
How Mary Cassatt Depicts Female Subjects in a Male-Dominated Society

This research paper focuses on how feminist artist, Mary Cassatt, depicted female subjects differently in a male-dominated society during the Impressionist period; with analytical references to *Young Woman Sewing in a Garden* by Mary Cassatt, 1880-82, an oil painting on canvas located in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris. During the Impressionist movement, Cassatt was not only the first American, but also the first woman painter to breakthrough. She depicted feminine experiences in ways different from male Impressionist artists. Her focal areas of interest were of women and children in domestic settings. Cassatt's paintings revealed the tragedy and beauty of women's lives in the 19th century, giving voice and respect to the disregarded domestic domain and objectified female figure. Mary Cassatt has not depicted the female figure in a stereotypical way (for its time) and has instead defied the male gaze – a concept used by men presenting women as objects of male pleasure. Her purpose was to support and encourage feminism of the time, hence making her one of the first most memorable female painters in history. Other painters have always used females as an object for the male gaze, such as Degas, who was ironically her mentor. Mary Cassatt focused her paintings solely on the female interest and comfort within the domestic space, and used this focus as a means of protest.

Impressionism is a painting style and movement originating from France in the 1860s. It emphasizes the visual Impression of the moment, especially in terms of the effect of light and colour. Impressionist painters aspired to capture the instantaneous, sensory effect of a scene (the Impression) the subject made to one's eye. Therefore, the main Impressionist subjects were landscapes and scenes of everyday life. This modern movement was developed in Paris and originated from artists such as Claude Monet, who rejected the official, government-sanctioned exhibitions, or salons. These artists first exhibited their work in 1874 with their primary purpose being to free themselves rather than promoting a new style. Monet achieved great success and was known for his remarkable representations and advances towards abstraction and modern paintings focusing on surface and light effects.

Due to the gender inequality present in the art world, one could say that Monet's success was related to the fact of him being a male who had presented and developed a "ground-breaking" idea. If a female were to present this, she would be shunned by society for going against the norm. The fight for women's rights only began in 1848, therefore presenting a relatively new concept and idea where women left confines of their home to achieve the ordinary. Mary Cassatt was born in 1844 to an affluent family in Pennsylvania, USA. Her parents encouraged her to develop her artistic skills, although it was uncommon for upper-class women to work as professional artists at the time. Women at the time were expected to be mothers, and so the occupation of an artist was contrary to painting women in the nude and observing public life.

Cassatt and her family had ventured out to Europe for year-long trips, and this is where she fell in love with the art world of Paris. After the Civil War, Cassatt and a classmate travelled to France to study painting, where she ended up residing most of her life. In 1877, Degas and Cassatt met at her Montmartre studio where he invited her to participate in an Impressionist exhibition for "independent" painters. Over time, Degas became Cassatt's mentor. Ironically

enough, Degas was known for depicting female subjects for the desire of the male gaze and often objectified them. Cassatt, on the other hand, enjoyed painting on the female subject due to the beauty of the domestic space and women's lives in the 19th century. She wanted to exemplify the overlooked domestic and female figures, being a woman herself who was unmarried and unconventional in society. However, the two shared similarities in the sense of experimentation through unusual media such as tempera, distemper, and metallic paints. Additionally, the s-curve was a compositional element incorporated by both artists so that a model's arms complement the contrapposto of their torso. This presented a sense of elegance and movement throughout their pieces. Both artists learned, respected and shared some artistic similarities with one another, but the two had remarkably different ways of perceiving their subject matters.

While Cassatt embraced the style of Impressionism, she developed her own unique artistic language that explored themes rarely considered by male artists, such as the contemporary lives of middle-class women. During the late 19th century, middle-class women were accompanied in public, and could not enter bars, brothels, and musical halls without serious social consequences – which served as central sources of inspiration for male artists at the time. Thus, Cassatt's social life was limited. So she decided to depict a different world – a one she knew. Feminism during the late 19th century was known as first-wave feminism and focused on women's equal rights in legal and voting matters. During the production of *Young Girl Sewing in a Garden*, first wave feminism was succeeding. Knitting and talking were forms of protest on behalf of women during the time. Women would come together within domestic settings to talk on issues, discuss rights, and perhaps even plan to take a stand that would lead to change. Mary Cassatt used this to depict females and change during the Impressionist time. She recorded and observed women like herself participating and engaging in domestic and social activities, and soon became known for intimate female portraits, such as the *Young Girl Sewing in a Garden*.

Staying true to the Impressionistic brushstrokes, Cassatt places the girl in an opulent coloured background with a diagonal path to give depth and structure towards the composition. Cassatt paints the young girl to appear almost monumental-like with her posture and figure in a flowy dress. However, the focal point and attention is on her rosy cheeks, working hands and concentrated facial expression. The evident outlines and details of the girl's face and hands relate to Cassatt's career-long practice and mastery of figure composition, an influence derived from her mentor, Degas who believed women did not make the best artists and were unable to draw as well. Cassatt made sure to prove him wrong, approaching every painting with a high level of technical skill and composition. Knitting, sewing and other stereotyped women's skills were ironic forms of protests to show that it could be used for a stand and represented much more than male-thought stereotyping and classification. Similarly, how Cassatt chose to master her figure composition to defy Degas' thought on women, she also incorporated a symbol epitomizing the first-wave feminism movement at the time. The young woman is seen sewing in the space of her comfort where she cannot be judged or morally wronged. The lack of decoration and flamboyant colours reflects on Cassatt's emphasis behind illustrating these women as educated, thoughtful, creative and/or in conversation; as opposed to her male peers who objectify women for the male gaze. Cassatt succeeds in forming and capturing an inimitable female interpretation of what modern life looked and felt like during the 19th century that otherwise may have gone unrecorded and unnoticed.

In conclusion, Mary Cassatt was an affluent woman who had the support of her family to be an

artist despite the unconventionality of it. During the Impressionist movement she was the first American female painter to advance in a male-dominated art world. Despite the rise of feminism at the time, women were still not given the right to enter male-dominated places unaccompanied. Hence, Cassatt decided to depict the female experience in ways male Impressionist artists could not – through domesticity. She defied the appeal of the male gaze and encouraged feminism at the time through authentic female representations. Despite Degas being her mentor, she chose to appreciate his influence while proving him wrong when it came to his thought on female artists. Cassatt's paintings revealed the tragedy and beauty of women's lives in the 19th century, expressing and empowering the disregarded domestic sphere and objectified female figure.

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