13 Mary Cassatt: Painter of Women and Children

Griselda Pollock

With almost no exceptions . . . she only painted one subject: children, and the role she gave in the majority of her canvases to the mother of the baby was ordinarily a secondary role in order to define the emotional intention and to emphasize by means of dark or light touches of costume or by means of the justness of her movement the general, overall harmony. *Achille Segard*

In summing up Miss Cassatt's complete works, there are . . . more portraits and figure studies of women than of mothers and children. It is only because of her unique approach to the maternity theme that she is known primarily as a painter of mothers and children. *Adelyn Breeskin*

After all a woman's vocation in life is to bear children. *Mary Cassatt, 1926*

Mary is at work again, intent on fame and money she says. . . . After all a woman who is not married is lucky if she has a decided love for work of any kind and the more absorbing the better. *Mrs. Cassatt, the artist's mother, to Alexander Cassatt, the artist's brother, July 23, 1891*

Mary Cassatt was both a woman painter and a painter of women. What this means and how she came to concentrate on portrayals of women are not easily explained. A glance at the first two extracts quoted above suffices to show the differences of opinion between even her most diligent and sympathetic biographers. The last two quotations place the problem in its precise historical context, for they are typical expressions of late nineteenth-century ideas about women that Cassatt herself seems to have accepted, while contradicting them by her activity as a professional, dedicated, and independent artist.

Mary Cassatt was born on May 22, 1844, in Allegheny, near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the second daughter and fourth surviving child of the solid upper-middle-class family of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Simpson Cassatt. Her father was a stockbroker, with a respectable position, a comfortable income, and a passion for moving from house to house, town to country, continent to continent, and inevitably up the social scale. Her mother also came from a long-established

Figure 13.1 Mary Cassatt, *Reading "Le Figaro,"* c. 1878. Oil on canvas, 39½ × 32 inches. Private collection, Washington, D.C.

Pennsylvanian family and had an exceptionally fine education. She spoke French fluently and was extraordinarily well read. The portrait of her by Cassatt, *Reading "Le Figaro"* of about 1878 (fig. 13.1), is an unusual if not unique image for a mother, for Mrs. Cassatt is shown seriously engaged in an intellectual pursuit that invites comparison not with the traditional iconography of women or mothers but rather with portraits of intellectuals, for instance of eighteenth-century philosophers. In other ways, this portrait can be compared to Cézanne's portrait of his father reading *L'Evènement* (1866, National Gallery of Art, Washington), although the difference of parental sex underlines the novelty of Cassatt's imagery. In her memoirs Louisine Havemeyer, a lifelong friend of Cassatt, paid tribute to Mrs. Cassatt when she wrote: "Anyone who had the privilege of knowing Mary Cassatt's mother would know at once that it was from her and her alone that [Mary] inherited her ability. In my day, she was not young [but] she was still powerfully intelligent, executive and masterful and yet with that sense of duty and tender sympathy that she had transmitted of her daughter."[1]

Cassatt therefore had close at hand a model of intelligence and accomplishment in her mother, which seems to pervade her presentations of women, who

Figure 13.2 Mary Cassatt, *Mrs. Duffee Seated on a Striped Sofa*, 1876. Oil on wood panel, 13¾ × 10½ inches. Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, bequest of John T. Spaulding.

are often shown reading. The painting *Mrs. Duffee Seated on a Striped Sofa* of 1876 (fig. 13.2) is one of the earliest of these and shows her debt to the old masters she studied so intensively in her youth. Fragonard comes to mind, with the eighteenth-century connotations of elegance of dress and casualness of pose. Cassatt's images of women reading soon lost their obvious dependence on old master sources and in 1877 she painted *The Reader* (Collection of Electra B. McDowell, New York), in which the book itself gains prominence, being placed firmly in the hands of the absorbed young woman, creating a kind of barrier between the spectator and the sitter, admonishing the viewer to maintain a respectful distance, silence, and quietude appropriate to the subject of the work. The theme reappears in portraits of the artist's sister, *Lydia Reading the Morning Paper* of 1878 (Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha) and *Lydia Reading in a Garden* of 1880 (Art Institute of Chicago), in which the figurine in profile, self-absorbed in mental activity, is turned completely away from the viewer, while the newspaper she reads proclaims distinct flavor of the modernity so precious to the impressionists.

The radical implications of self-absorption and sustained activity in portrayals of middle-class women cannot be sufficiently emphasized, for it was the lack of undisturbed time that so impeded the majority of women from attaining any degree of professional competence. Florence Nightingale, an older contemporary of Mary Cassatt, railed against women's oppressive lot in her essay "Cassandra," where she discussed the "odd times" that middle-class women could work undisturbed: "Women dream a great sphere of steady not sketchy benevolence. . . . For how do people exercise their moral activity now? We visit, we teach, we talk 'among the poor.' How different would be the heart for work, how different would be the success if we learnt our work as a serious study and followed it up as a profession. If a man were to follow up his profession or occupation at odd times, how would he do it? . . . Women themselves acknowledge that they are inferior in every occupation to men. Is it surprising? They do everything at 'odd times.'"[2]

Cassatt's reading women contain a very personal element verging on the autobiographical. She was herself very well read and well informed, a fact that her father proudly reported to Alexander Cassatt in a letter of December 13, 1878: "I suppose you saw that the Boston people gave Mame a silver medal. I believe she was the only woman among the silver medals. Her circle amongst artists and literary people is certainly extending and she enjoys a reputation among them not only as an artist but also for literary taste and knowledge, which moreover she deserves for she is uncommonly well-read especially in French literature."[3] However, reading and its creative counterpart, writing, were in the nineteenth century slightly more accessible to a middle-class woman than the professional practice of the visual arts. Virginia Woolf describes Jane Austen writing in her drawing room, hiding her manuscripts under the blotter when the inevitable visitors claimed her attention. One cannot conceive such possibilities for the painter.

The girl, the unmarried sister, the married woman, and the mother—the models for the paintings discussed so far—are presented without any concern to emphasize the social roles so important in nineteenth-century society. Instead, these early paintings are unified by the recurring images of self-contained and mental activities in which women were engaged—reading books and newspapers, and studying prints. These features constitute the fundamental theme of Cassatt's oeuvre. Women in her paintings rarely look out of the picture or meet the gaze of the viewer; they are absorbed in their own activities. This is even more remarkable in those subjects that reflect the more commonplace occupations of the bourgeoisie, such as crocheting, embroidering, knitting, and taking tea and visiting, which form the major part of Cassatt's work in her early maturity, from the mid-1870s to the mid-1880s.

One other activity of the middle-class woman's life that took her outside the home was theatergoing, a motif that often attracted Cassatt as it had her new friends in the impressionist circle. Impressionist iconography was deeply influenced by the call for painters of modern life made by writers throughout the nineteenth century, but most famously by the poet Charles Baudelaire, who published a seminal essay in 1863 entitled "The Painter of Modern Life." The novelty of the life of a large city, with its fashionable and artificial high society jostling depths of degradation and ugliness, called on painters to record for posterity its particular character and demanded new styles to capture the essence of modernity. Manet, Degas, and Renoir turned to public entertainments for inspiration, where the glitter of fashion shone under the artificial lights of the theater.

From 1872 on Cassatt regularly exhibited in the Salon portraits of fashionable women or figure studies, whose distinctive Spanish flavor and bold brushwork suggest a debt to the art of Edouard Manet. At the Salon of 1874 she showed a *Portrait of Mme. Cortier* (private collection), which elicited from Edgar Degas the admiring comment, "C'est vrai. Voilà quelqu'un qui sent comme moi" ("It is real [true, genuine]. There is someone who feels as I do"). In 1877 Degas was introduced to Cassatt by Léon Tourny, who had met her in 1873 in Antwerp, where they were both studying the art of Rubens. At this meeting Degas invited Cassatt to join the independent exhibiting society that had been founded in 1874 and whose members had become popularly known as the impressionists. In 1913 Cassatt told her biographer of her response: "It was at that moment that Degas persuaded me to send no more to the Salon and to exhibit with his friends in the group of impressionists. I accepted with joy. At last I could work with complete independence without concerning myself with the eventual judgement of a jury. I already knew who were my true masters. I admired Manet, Courbet and Degas. I hated conventional art. I began to live."[4]

Cassatt first exhibited in 1879 with this group, which was renamed "Un Groupe des Artistes Indépendants, Réalistes et Impressionistes" (A Group of Independent, Realist, and Impressionist Artists), showing two works, *The Cup of Tea* of 1879 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and *Lydia in a Loge, Wearing a Pearl Necklace* of 1879 (fig. 13.3). The latter's bright and luminous color and fluent brushwork, with its quintessentially modern subject, placed her immediately well within the impressionist group and compositionally recalls *The Loge* (Courtauld Institute, London), which Pierre-August Renoir had sent to the First Impressionist Exhibition. *Lydia in a Loge,* one of her first paintings set in a theater, is, however, unsatisfactory in many ways, despite the seductive sureness of her brushwork and dazzling treatment of the pale, transparent flesh tones. Renoir's painting is successful because there is an underlying identity

Figure 13.3 Mary Cassatt, *Lydia in a Loge, Wearing a Pearl Necklace,* 1879. Oil on canvas, 31⅝ × 23 inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art, bequest of Charlotte Dorrance Wright.

between the subject, the spectacle in the theater that the woman is watching, and the image, the spectacle the woman herself offers to the appreciative viewer outside the painting. In Cassatt's painting there are contradictions, for instance between the lack of engagement of the woman with the spectator, through the shading of her face and the direction of her gaze, and the sensuous treatment of pink silk and pearly skin to which we are drawn by the liveliness of the brushwork.

A pastel portrait entitled *Lydia Leaning on Her Arms, Seated in a Loge* of about 1879 (fig. 13.4), possibly related to the oil, is, however, a far more coherent image, with fewer distractions and inconsistencies. The mirror here reflects only the back of the figure, complementing the frontal view and creating a sense of the figure's wholeness. There is an overall material consistency in the web of pastel strokes, unifying all the textures and features, while the immediate and psychological activity of the attentive woman is conveyed by the pose, Lydia leaning forward on her arms and clasping her hands, which underlines the direction of her gaze out of the picture and away from the viewer. The display of a woman as a spectacle gives way and instead private mental activity dictates the meaning and unity of the painting, as in the series of pictures of women readers.

The strongest and wittiest of Cassatt's series of loge scenes, in which her original contribution to this motif is most apparent, is *In the Loge* of 1880 (fig. 13.5). The black figure in the foreground serves as a *repoussoir* into the auditorium, where the smaller figures, also dressed in black, punctuate the surface and link back to the young woman with her opera glasses. But as one follows the direc-

Figure 13.4 Mary Cassatt, *Lydia Leaning on Her Arms, Seated in a Loge*, c. 1879. Pastel on paper, 21⅝ × 17¾ inches. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Mo., acquired through the generosity of an anonymous donor.

tion of her gaze through them to look across the surface of the painting, one notices a man leaning prominently out of his box to train his opera glasses on her. The idea of woman as spectacle and viewer as spectator, which is implicit in Renoir's *The Loge* and which I suggest Cassatt's series begins to question, is made explicit in this work by inscribing a male viewer into the painting itself, while the woman is sublimely unaware of the fact that she is the object of his gaze, for her own consciousness is powerfully asserted in pictorial terms by her coloristic dominance and her structurally decisive pose at a right angle both to the male spectator within and to the viewer outside the painting.

Cassatt did not ignore the traditional attributes of femininity, of costume and fashion located in the drawing room, the secluded garden, or the loge of a public theater. Rather, she transformed them by marrying to the iconography of woman—both historical and in contemporary art, with its play on external accessories and sensual charms—the intellectual or rather inner world of thoughtful reflection and subjective identity, traditionally reserved for representations of men.

In Cassatt's work there are no more than a mere handful of portraits or figure studies of men. Apart from six portraits and sketches of her father and ten of her closest brother, Alexander, there are only three realized male portraits—an oil, *Portrait of Marcellin Desboutins* of 1879 (private collection), and two pastels, *Portrait of Moyse Dreyfus* of 1879 (Petit Palais, Paris) and *Portrait of M. O. de S.* of about 1909 (private collection)—as well as a few odd sketches. One simple explanation for this vast disproportion is that social convention made it unsuitable for a woman to be alone in a studio with a male model, except, of course, when the man in question was a close family relative, which explains the greater

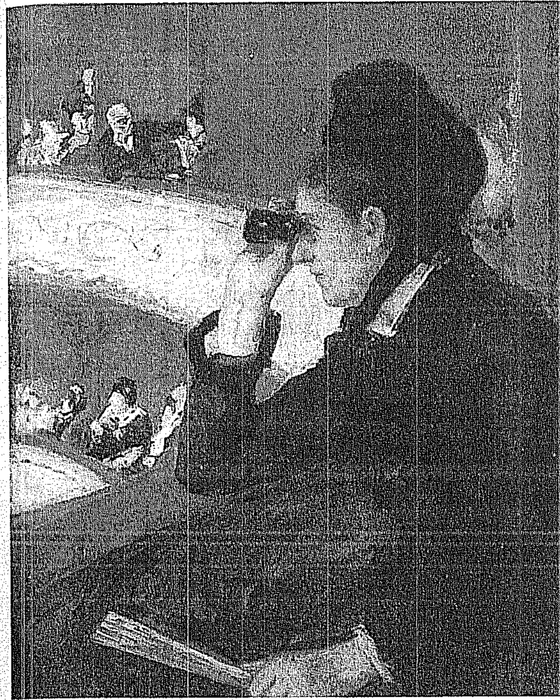

Figure 13.5 Mary Cassatt, *In the Loge*, 1880. Oil on canvas, 32 × 26 inches. Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, The Hayden Collection.

number of portraits of her father and brother. Furthermore, most woman artists were denied access, on account of propriety and decency, to the male nude except in plaster casts and thus had little sound knowledge of the male figure. Cassatt's contemporary and fellow Pennsylvanian Thomas Eakins was dismissed from the staff of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where Cassatt herself had studied between 1861 and 1865, for removing the loin cloth from the male model during a mixed anatomy lecture. Yet the fact that the portraits of Desboutins and Dreyfus were both painted in 1879, when Cassatt worked in her own studio outside the family home, suggests that these conventions could in fact be overcome.

It has been argued that the small number of male subjects in her works resulted from her inability to portray a man with the conviction she conveyed in images of her own sex. To some extent the pictures themselves support such an assertion, for they are often incomplete and wooden, but the relative insignificance of her male *portraits* is due more, perhaps, to the fact that she was not primarily a portraitist but a figure painter. In her figure studies that include men no lack of force can be observed. The 1873 *Toreador* (Art Institute of Chicago) is such an image, with strong color contrasts of red tie and cape and the blue and

silver embroidered jacket, while for unrelieved boldness, physical strength, and truth-to-type, the image of the boatman in *The Boating Party* of 1893–94 (National Gallery of Art, Washington) is unmatched, with the clear contours and vigorously painted face in *profil perdu* (hidden profile).

The lack of representation of men in Cassatt's oeuvre can be viewed from yet another perspective. Her sex and her class placed firm restrictions on her knowledge of the world of men. Despite some friendships with artists like Edgar Degas and familiarity with her retired father or visiting brothers, she lived apart from any close or daily contact with the worlds that men of her class occupied in the public spheres of business, the professions, or government, and she was absolutely cut off from the lower haunts of men of all classes in the streets of Paris and in its cafés and brothels.

But despite these very real and too often unrecognized limitations on a woman's experience of the world in which men passed so freely, there is a positive side to this particular coin, for Cassatt knew the world of women, the drawing room, and childbearing as few men in that period could have done, a dimension perceptively recognized in 1881 by the contemporary critic J.-K. Huysmans: "For the first time thanks to Miss Cassatt, I have seen the likenesses of ravishing children, quiet bourgeois scenes painted with a delicate and charming tenderness. Furthermore, only a woman can paint infancy. There is a special feeling that a man cannot achieve . . . only a woman can pose a child, dress it, adjust pins without pricking themselves. . . . This is family life painted with distinction and with love. . . . She achieves something none of our painters could express—the happy contentment, the quiet friendliness, of an interior."[5] Behind Huysmans' effusion lurks a sentimental tendency and the seeds of the disease of the "special category" for womanly subjects and for woman artists that has distorted their work and reputation. But it does contain a grain of truth. Cassatt knew the "bourgeois interior" and rarely presumed to paint what her class or sex determined that she should not know, a fidelity to the experience of class and sex not shared by the majority of male artists.

If the adult male is conspicuously absent from Cassatt's oeuvre, small boys and male infants are clearly not, for the male occurs as often as the female in Cassatt's representations of childhood. However, it would seem that Cassatt did not really emphasize sexual differentiation in the very young. The very young child not only seems to function in Cassatt's work as a miniature version of adult masculine or feminine roles but can also be read as a symbol or an analogy for the art of painting itself.

Cassatt's treatment of the child and mother elicited this comment from an early biographer, Edith Valerio (1930): "Mary Cassatt was not married, she was never a mother, and yet, there are few women painters, and scarcely any men, who have interpreted maternity and early childhood in a language so authentic, so right, so accurate and so moving. She understood and expressed those beauties whose meanings are obscured from most mothers. The gestures, the movements which characterize earliest childhood, this slow discovery of self, of these faculties that are still untested by the world around it, Mary Cassatt rendered with unequalled charm."[6]

That charm has often obscured the more rigorous and truthful observations Cassatt made of the process of personal development as the immature, dependent, and physically undeveloped baby progresses toward becoming a separate and self-conscious individual. Max Raphael, in an essay "The Struggle to Understand Art," makes a statement on the nature of art which suggests that creative activity concerns a similar process of becoming: "It is the nature of the creative mind to dissolve seemingly solid things and to transform the world as it is into a world in process of *becoming* and *creating*."[7] Cassatt was, as Valerio pointed out, neither wife nor mother, despite her own assertion late in life that these roles were women's vocation. She was a painter, creating cultural artifacts instead of performing the procreative act. Yet as one of the main themes of her creative work she turned to the image of mother and child, the epitome of the vocation she had forsworn, which is also the moment of new lives and new identities, states of becoming and creating which her evolution as an artist in her paintings and her activities paralleled in the cultural rather than natural or biological sphere. In doing so, she radically transformed the theme of maternity.

This image, so deeply rooted in Western culture in its traditional form of Madonna and child, evolved slowly in Cassatt's oeuvre. Indeed, she may never have consciously perceived the full implications of what she produced. However, her participation in the Independent movement after 1879, with its programmatic search for thoroughly modern subjects and a novel style of painting to convey modern sensibility, provided the necessary impulse for such a departure from tradition. Both Segard and Breeskin emphasize the central importance of mother-and-child paintings, which have become her most famous motif. That may further account for her neglect, for one asks cynically how a painter of apparently so familiar a subject, so traditional a theme, who repeatedly reworked the motif in the second half of her career, could bear comparison with the radical innovations of Degas, Manet, or Toulouse-Lautrec, who brought absolutely new subjects into the history of painting. However, Cassatt's mothers and children illustrate superbly the two-sided coin of women's art. Although she was restricted by social conventions to models from the life of bourgeois women and children around her, she nonetheless used the everyday happenings of family life to forge her most significant achievement, a new image of women.

One of Cassatt's earliest recorded paintings is a pastel of about 1868, *Two*

Children at a Window (private collection), which shows a brother and sister locked in a supportive embrace, gazing out of a window into a luminous beyond. The symmetry and interlocking arms of the children cause the boy and girl to fuse into a single mass silhouetted against the light, which disguises the importance of their different sexes. But as the foreground space opens out, the masculine and feminine separate. On the right, behind the little girl, a doll lies in a small cot, while on the boy's side of the room there is a large, adult-sized desk and chair, as disproportionately large as the cot and doll are miniature. Yet the children turn their backs on the symbols of their likely future roles and look to something outside the homely room.

Cassatt herself looked beyond the domestic role that was a probable destiny for any woman of the period, and especially for a Pennsylvanian lady of good family and reasonable fortune. Instead, at sixteen, she decided to study art seriously. Painting was, however, one of the acceptable and indeed desirable "accomplishments" of middle-class women, as innumerable novels, texts on women's education, and the vast number of amateur women painters amply document. A Mrs. Ellis, a prolific writer on the subject of women's roles and duties, sounded a warning, however, in her popular *Family Monitor and Domestic Guide* against pursuing any "accomplishment" further than social necessity demanded: "It must not be supposed that the writer is one who would advocate, as essential to woman, any extraordinary degree of intellectual attainment, especially if confined to one particular branch of study. . . . To be able to do a great many things tolerably well, is of infinitely more value to a woman than to be able to excel in any one. By the former, she may render herself generally useful; by the latter she may dazzle for an hour."[8]

Cassatt did not heed such advice to develop her interests only to a limited and altruistic degree. Instead, she enrolled, apparently against her father's wishes, in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, where she remained from 1861 until 1865, when she set off for Europe to follow her male and female colleagues to Paris to study the techniques of the old masters, who were so poorly represented in the United States. Even then Cassatt had a firm conviction of her seriousness, which she light-heartedly explained, while on a sketching tour in France, to her more conventional sister-in-law in a letter of August 1, 1869: "I am here with my friend Miss Gordon from Philadelphia and we are roughing it most artistically. . . . [Aix-les-Bains] was too gay for two poor painters, at least for one, for although my friend calls herself a painter, she is only an amateur, and you know how we professionals despise amateurs."[9]

The outbreak of hostilities between France and Prussia in 1870 obliged her to return briefly to Philadelphia, but as soon as that war and the subsequent civil war in France of 1871–72 were over, she sailed for Italy. In Parma, she concentrated

her attention on two masters of the theme of Madonna and child, Correggio and Parmigianino. The style of Correggio, a native of Parma, anticipated the Baroque and is said to have influenced eighteenth-century French art, which can be cited as a source for French impressionism. From Correggio, Cassatt learned to admire both solid draftsmanship of true line and the luminous and suggestive color that the Italian artist had combined in moving but sophisticated compositions of the Madonna and child. In Parmigianino's Madonnas and children she studied complex compositions of elongated figures in elegant poses.

Cassatt's study of Correggio and Parmigianino was complemented by a sojourn in Spain in 1873. In Seville and Madrid she looked at the work of Velázquez and in Madrid she also studied Rubens, seeing more of his pictures during a trip to Antwerp. Rubens's lush Madonnas and chubby children provided yet another confirmation of her interest in this type of composition, while Velázquez's treatment of children in, for instance, *Las Meniñas* (Museo del Prado, Madrid) explores a quite different aspect which Cassatt later developed: the juxtaposition of childishness and adult artifice.

After an initial interest in children in her paintings of the late 1860s and early 1870s, Cassatt turned to figure paintings of mature women in scenes from modern life. A visit to Paris in 1880 by her brother Alexander with his young family provided an opportunity to study and paint children from life. It may also have reawakened in her memories of what she had learned from the old masters in her travels through Europe earlier in the decade, knowledge that she had put aside to study and work with contemporary masters such as Courbet, Manet, and Degas. One of her first renderings of the mother-and-child motif was executed in 1880, *Mother about to Wash Her Sleepy Child* (fig. 13.6), in which some of the many threads of her career came together—childhood and womanhood and the stylistic influence both of the old masters and of the new avant garde.

The child sprawls loose-limbed on the mother's broad lap but is held firmly in place. The direction of its body forms an opposing diagonal to the pose of the almost massive mother, who is contained by the solid frontal rectangle of the chair which her right arm breaks into, while the frame in turn cuts across her arm, preventing any simple symmetrical reading of the painting. The opposing postures of the figures' bodies are counterbalanced by the closeness of their heads and the interlocking gaze of mother and child, which, significantly, breaks with the usual self-containment and self-absorption of Cassatt's female figures. The mother's gaze, which is so often turned away from the spectator in Cassatt's pictures, is here directed toward her offspring, whose overwhelming sleepiness is subtly conveyed by the vagueness with which the paint was applied to its face.

The breadth of handling, the large areas of white touched with blue, yellow, and pink, so beloved by the impressionists as a demonstration of their theories

Figure 13.6 Mary Cassatt, *Mother about to Wash Her Sleepy Child*, 1880. Oil on canvas, $39\frac{1}{2} \times 25\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Mrs. Fred Hathaway Bixby Request.

of reflected and mutually modifying colors, the Rubenesque carmine outlines of the figures still apparent beneath the layers of paint, and the directional brushwork more often associated with her contemporaries, here achieve a stylistic synthesis. Furthermore, the dynamic but monumental composition can be compared to Cézanne's portraits of Madame Cézanne; for instance, *Mme. Cézanne with a Fan* of 1879–82 (collection of Emile Bührle, Zurich). Cassatt admired Cézanne very early and brought his paintings, but he is rarely mentioned in relation to her work. Yet the comparison is illuminating. In her images of mothers and children, Cassatt used solid, balanced structures and insistent physicality of paint to capture what is most elusive, the most momentary glance, gesture, or movement. This synthesis of the immediate and the instantaneous with the permanent and the monumental, which Cézanne sought to achieve in painting the

Figure 13.7 Mary Cassatt, *Emmie and Her Child*, 1889. Oil on canvas, $35\frac{7}{8} \times 25\frac{7}{8}$ inches. Wichita Art Museum, Wichita, Kan., The Roland P. Murdock Collection.

infinite variations of nature's constantly changing appearance, can be found in this early rendering of a child's daily bath.

In a painting of 1889, *Emmie and Her Child* (fig. 13.7), Cassatt initiated her great phase of treatments of the maternal theme, a subject which she had only infrequently reworked in the intervening decade. Close dependence and security are conveyed by the binding gestures of the hands. Here mother and child do not look at each other, but are linked by the physical bond created by the child's hand on the mother's face while she firmly grasps its small limb. The unfinished state of the canvas provides an opportunity to study Cassatt's working method. Over a warm beige ground, broad areas of color were laid, moving from dark to light, a technique associated with old master processes. The dress, which in is completed parts is white with a red pattern, was painted over a layer of unexpected blue, a color that gives resonance to all colors affected by it, while

touches of red with its characteristic warmth and liveliness suggest a thorough study of Rubens's procedures in particular. But in the contrast of the unfinished and the completed parts of the child's legs, the transition from a chaos of color and arbitrary brushstrokes to fully modeled and realized form can be observed, a transition that unconsciously inscribes into the painting the process of life, both in terms of physical development and of the more psychological passage from the unformed immaturity of the infant to a distinct, separate, and conscious individual.

The physical closeness of the child itself to its mother is contrasted with the look of private reverie as it caresses its mother's face. That gesture recurs in a pastel of 1891, *A Caress* (fig. 13.8). Cassatt caught a rarely portrayed moment, a child's first intuitions of separateness from its mother as it reaches out to examine her as an object distinct from itself. With penetrating insight and sure mastery of her medium and composition, she simply and convincingly painted a crucial moment in a child's development, in its becoming a separate person while still profoundly dependent both emotionally and physically; a state that is represented pictorially by the languid and lolling pose of the infant in the lap of the mother, whose large adult hand tenderly holds his pale, soft-skinned foot.

The nude and clearly male baby with its mother, its plump healthiness and her charming sweetness, focus attention on the question of these images as a secular and contemporary form of Madonna and child. Degas' reaction to the oil painting *The Oval Mirror* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) was reported by Cassatt to Mrs. Havemeyer: "When he saw my *Boy Before a Mirror* he said to Durand-Ruel 'Where is she? I must see her at once. It is the greatest painting of the century.' When I saw him he went over all the details of the picture with me and expressed great admiration for it, and then, as if regretting what he had said, he relentlessly added, 'It has all your qualities and all your faults—it is the Infant Jesus with his English nurse.'" Indeed, the structure of the painting comes closest to the religious compositions of Parmigianino. Achille Segard went so far as to suggest the alternative title *The Adoration* for the exquisite pastel *After the Bath* (Cleveland Museum of Art), but in the complex articulation of the three figures across the frieze-like composition it is the structure of a Parmigianino mother-and-child painting that is suggested rather than the underlying ideology.

Any profound association with Christian tradition is negated by the important fact that Cassatt as often painted mothers and daughters, a subject that has no prototype in religious iconography but looks back to the eighteenth century, when the distinctly secular and bourgeois celebration of family life and domestic happiness was elaborated as a subject both by figure painters like Greuze in

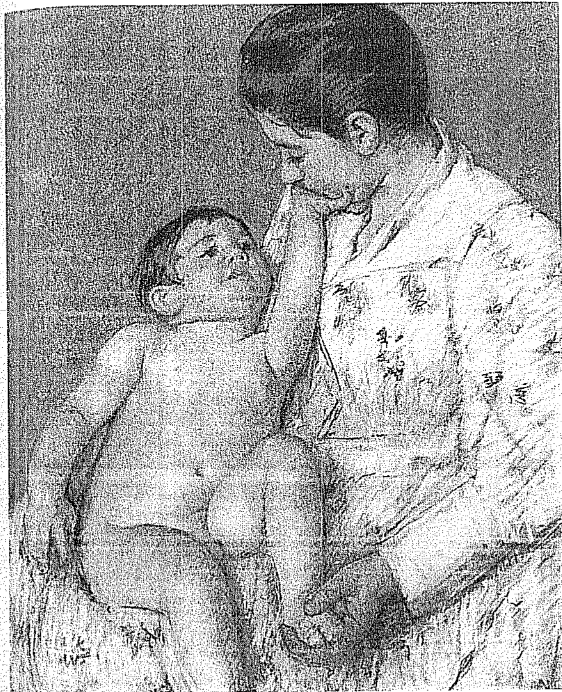

Figure 13.8 Mary Cassatt, *The Caress*, 1891. Pastel on paper, 30 × 24 inches. New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain, Conn., Harriet Russell Stanley Fund. Photograph, E. Irving Blomstrann.

