *erotic* portrait seems to be out of touch with Cassatt's oeuvre. If this route was to be taken I would argue that the "erotic" nature of this image would rather be a form of commentary on the contemporary scholarship of child imagery rather than Cassatt participating within that scholarship.

<sup>51</sup> It may also be plausible that Cassatt is drawing the connection of Manet's work to Titian by then replacing the cat with the original concept of the dog. Which, in fact, the dog in Titian's work is sleeping.

background of blue space. By placing this dog in a prominent position within the compositional plane, while further emphasizing its presence by turning his chair so that it creates a direct relationship to the little girl, Cassatt establishes the dog as a central figure in its own right.

Much like the male figure in Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass* (fig.32), the little girl's expression is playing with the perceived notions of how a girl should be represented. This play with traditionally anticipated norms, as alluded to earlier, can also be seen in Manet's work. The male figure is presented to the viewer in a kind of dazed like state, withdrawn and unrelated to his fellow sitters. While a male figure has often been represented as unengaged, it was most commonly interpreted as a kind of intellectual disconnect, whereas in this work the male figure is seemingly *mindless*.

Like Manet, Cassatt plays with the viewer's expectations and the way in which reality is being quoted and questionably reiterated to the viewer. The severe cropping and cut off photographic quality directly quotes Degas' influence and can even be attributed to his involvement in the completion of this work.<sup>52</sup> The awkward relation presented between the figures and the setting can also be seen in Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass* (fig. 32). The figures in Manet's piece have almost no relation to the space they occupy through their exaggerated and varied scale and perspective. While the perspective is not as exaggerated in Cassatt's work there is still a strong disconnect between the perspective line that accentuates the background and the directional presentation of the figure to the viewer (fig. 5). The vast vanishing point creates a confused three-dimensional space.

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<sup>52</sup> As Cassatt states in a letter to Ambroise Vollard (French art dealer) that: "I had done the child in the armchair, and he [Degas] found that to be good and advised me on the background, *he even worked on the background.*" Italics are not mine but Cassatt's. This excerpt can be found in Mathews 281.

The painted surface, therefore, breaks down into three separate planes: (1) the viewer, (2) the little girl, and (3) the expansive background. By creating three distinct spaces within the work, the viewer is presented with a confused representation of a tangible reality.

The connection between the little girl in the foreground with the ambiguous background lacks any type of narrative leaving the viewer with no real grasp of the scene presented.

This separation of recognizable space or its relationship to the viewer as a painted surface can, again, be directly linked to Manet, specifically, *Luncheon on the Grass*. In Manet's work, the figures placed in the foreground have no recognizable relation to the woman in the background or the wooded setting around them. The wooded surrounding gives no more understanding to the work other than the distinction between an interior space versus an exterior. The scale between each section of Manet's work defines the varied range in scale overall. The female figure in the background is represented in such an exaggerated scale that any perception of real space or accurately functioning perspective is lost. The viewer is unable to re-create a reality in which this space would exist. By dividing the painted surface into three distinct areas, the viewer is forced to recognize the work as a painted surface. Cassatt's inclusion of this commentary and quotation of Manet's stylistic representation place her rendering of a little girl in a blue armchair into a witty conversation with three-dimensional space that critiques the social ideal of girlhood and traditional artistic practices.

Cassatt's use of abrasive brush strokes and color reiterate her use of the unexpected as an ironic commentary of perceptions of "feminine" art. The Impressionists prided themselves on the use of bright colors and spontaneity of their brushstrokes, but Cassatt uses these aspirations as a much more exaggerated treatment.

The vibrant blue of the armchair, as well as the rest of the furniture accompanied by the blue haze, as depicted throughout the background, (representing an atmospheric quality often found in landscape paintings) overwhelms the color palette. A small shading of blue also surrounds the eyes of the little girl, intensifying the viewer's relation to the sheer "blueness" of the canvas. By exaggerating the color, Cassatt disorients the viewer even further. This abrasive quality follows through in her brushstroke as well. The strong swipes of color in order to depict flowers not only ironically contradicts the perceived idea of a woman's hand in painting, but also provides an amusing commentary in relation to the quality and presence of the flowers (fig. 6). The female artist was believed to have a soft feminine brushstroke that ultimately identified her sex when otherwise one could not.<sup>53</sup> By directly opposing that traditional representation, Cassatt situates herself within Impressionism as an active participant rather than an idol female member. The simple irony that can be found in this identification is seen through the non-risible juxtaposition between Cassatt's femininity and her masculine force of painterly brushstrokes.

Through the previous examples a sound commentary on artistic practices can be ascertained through a closer look at Cassatt's wit, yet the fact that this conservation was reciprocated solidifies Cassatt as an active participant in her artistic community. Here we

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<sup>53</sup> Berthe Morisot is another woman who, even more so, demonstrated this harsh and abrasive brushstroke. This may be a reference to her influence as well. These formless flowers also seem to be commenting on the traditional artistic practices for women. It was a widely accepted education for women during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century to practice painting flowers on both valuable china as well as canvas. It was a sign of their high status cultivation of education. Much like the American sampler, a woman's intelligence and, to some extent, worth, could be calculated by how well she rendered her "female art". By Cassatt taking these flowers to an almost abstract mannerism, she is harshly contrasting the traditional connotations of the flower not only through her brushstrokes, but through the rendering of them as a whole.



will return to Cassatt's renderings of the Loge. This series of works break the mold for Cassatt in a number of ways. While, as I have mentioned before, it is entirely acceptable now to situate Cassatt's work within a gendered sphere, this series plays with the notions of a gendered space. The Loge was a public place for men and women to congregate, allowing Cassatt to become an observer of modern public life. Cassatt emphasizes this notion of the public sphere by reiterating its appearance for the viewer within the placement of the mirrors. Almost every painting of the Loge includes a mirror. By doing this it allows Cassatt to place the viewer within the setting as well as separate from it. Yet, the rendering of the audience as blurred and masked conveys them as a single entity—the spectacle. The mass identified as the audience through what Cassatt signifies, are nothing more than a cohesive bond of paint. This signified spectacle places the viewer outside of the action, allowing them to then take a position of observation. However, the roles of the sitters pose a problematic catalyst for modern ideals. While their presence imposes themselves onto the viewer they are also not actively engaging the viewer's attention. Here Manet takes these perceptions of the modern spectacle and expanding their disturbing potential in his 1881-82 *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (fig.33).

Cassatt begins her Loge series as early as 1877 but turns away from the subject by 1880-81, after which her domestic scenes overwhelm her subject matter. It could be speculated that the death of her sister Lydia in early 1882 may have urged Cassatt to invert her subject matter. Leading up to this moment, a growing relationship between Manet and Cassatt can be seen through her letters home to her brother Alexander (Aleck) Cassatt. Mary Cassatt's class status imposed an emphasized burden on her involvement in the Impressionist group. The overall well being of her fellow members that were not

so “well off” fell on the responsibility of the more wealthy members such as Caillebotte and Cassatt. During hard times when their art was not being purchased at a high rate, Cassatt (as well as Caillebotte and a few other members) began to purchase their friends works while encouraging family members to do the same as well.<sup>54</sup> In a number of correspondences to Aleck, Mary specifically encouraged him to buy Manet’s works.<sup>55</sup>

Through both the growth of their friendship from acquaintances to colleges as well as the final installment of Cassatt Loge series, Manet could have very well been creating homage to Cassatt in his *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1881-82)(fig.33). This connection between Manet and his *Bar at the Folie-Bergere* has been well documented and illustrated by both art historians Judith Barter and Griselda Pollock.<sup>56</sup> While one of the most famous mirror depictions of the nineteenth century, the coincidences seem fitting. As both Barter and Pollock point out, Manet included a small woman in the lower left side that holds a pair of opera glasses dressed in all black. While the nature of this figure understood as a participant within the modern spectacle the question of her more detailed rendering problematizes her significance. While still painted in a sketch-like brushstroke, we are able to make out even the smallest of details such as her lips, the opera glasses, as well as a somewhat blurred rendering of her dress. This figure could

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<sup>54</sup> This reliance on Cassatt’s wealth also became a tension within the group as well. She began to question her support within the group as whether she was a member or a financial supporter.

<sup>55</sup> Mary Cassatt also urged him frequently to buy Degas’ work of the horse races since, especially within the later years, Aleck began to show a growing interest in the races himself.

<sup>56</sup> Pollock however, has been accused by Nancy Mowll Mathews of not providing the proper acknowledgment to the scholar that have already established this idea, which I believe she is refereeing Barter.

very well be a form of homage to Cassatt and her rendering of the theatre during this time period, thus creating a witty conversation between these two artists.

By developing specific quotations of her work, we are able to see a more distinct play with her contemporaries. This “play” with conversation can then be identified as a witty remark or contemplation of what is going on in the overall art world. Like a socially successful conversation between two individuals, often exemplified by ones use of wit, these artistic conversations are not unlike their social counterparts. Cassatt’s keen cultivation of wit in correspondence to the figures around her broaden the perceived notions of who she was as an artist as well as an individual. Cassatt not only presents a females perspective of social life through the limited gaze of her gendered sphere, but rather uses her “sphere” as a initial façade for greater commentaries on the modern perception of art and artistic practices through her cultivation of social wit.

## CONCLUSION

### Fractured Scholarship

It has become common practice when dealing with Cassatt's oeuvre to focus mainly on the early works. This phenomenon has been identified by a number of art historians including Mathews. Yet, little has been done in order to rectify this nuance. Some, like Mathews, blame this on the fact that the later works are harder to categorize into handy little sections or thematic references. However, it is my contention that if one were to expand what has been illustrated here through Cassatt's rendering of wit, one would see that a continuation of this aspect would be evident. Some suggest that her work becomes inevitably sentimental in the rendering of maternity and the mother-and-child works due to the death of Lydia and the sudden immersion of family within Cassatt's home of nieces and nephews. Nevertheless, if this predisposed notion is excluded from one's reading and then placed again in the previous form of reference, wit, an entirely new conclusion can be seen in her later works.

Within these years Cassatt continues to place her work in the contemporary practice of art by reacting to Puvis and Denis, adding commentary on Symbolism and displaying an admiration for Japanese prints. Her wit remains intact and its presence reinforces Cassatt's freedom from the limiting category of a "female" artist. It may even be argued that like Mathews explained earlier, the mask of what she was expected to be and what she was may be seen in her mother and child "sentimentality" as a mask for her intellectually bound intentions.

During the 1880 through the turn of the century, a few artists began to investigate the notions of Symbolism and how the literary components could translate into the visual. Taking cues from such poets as Baudelaire and Mallarmé, as well as literary novelists such as Joris-Karl Huysmans, artists began to venture into the realm of Symbolism as a visual artistic movement. Cassatt's first recorded interaction with the Symbolists was in the 1886 Impressionist exhibition. In addition to the usual members exhibited, the program had expanded to include such figures as George Seurat, Paul Gauguin, and Odilon Redon.<sup>57</sup> The significance of there exhibition in this context demonstrates the strong tension between Impressionism and Symbolism. At this time Seurat, Gauguin, and Redon were seen as practicing within the Impressionist mode, yet their intellectual pre-occupation with the symbolic expression of reality ultimately separated them from Impressionism. They were later categorized as some of the leading figures within Symbolism. Although Cassatt was far from ever proclaiming herself as a Symbolist, her relationship with this group of artists was non-the-less influential.<sup>58</sup> Cassatt's growing interest and connection with the Symbolists would be nothing less than expected, given her draw to the Impressionists. Symbolism was actually seen as a growth out of Impressionism. While still practicing within the Impressionist style, Cassatt remains an active member in the artistic world around her through the continued interactions and

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<sup>57</sup> Barter, Judith, *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman*, New York: Art Institute of Chicago in Association with H.N. Abrams, 1998.p.85.

<sup>58</sup> As Barter pointes out, Cassatt was introduced to Mallarmé as early as 1888 through their mutual friend, Berthe Morisot. Barter also notes that Mallarmé admired Cassatt's work as demonstrated in a letter to Edmond Deman April 14, 1889 inviting Cassatt to contribute an illustration to his publication *Pages*. (Batre, pg.104, note 113.) It has also been noted that Cassatt was admired by the well known Symbolist critic Albert Aurier as well as Paul Gauguin. Gauguin had even written to his wife telling her that if they were in need of money that she was permitted to sell their drawings by Degas, but not their Manet or Cassatt (see Barter note 115).

conversations presented within her oeuvre. In numerous instances, Cassatt engages in a witty play of subject matter with Puvis de Chavanne.<sup>59</sup>

As I started this investigation with Cassatt's mural for the Women's Building in Chicago, I see it fitting to end by returning to it. As I stated earlier, the problems with beginning one's look at Cassatt's oeuvre through the scope of her *Modern Woman* (fig.1) mural is that it does not encapsulate her work as a keystone of her artistic intension, but rather as a reinforcing proclamation of what her later works have set out to conquer. It is this work that seems to be the proclaimed division between her late work and her early renderings. Yet, if seen through the eyes of her rendering of wit as well as her witty "conversations" with her contemporaries, this infamous mural appears as an artist's continual investigation into modern practices of art.

