“I have had a joy from which no one can rob me—I have been able to touch some people with my art.”  

Mary Cassatt
An American in Paris

Mary Stevenson Cassatt (1844 – 1926) is best known for her portrayals of mothers and children. She became a successful professional artist at a time when it was very difficult for a woman to do so.

Born in Pennsylvania into an affluent family who believed in education for women, Cassatt also had the experience of attending school and traveling in Europe during her childhood. This early exposure to the art and culture of Europe had a major impact on the young Cassatt.

After training in studio art in Philadelphia, Cassatt wished to return on her own to Paris, then the center of modern art. Her parents needed a lot of convincing, since this was a highly unusual undertaking for a twenty-year-old, upper-class woman. They eventually agreed, giving her an allowance and using their social connections to help their daughter get settled. Once there, Cassatt studied on her own, traveling to museums across Europe and training in the studios of established artists. (The main art school of Paris, the École des Beaux-Arts, did not yet accept female students.)

Impressionist Connection

Early in her career, Cassatt explored different styles of painting. Soon, however, she began to observe and paint the scenes around her in Paris, exploring the subject of modern life. But Cassatt was not a bohemian artist. She was comfortable in her own social milieu, and it is this world—populated by family, friends, and their children—that she depicted. Ladies seated in the theater, women reading or taking tea in homes or gardens, mothers washing and swaddling babies, and children playing were the subjects that were part of her everyday world.

Her ability to capture a moment in time caught the attention of Edgar Degas, who invited Cassatt to

Mary Cassatt, 1914 (detail). Courtesy of Frederick Sweet’s research materials on Mary Cassatt and James A. McKerill Whistler, 1872 – 1975, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution
Cassatt’s Children

Cassatt transformed seemingly conventional subjects with her fresh vision. Her singular ability to portray children honestly — fully absorbed in their own worlds — is demonstrated by the three works illustrated here: The Boating Party, Children Playing on the Beach, and Little Girl in a Blue Armchair. A restless baby squirms in her mother’s lap, a toddler awkwardly grips a shovel and bucket, and a young girl sprawls in a large armchair. The “emotional truth” Cassatt arrested was heightened by her striking arrangements of keyed-up color and flattened space, over which brushstrokes seem to dance.
try this!

These books about Mary Cassatt can be found at your local library or bookstore.

Quiet Time with Cassatt
By Julie Merberg and Suzanne Bober
baby – preschool

Mary Cassatt: Family Pictures (Smart About Art)
By Jane O’Connor, illustrated by Jennifer Kalis | ages 4 – 8

Mary Cassatt (The Life and Work of)
By Ernestine Giesecke | ages 4 – 8

Mary Cassatt: Impressionist Painter
By Lois V. Harris | ages 4 – 8

Mary Cassatt (Getting to Know the World’s Greatest Artists)
By Mike Venezia | ages 4 – 8

Suzette and the Puppy: A Story About Mary Cassatt
By Joan Sweeney | ages 4 – 8

First Impressions: Mary Cassatt
By Susan E. Meyer | ages 9 – 12

Mary Cassatt: Portrait of an American Impressionist
By Thomas Streissguth | ages 9 – 12

Mary Cassatt: The Life of an Artist
By Carolyn Casey | ages 9 – 12

The Essential Mary Cassatt
By Georgette Gouveia
ages 12 and up

Explore Mary Cassatt’s
Little Girl in a Blue Armchair

Look closely at this painting: describe what you see.

Consider how the girl might feel. Which words best describe her mood?

Wonder: What might she be thinking about?

Pretend that this painting is a scene from story:

Who is the girl?
Where is she?
Why is she sitting on this chair?
What was she doing earlier in the day?
What will she do next?

Think about life in the nineteenth century: Children didn’t have televisions, computers, or stereos. How do you think children entertained themselves?

Imagine you could talk with this girl: what would you ask her?

above: Mary Cassatt, Little Girl in a Blue Armchair, 1878,
National Gallery of Art, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon