

MARY CASSATT

This work by is *Self Portrait*, gouache on paper, c. 1878.



Biography

- NAME: Mary Cassatt
- OCCUPATION: Painter
- BIRTH DATE: May 22, 1844
- DEATH DATE: June 14, 1926
- EDUCATION: Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts
- PLACE OF BIRTH: Allegheny, Pennsylvania
- PLACE OF DEATH: Le Mesnil-Théribus, France
- FULL NAME: Mary Stevenson Cassatt



Artist Mary Stevenson Cassatt was born on May 22, 1844, in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania. Mary Cassatt was the daughter of a well-to-do real estate and investment broker, and her upbringing reflected her family's high social standing. Her schooling prepared her to be a proper wife and mother and included such classes as homemaking, embroidery, music, sketching and painting. Though women of her day were discouraged from pursuing a career, Mary Cassatt enrolled in Philadelphia's Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts at age 16. Not surprisingly, she found the male faculty and her fellow students to be patronizing and resentful of her attendance. She decided to leave the program and move to Europe where she could study the works of the Old Masters on her own, firsthand.

Despite her family's strong objections (her father declared he would rather see his daughter dead than living abroad as a "bohemian"), Mary Cassatt left for Paris in 1866. She began her study with private art lessons in the Louvre, where she would study and copy masterpieces. She continued to study and paint in relative obscurity until 1868, when one of her portraits was selected at the prestigious Paris Salon, an annual exhibition run by the French government. With her father's disapproving words echoing in her ears, Cassatt submitted the well-received painting under the name Mary Stevenson.

In 1870, Mary Cassatt reluctantly returned home to live with her parents. The artistic freedom she enjoyed while living abroad was immediately extinguished upon her return to the outskirts of Philadelphia. Not only did she have trouble finding proper supplies, but her father refused to pay for anything connected with her art. To raise funds, she tried to sell some of her paintings in New York, but to no avail. In the midst of these obstacles, Cassatt was contacted by the archbishop of Pittsburgh. He wanted to commission the artist to paint copies of two works by the Italian master Correggio. Cassatt accepted the assignment and left immediately for Europe, where the originals were on display in Parma, Italy. With the money she earned from the commission, she was able to resume her career in Europe.

She continued to study and paint in Spain, Belgium and Rome, eventually settling permanently in Paris. No longer concerned with what was fashionable or commercial, she began to experiment artistically. Her new work drew criticism for its bright colors and unflattering accuracy of its subjects. During this time, she drew courage from painter Edgar Degas, whose

pastels inspired her to press on in her own direction. "I used to go and flatten my nose against that window and absorb all I could of his art," she once wrote to a friend. "It changed my life. I saw art then as I wanted to see it."

Mary Cassatt exhibited 11 of her paintings with the Impressionists in 1879. The show was a huge success both commercially and critically. Shortly thereafter Mary Cassatt was forced to withdraw from the art world to care for her ill mother and sister. Her sister died in 1882, but after her mother regained her health, Mary was able to resume painting.

Mary Cassatt became famous for her portraits. She was especially drawn to women in everyday domestic settings, especially mothers with their children. Cassatt's portraits were unconventional in their direct and honest nature.

A 1910 trip to Egypt with her brother, Gardner, and his family would prove to be a turning point in Mary Cassatt's life. The magnificent ancient art made her question her own talent as an artist. Soon after their return home, Gardner died unexpectedly from an illness he contracted during the journey. These two events deeply affected Cassatt's physical and emotional health, and she was unable to paint again until around 1912.



Three years later, she was forced to give up painting altogether as diabetes slowly stole her vision. For the next 11 years, until her death—on June 14, 1926, in Le Mesnil-Théribus, France—Mary Cassatt lived in almost total blindness, bitterly unhappy to be robbed of her greatest source of pleasure.

Note: Excerpts taken from <http://www.biography.com/people/mary-cassatt-9240820?page=1>

Personal Style and Motivation

Cassatt's popular reputation is based on an extensive series of rigorously drawn, tenderly observed, yet largely unsentimental paintings and prints on the theme of the mother and child. Some of these works depict her own relatives, friends, or clients, although in her later years she generally used professional models in compositions that are often reminiscent of Italian Renaissance depictions of the Madonna and Child. After 1900, she concentrated almost exclusively on mother-and-child subjects.

The 1890s were Cassatt's busiest and most creative time. She had matured considerably and became more diplomatic and less blunt in her opinions. In 1891, Chicago businesswoman Bertha Palmer approached Cassatt to paint a 12' x 58' mural about "Modern Woman" for the Women's Building for the World's Columbian Exhibition to be held in 1893. Cassatt completed the project over the next two years while living in France with her mother. The mural was designed as a triptych, a work of art that is divided into three sections. The mural displays a community of women apart from their relation to men, as accomplished persons in their own right. Palmer considered Cassatt to be an American treasure and could think of no one better to paint a mural at an exposition that was to do so much to focus the world's attention on the status

of women. Unfortunately the mural was lost when the building was torn down after the exhibit. Cassatt made several studies and paintings on themes similar to those in the mural around that time, however, so it is possible to see her development of those ideas and images. Cassatt also exhibited other paintings in the Exposition. This work by Mary Cassatt is *Lilacs in a Window*, oil on canvas, 1880.

Also in 1891, she exhibited a series of highly original colored drypoint and aquatint prints, including *Woman Bathing* and *The Coiffure*, inspired by the Japanese masters shown in Paris the year before. Cassatt was attracted to the simplicity and clarity of Japanese design, and the skillful use of blocks of color. In her interpretation, she used primarily light, delicate pastel colors and avoided black (a "forbidden" color among the Impressionists). A. Breeskin, of the Smithsonian Institution, notes that these colored prints, "now stand as her most original contribution... adding a new chapter to the history of graphic arts...technically, as color prints, they have never been surpassed."

An increasing sentimentality is apparent in her work of the 1900s; her work was popular with the public and the critics, but she was no longer breaking new ground, and her Impressionist colleagues who once provided stimulation and criticism were dying off. As the new century arrived, Cassatt served as an advisor to several major art collectors and stipulated that they eventually donate their purchases to American art museums.

Diagnosed with diabetes, neuralgia, and cataracts in 1911, she did not slow down, but after 1914 she was forced to stop painting as she became almost blind. Nonetheless, she took up the cause of women's suffrage, and in 1915, she showed eighteen works in an exhibition supporting the movement. She died on June 14, 1926 at Château de Beaufresne, near Paris, and was buried in the family vault at Le Mesnil-Théribus, France.

- "There are two ways for a painter: the broad and easy one or the narrow and hard one."
- "If painting is no longer needed, it seems a pity that some of us are born into the world with such a passion for line and color."
- "I have not done what I wanted to, but I tried to make a good fight."
- *Degas to Mary Cassatt*: "Most women paint as though they are trimming hats. Not you."

Note: quotes from http://womenshistory.about.com/od/quotes/a/mary_cassatt.htm