Cassatt's *Modern Woman* depicts ten women within the center panel and three in each of the flanking sections. The first section to the left illustrates three young women chasing after a flying nude figure perceived as a baby. The background within this panel, as well as the far right panel, encompasses almost the entire depth of field within each representation. The figures portrayed within each foreground are almost lost to the expansive and barren background of deep meadow and grass. The figures are almost entirely overshadowed by the background especially when juxtaposed to the central panel and its heavily detailed foreground and well-established background. While it can be noticed that the horizon line is the connecting motif through the sectioned space, it becomes somewhat illusionistic within the side panels. The lack of space taken up by the

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<sup>59</sup> Cassatt's later works also show an infatuation with Japanese prints and Japonisme, like many of the Symbolists. Their interest in the simple equation of line and color intrigued the symbolic nature of it's representation and possibilities.

figures in comparison to the space given to the background is unproportional, and thus undoubtedly calling on Cassatt's influence by Degas. Yet, this play with ones perceived notions of space also calls attention to the main panel, positioning it as the focal point.

The main panel situates ten women in a dense orchard picking fruit, more specifically, apples. The figures are placed within three main compositional groupings that are depicted themselves as triangular configurations. Each grouping of women call on a three point triangle with one woman as the apex and two other women as equally subordinate points. The figures are solid in their rendering, yet, unconscious of their placement. They seem to interact within their organized group by passing fruit to one another (the passer of the fruit is mainly understood as the woman presented in the apex of each groups triangle), yet, there is no compositional connection between the groups themselves. Much like the mural as a whole, the sectioned panels communicate within their confined area of representation, yet do not interact with the separating areas. This separation is continued within the last panel. The panel farthest to the right depicts (again) three women entertaining themselves through music and dance. As stated earlier, the horizon line is mimicked within this panel as in the previous two as well. Yet, like the first panel, its depth is somewhat disorienting in relation to the figures as well as the central panel.

These figures represented within Cassatt's *Modern Woman* are the first striking resemblance to Puvis' *Inter Arts et Naturam* (1890) (fig.34). Like many of Puvis' murals his figures are grounded in their separated narratives rather than the compositional narrative as a whole. While the groupings in his *Inter Arts et Naturam* do not demonstrate Cassatt's consistence of balance (referencing her repetition of the number

three), they do demonstrate a sharp disconnect from one another as well as illustrating a compositional narrative that can be followed throughout the work. Beginning with his central figure, a woman presumably a mother, holds her child up in order to help him reach a piece of fruit from the tree. Then to the left of that figure two men seem to be digging a ditch. Continuing to the left, a group of three converse about what looks to be a flower, while a servant is placed directly behind them carrying a tray of pots (seemingly unassociated with the group in front of him). Then Puvis places a haunting lone figure to the far left leering in the edges of his canvas. This separation of the compositional plane as well as the general representation of figures is unmistakable within Cassatt's rendering of the *Modern Woman* mural.

The timeframe that surrounds these two works also provide a convincing biography of sequences. Cassatt was not invited to participate within the fair at the Women's Building until late 1889, given their slow reaction in selecting a second artist for the south tympanum. Then in 1890, Puvis exhibited his *Inter Arts et Naturam* at the Musée des beaux-arts, Rouen. As Barter points out, this location was only ten miles from Cassatt's residence at Bachivillers. Cassatt was well-known for frequently visiting local museums and galleries continually absorbing the practices and techniques of her contemporary artists. Cassatt's mural was finished in 1893 and hung opposite to Mary MacMonnies' *Primitive Woman* (fig.2) that likewise quoted Puvis' *Summer* (fig.36) mural.

This connection was first brought to light in Barter's essay *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman* and again, like Manet, both of these individuals have a common thread with Thomas Courture. Yet, it is Puvis' Symbolist ideals and technical renderings that can be



seen in Cassatt's quotations of him. The most notable of these representations are demonstrated in her *Modern Woman* mural (1892-93) (specifically the center panel) (fig.1) compared to Puvis' *Inter Arts et Naturam* (1890) (fig.34). Compositionally, the figures are arranged in a somewhat organized yet, speratic manner, which can be identified as a common Puvis composition, while the allegorical subject matter of women picking the fruit of knowledge is a fundamental Symbolist ideal.<sup>60</sup> Cassatt then takes this motif and magnifies its witty undertones by multiplying the presence of woman within this "garden" and placing them at the apex of the world of knowledge. Throughout history women have been visually associated with the garden of Eden and the betrayal of Eve. Seen as the perpetuating figure of shame, Eve's womanhood and disobedience has been personified onto the notion of all women. The visual iconographic cue of a woman in a garden can ultimately be tied to such readings of a female figure. Yet, Cassatt juxtapositions it to the social reality by reiterating that the fruit in which Eve partook was, in fact, from the tree of knowledge. Within each triangle (as seen in the central panel of the mural) a woman is placed at the apex of its composition in order to pass the knowledge to the younger generation. By placing the all female cast as the first recipients of knowledge, Cassatt creates a witty remark to modern social concepts of female and male intellectual perceptions. The central figures of Puvis work is again reiterated within another Cassatt painting in *Child Picking Fruit* (1893) (fig. 35).

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<sup>60</sup> I may not say that Cassatt has crossed over from Impressionism to Symbolism, yet I would argue so much as to the fact that this shows a clear awareness to what is happening within the other artistic movements that are surrounding her during this period. Including the role in which Japanese prints made on Cassatt as well.

The connection between these two works, Cassatt's *Modern Woman* as well as *Child Picking Fruit*, were both finished in 1893, seemingly suggesting their relation as one being a study for the other. Yet, it is Cassatt's continued conversation with Puvis that can help suggest otherwise. Three years after Cassatt's completion of *Modern Woman*, Puvis' influence can be seen again in her *Maternal Caress* (1896) (fig.14). Cassatt presents a woman and child (presumably a mother and child) within a closely cropped portrait. At the center of this work Cassatt places the hands of these two figures. Unlike what the title may lead one to assume, these hands are in a rather aggressive relationship to one another. The mother's hand is firmly grasping the small child's arm, while the child's hand is firmly positioned on the mother's face creating deep impressions that cause the mother's cheeks to swell between the child's fingers. The mother's firm grasp is reiterated then in the placement of her other hand behind the child's body, further creating a tension between these two figures "embrace." The placement of the mother's right hand *over* the child's arm is the first inclination of an aggressive relationship. By placing the mother's hand on top of the child's arm a dominant role is presented to the viewer. The common understood tenderness between a mother and her child is subverted by the tension between control and aggression. This is not to say that this mother is being abusive, but rather this is a common depiction of a mother scolding her child for, most likely, hitting or being too ruff. Cassatt's witty remark is found within this context and the fundamental idea that women, likewise, little girls, were perceived to be gentle.

The aggressive connotation is further understood by placing it next to Puvis' *Summer* mural (1873) (fig. 36). Placed slightly off center, Puvis depicts, what can be

presumed to be a mother and child engaged in a similar embrace. While Cassatt's figures are highly enlarged and cropped to specific subject matter, Puvis demonstrates this same play with traditional notions of mother and child relationships. The mother is represented as taking a firm grasp of her child's arm in order to restrain them from what seem to be a kind of "fit" or outburst (perhaps in reaction to taking a bath). This authoritative gesture juxtaposed the gentle rendering of the presumed father, directly next to this women, holding a lamb for his sons to play or interact with creates a commentary on the traditional roles of the family; mother as gentle caregiver, and father as authoritative aggressor.

Cassatt's later works are no less involved and intellectually responsive as her early works. She continually questioned the social reality of her surroundings and took an observational stance on what was presented, not through sentimentality, but through a well thought out juxtaposition of perceived traditions. Cassatt's use of wit places her in a seat of power, much like the flâneur and his use of wit. It allows the "joke teller" to take authority of a subject so entirely that they are then able to pass judgment in the form of a witty remark or representation, in this case.<sup>61</sup> Through wit Cassatt is able to establish herself within the aristocratic irony of the flâneur. Cassatt's close knit relationship to the world of the flâneur would have predisposed this mentality directly or indirectly within her works. Through the identification of wit in Cassatt's work, we are able to place her "domestic" renderings into a realm much closer to her male counterparts. It is this use of

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<sup>61</sup> Hans Speier, "Wit and Politics: An Essay on Laughter and Power," in *The American Journal of Sociology*, [University of Chicago Press. 103:5 (1998): 1352-1401].

wit, in fact, that crosses the gender divide and allows Cassatt to become an active participant in the social network.

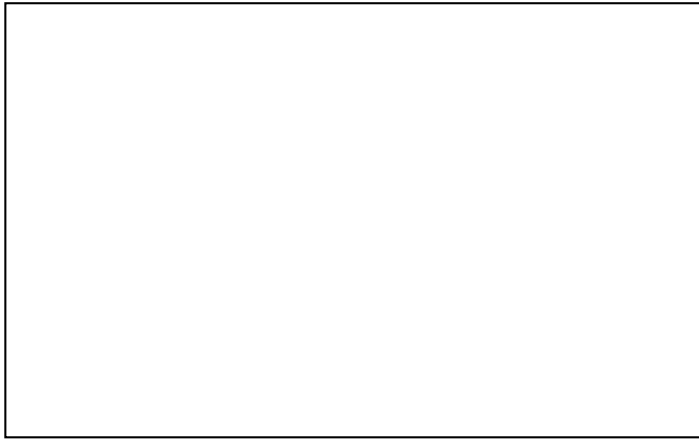


Table 1. Salon Exhibition of 1869. Reproduced in: Laura Morowitz and William Vaughan, Ed., *Artistic Brotherhoods in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, (Aldershot, England: Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000), page 3.

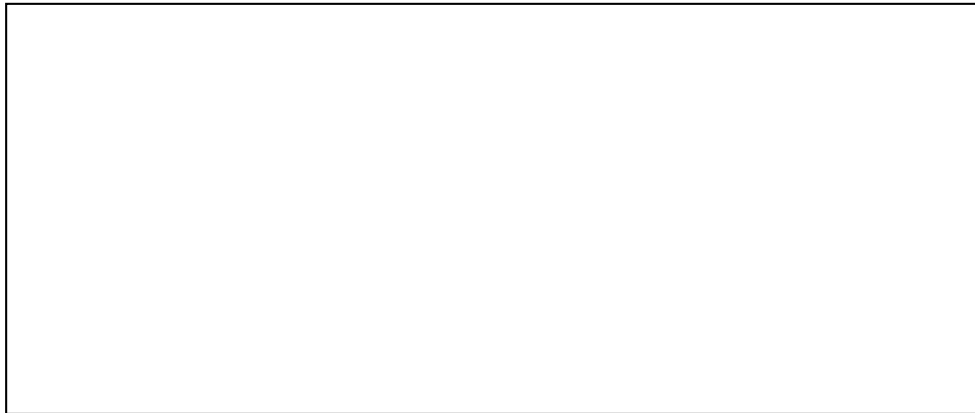


Figure 1. Mary Cassatt, *Modern Woman*, 1893. Destroyed. Reproduced in: Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women* (London : Thames & Hudson, 1998), page 40-41.



Figure 2. Mary Fairchild MacMonnie, *Primitive Woman*, 1893. Destroyed.  
Reproduced in: Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women*  
(London : Thames & Hudson, 1998), page 40-41.

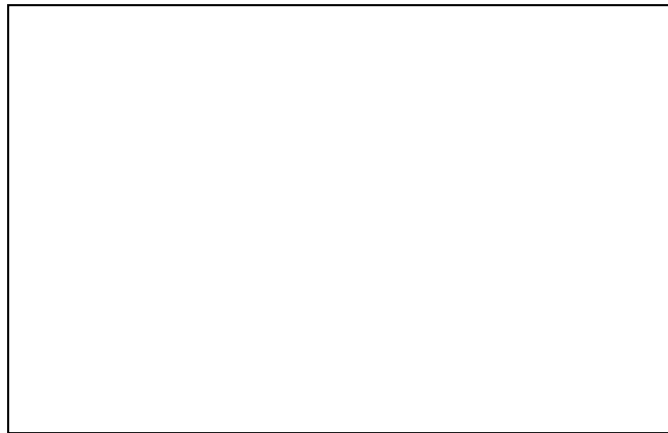


Figure 3. Mary Cassatt, *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair*, 1877-1878.  
Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art. Reproduced in: Griselda Pollock,  
*Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women* (London : Thames & Hudson, 1998),  
page 131..

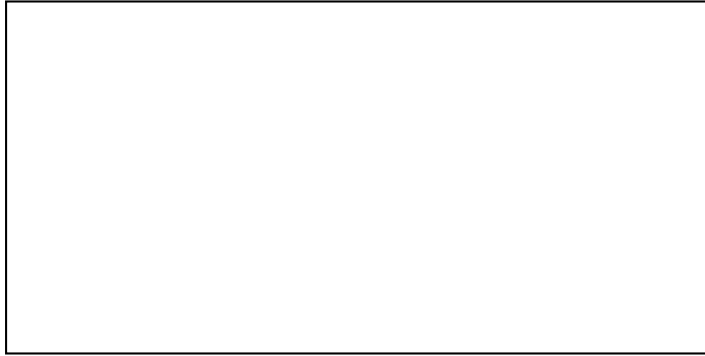


Figure 4. Mary Cassatt, *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair*, detail.  
Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art. Reproduced in: Griselda  
Pollock, *Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women* (London : Thames &  
Hudson, 1998), page 131..

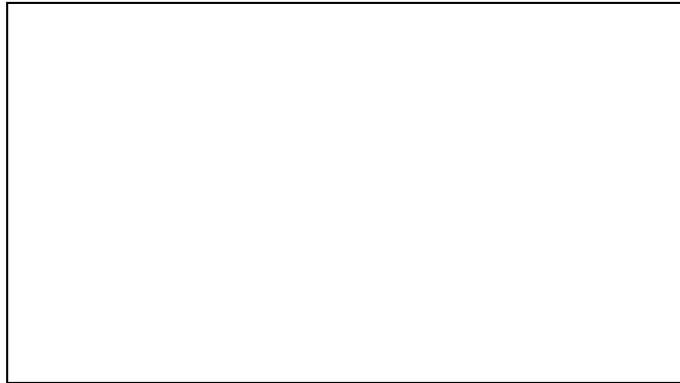


Figure 5. Mary Cassatt, *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair*, detail.  
Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art. Reproduced in: Griselda  
Pollock, *Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women* (London : Thames &  
Hudson, 1998), page 131.

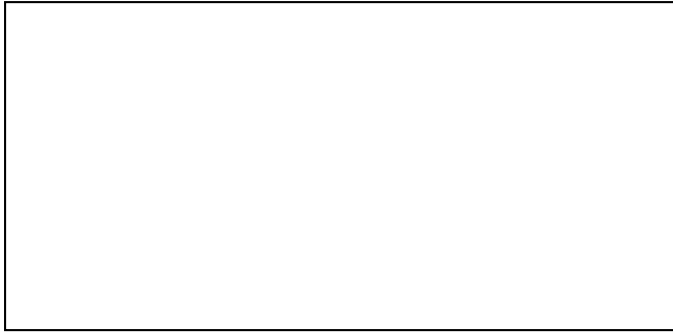


Figure 6. Mary Cassatt, *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair*, detail. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art. Reproduced in: Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women* (London : Thames & Hudson, 1998), page 131.

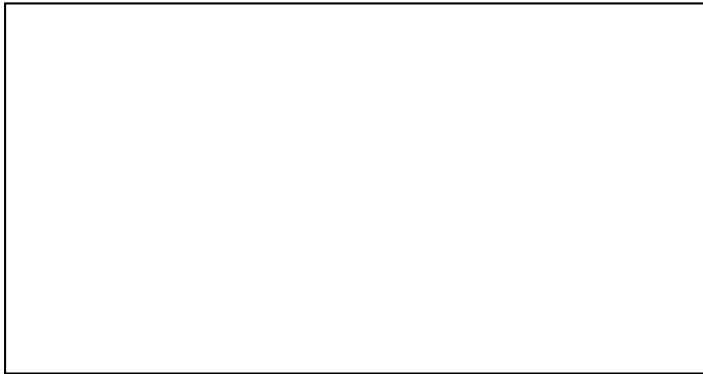


Figure 7. Mary Cassatt, *Cup of Tea*, 1880. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts M. Theresa B. Hopkins Fund. Reproduced in: Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women* (London : Thames & Hudson, 1998), page 130.





Figure 8. Honoré Daumier, *Types Parisiens*, 1841. University of Missouri-Columbia. Reproduced in: Daumier, Honoré. *Married life : twenty-four lithographs*. (New York : Pantheon Books, 1944), Plate 9.



Figure 9. Artist unknown, *Young Boy*, 17<sup>th</sup> century. Reproduced in ArtStore Digital Images. Identification 190506.



Figure 10. Mary Cassatt, Caricature of a little Girl, 1874. Destroyed. Reproduced in: Mathews, Nancy Mowll. Ed. *Cassatt and Her Circle: Selected Letters*. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), page 256.

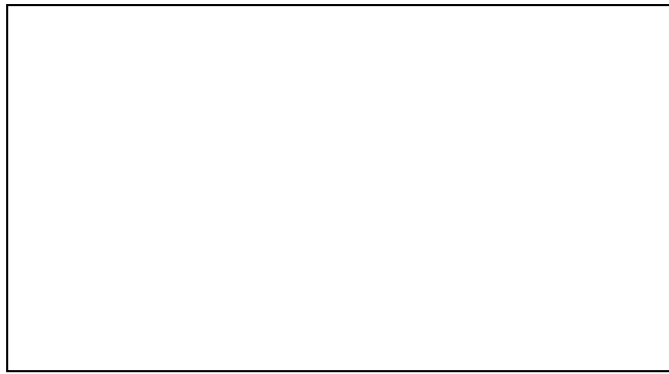


Figure 11. William Adolphe Bouguereau, Child at Bath, 1886. Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington-Seattle, Horace C. Henry Collection. Reproduced in: Carter, Curtis. *Children in Art: a Century of Change*, (Milwaukee, Wis.: Patrick and Beatrice Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, 1999), plate 24.

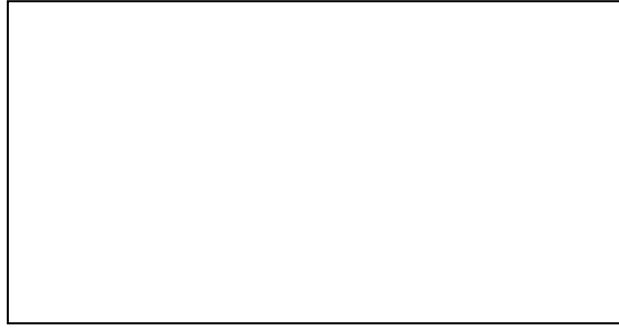


Figure 12. Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Reproduced in: Clark, T.J. *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*. Revised Edition. Princeton (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), Plate 6.



Figure 13. Alfred De Dreux, *Innocence between two Theieves*, 1859. Private Collection. Reproduced in: Carter, Curtis. *Children in Art: a Century of Change*. (Milwaukee, Wis.: Patrick and Beatrice Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, 1999), page 45.

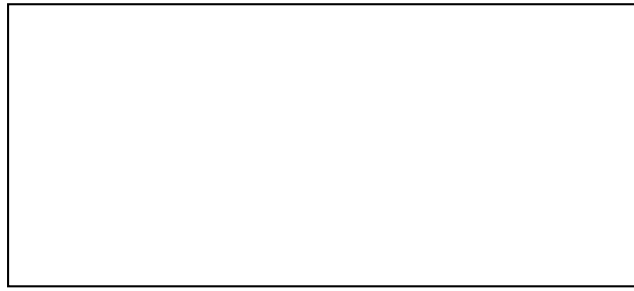


Figure 14. Mary Cassatt, *Maternal Caress*, 1896. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Reproduced in: Barter, Judith. *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman*. (New York: Art Institute of Chicago in association with H.N. Abrams, 1998), Plate 53.

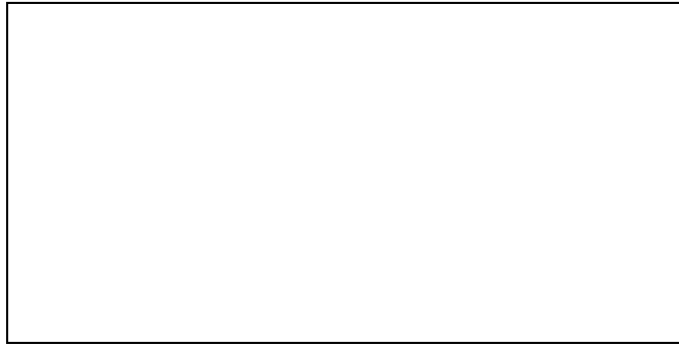


Figure 15. Courbet, *Stonebreakers*, 1849. Destroyed. Reproduced in: H.H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, and Photography*. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 2003), page 25.



Figure 16. Degas, *L'Étolie*, 1876-77. Museo d'Orsay di Parigi. Reproduced in: Clark, T.J. *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*. (Revised Edition. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), page 75.

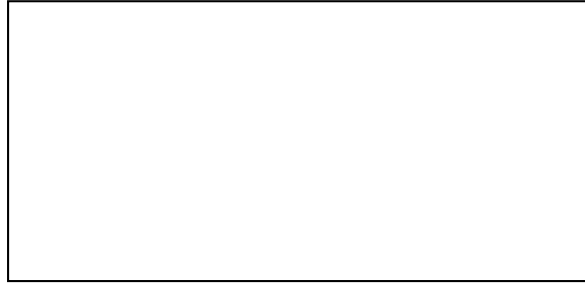


Figure 17. Mary Cassatt, *At the Opera*, 1877-78. Boston Museum of Fine Art. Reproduced in: Barter, Judith. *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman*. (New York: Art Institute of Chicago in association with H.N. Abrams, 1998), Plate 17.

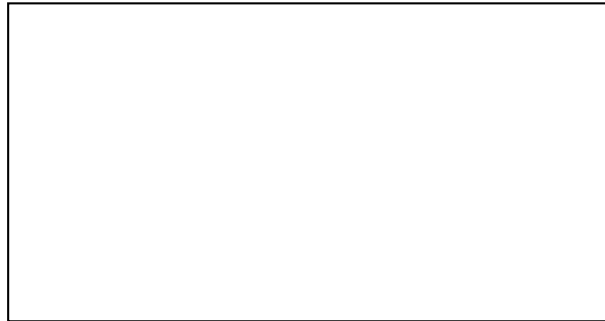


Figure 18. Mary Cassatt, *At the Theatre*, 1878-79. Private Collection. Reproduced in: Barter, Judith. *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman*. (New York: Art Institute of Chicago in association with H.N. Abrams, 1998), Plate 18.



Figure 19. Mary Cassatt, *Woman in a Loge*, 1878-79. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Reproduced in: Barter, Judith. *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman*. (New York: Art Institute of Chicago in association with H.N. Abrams, 1998), Plate 15.

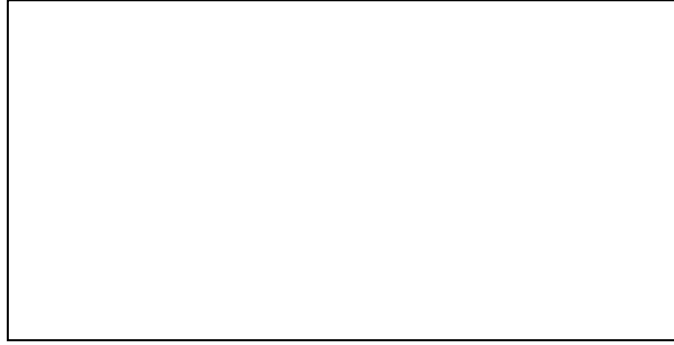


Figure 20. Mary Cassatt, *A Corner of the Loge*, 1879. Private Collection. Reproduced in: Barter, Judith. *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman*. (New York: Art Institute of Chicago in association with H.N. Abrams, 1998), Plate 16.

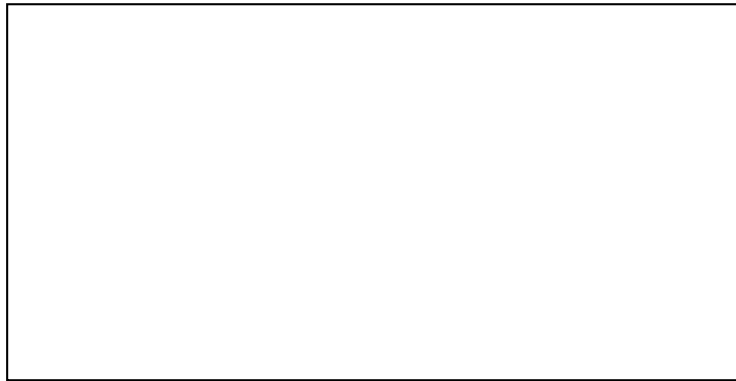


Figure 21. Mary Cassatt, *At the Theatre (Woman in a Loge)*, 1879. Boston Museum of Fine Art. Reproduced in: Barter, Judith. *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman*. (New York: Art Institute of Chicago in association with H.N. Abrams, 1998), Plate 19.

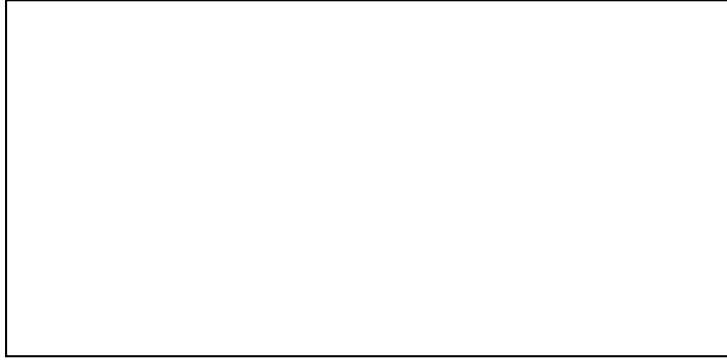


Figure 22. Mary Cassatt, *Theatre*, 1879. Private Collection. Reproduced in: Barter, Judith. *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman*. (New York: Art Institute of Chicago in association with H.N. Abrams, 1998), Plate 20.



Figure 23. Mary Cassatt, *At the Performance*, 1879-80. The Art Institute of Chicago. Reproduced in: Barter, Judith. *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman*. (New York: Art Institute of Chicago in association with H.N. Abrams, 1998), Plate 21.



Figure 24. Mary Cassatt, *Two Young Ladies in a Loge, Facing Right*, 1879-80. S.P. Avery Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, New York Public Library. Reproduced in: Barter, Judith. *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman*. (New York: Art Institute of Chicago in association with H.N. Abrams, 1998), Plate 22.



Figure 25. Mary Cassatt, *Woman at the Theatre*, 1879-80. The Art Institute of Chicago. Reproduced in: Barter, Judith. *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman*. (New York: Art Institute of Chicago in association with H.N. Abrams, 1998), Plate 23.



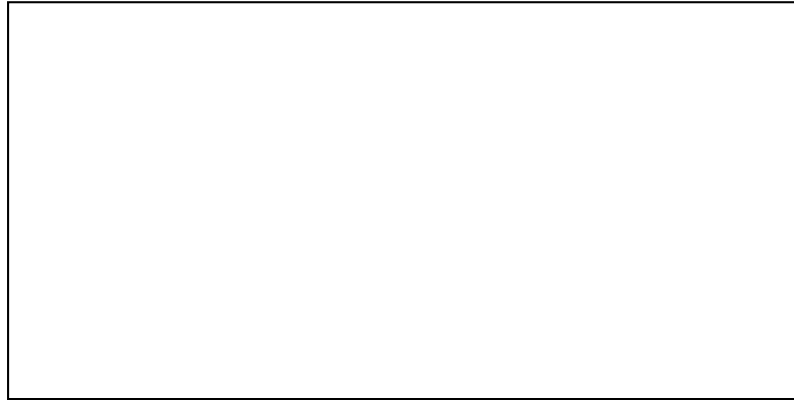


Figure 26. Mary Cassatt, *At the Theatre*, 1879-80. S.P. Avery Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, New York Public Library. Reproduced in: Barter, Judith. *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman*. (New York: Art Institute of Chicago in association with H.N. Abrams, 1998), Plate 24.

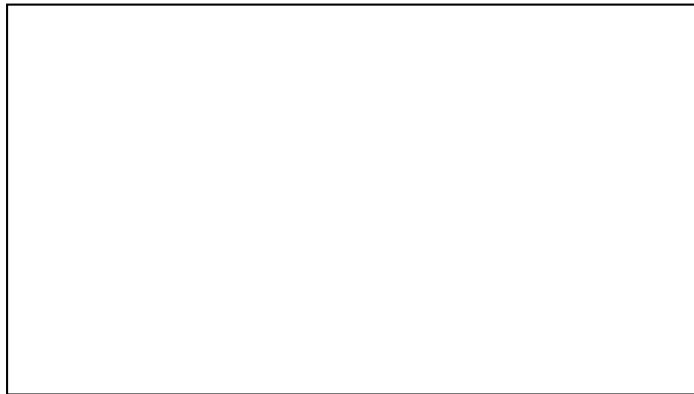


Figure 27. Mary Cassatt, *Women in a Loge*, 1881-82. Cincinnati Art Museum. Reproduced in: Barter, Judith. *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman*. (New York: Art Institute of Chicago in association with H.N. Abrams, 1998), Plate 25.



Figure 28. Mary Cassatt, *Women in a Loge*, 1881-82. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art. Reproduced in: Barter, Judith. *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman*. (New York: Art Institute of Chicago in association with H.N. Abrams, 1998), Plate 26.



Figure 29. Auguste Renoir, *The Loge*, 1874. London, Courtauld Institute Galleries. Reproduced in: Robert Herbert, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), Plate 90.

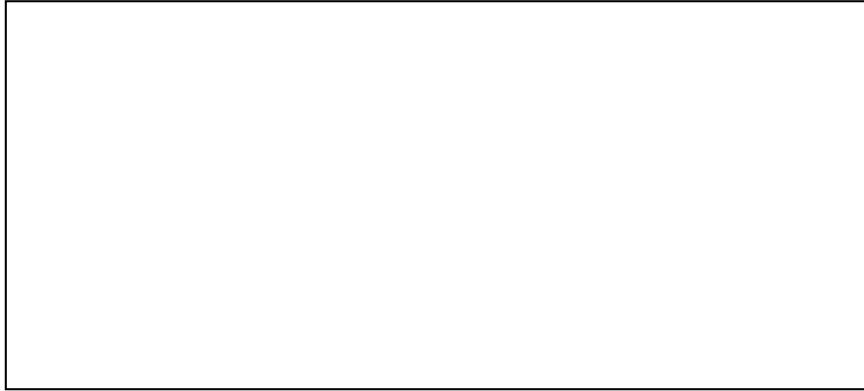


Figure 30. Auguste Renoir, *The First Outing*, 1875-76. London National Gallery. Reproduced in: Robert Herbert, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), Plate 97.

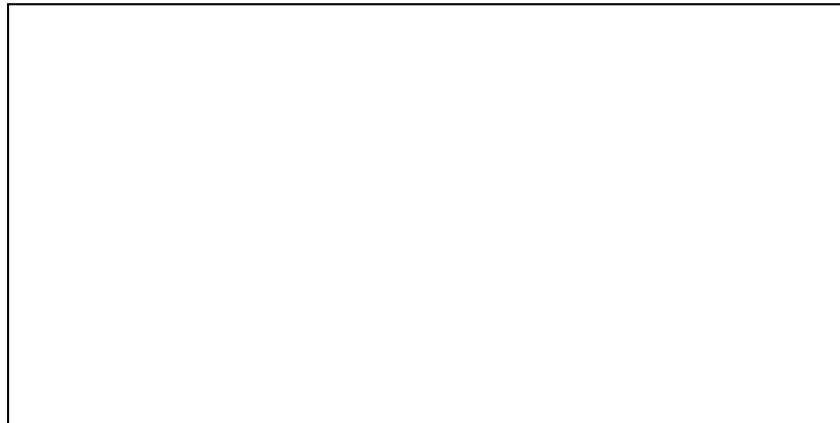


Figure 31. Auguste Renoir, *The First Outing*, (detail). London National Gallery. Reproduced in: Robert Herbert, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), Plate 97.



Figure 32. Edouard Manet, Luncheon on the Grass, 1863. Musée d'Orsay (Jeu de Paume), Paris. Reproduced in: Clark, T.J. *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*. Revised Edition. Princeton (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), page 167.

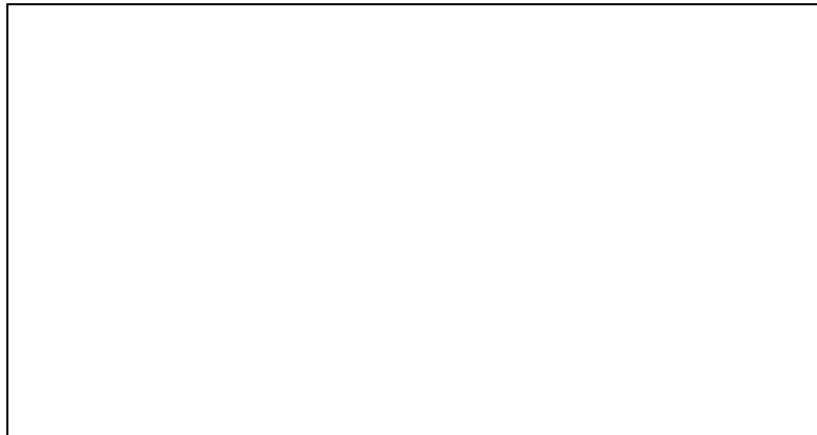


Figure 33. Edouard Manet, Bar at the Folies-Bergère, 1881-82. Courtauld Institution Galleries, University of London. Reproduced in: Clark, T.J. *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*. Revised Edition. Princeton (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), Plate 24..

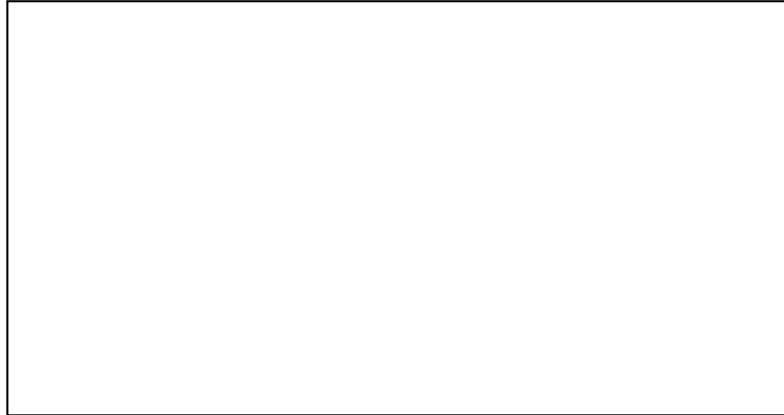


Figure 34. Puvis de Chavanne, *InterArts et Naturam*, 1888-1891. Private Collection. H.H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, and Photography*. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 2003), Page 289.



Figure 35. Mary Cassatt, *Picking Fruit*, 1893. Richmond, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Reproduced in: Barter, Judith. *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman*. (New York: Art Institute of Chicago in association with H.N. Abrams, 1998), Plate 32.

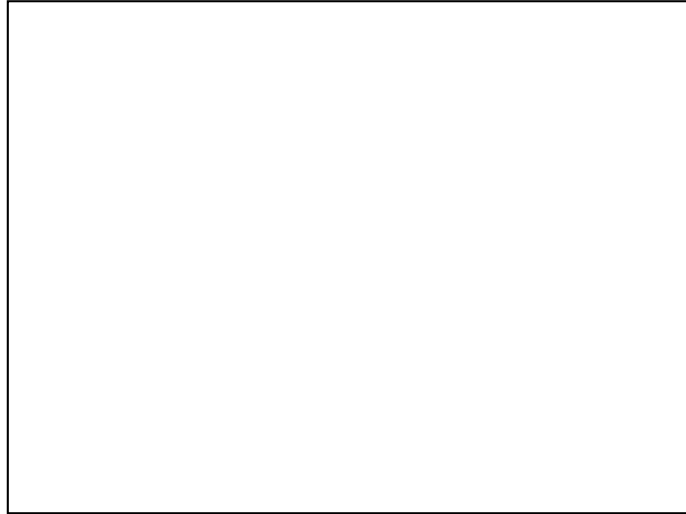


Figure 36. Puvis de Chavanne, *Summer*, 1873. Private Collection. Reproduced in: H.H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, and Photography*. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 2003), page 136.

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In Mary Cassatt's painting of her sister, Lydia can be seen to be actively taking in the spectacle. Her pose is slightly skewed, making her somewhat off center and giving her a more dominating position. Lydia is clearly enjoying herself and seems to invite the viewer to enjoy the show along with her. She is part of the spectacle but she enjoys it; it is not a commercial or sexual transaction which she participates in, and ultimately, this sense of her own enjoyment makes the viewer relatively peripheral to the painting, of no more importance than the small male figure who may be staring at her. Mary Cassatt used the techniques of Impressionism to acknowledge and celebrate the everyday life and rituals of women in the late nineteenth century. While her later and most impressive work shows women at work. In showing these women at work, Cassatt was portraying the reality of modern life for women of the time. I chose to do research on Mary Cassatt not only because I plan to visit her exhibit at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, but also because I have always enjoyed and admired her work. The subject matter of Mary Cassatt's paintings was primarily that of women engaged in everyday activities and children.