The Beloved Mother of 1795 (De Laborde collection, Paris) and by portraits, a fine and relevant example of which is Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's *Portrait of the Artist and Her Daughter* of 1789 (Louvre, Paris). Some of Cassatt's pastels of mothers and daughters, such as *Marie Looking up at Her Mother* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and *Pensive Marie Kissed by Her Mother* (Philadelphia Museum of Art), both of 1897, do have a touch of that sweetness and intimate charm characteristic of the eighteenth century, and of Vigée-Lebrun in particular, but one should not underestimate the undeniable, if at times uncomfortable, appeal of such pastels, which in many ways faithfully convey conventional notions of the sweetness of the ideal little girl.

The common notion that Cassatt reworked the religiously symbolic icon of Madonna and child can be replaced by the idea that she used the child and its parent to express, instead, a sense of the phases of family life. This becomes clearer when considering the series of paintings and drawings of girls executed in the 1870s and 1880s. In the pastel of about 1868, *Two Children at a Window*, a little girl is set beside her cot and dolls, an association that is made explicit in a drawing of 1876, *Little Girl Holding a Doll* (private collection). A painting of her

Figure 13.9 Mary Cassatt, *Girl in a Blue Armchair,* 1878. Oil on canvas, 35 × 51 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon.

impressionist period, *Girl in a Blue Armchair* (fig. 13.9), presents a completely novel and honest treatment of the ungainliness of a child, culled from observation of young children and incorporating the expressive innovations of composition to which Degas' work introduced Cassatt in the 1870s. Indeed, Degas actually worked on this painting, as Cassatt later told the dealer Ambroise Vollard: "I did it in '78 or '79. It was the portrait of a child of a friend of M. Degas. I had done the child in the armchair and he found it good and advised me on the background and even worked on it. I sent it to the American section of the Exposition [1878], they refused it. . . . I was furious, all the more so, since he had worked on it."[10]

In the painting, one is precipitated abruptly into the space because the frame cuts off the lower edges of the armchairs, but one views the room from a high viewpoint, so that the upper limits of the frame also cut off the tops of the background sofas. Such devices indeed owe much to Degas, but here they function to create a pictorial structure that conveys incompleteness, awkwardness, and disproportions of scale, notably in the menacing fullness of the furnishings in this compacted space, all of which correspond with the treatment of the child herself, who sprawls languidly and inelegantly on the chair, while her smart outfit and bored expression reflect Cassatt's grasp of her character. The picture

is not only of a child, but its perspective and scale suggest a child's own view. Cassatt thus achieved a complete identity between the meaning of the work and the pictorial means themselves.

The reconsideration of the theme of mothers and children exposes the central theme of Cassatt's oeuvre as phases of womanhood. Cassatt thus produced a series in which the artist examined what might be called the seven ages of women: infancy, childhood, adolescence, young womanhood, maturity, and old age, a cycle that begins again with maternity, which thus has a central place within the sequence. But it would be a mistake to see such a series as purely abstract or philosophical exercise, for, as I have tried to show, the forces that condition the nature of the phases of women's lives, which Cassatt as a middle-class woman of her time knew well, are of social and psychosocial origin. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex:* "One is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature . . . which is described as feminine."[11]

One final painting, executed around 1905 and entitled simply *Mother and Child* (fig. 13.10), brings together all the threads of Cassatt's program as an artist and the stylistic means developed within the impressionist and postimpressionist periods of French art in order to reveal that process. It is a picture of enormous complexity and internal oppositions, which synthesizes the elements of the vocabulary of forms and meanings Cassatt had evolved throughout her career before encroaching blindness incapacitated her painting.

In this painting the mother in her fashionable finery is opposed to the unadorned nudity of her daughter. The nude had been one of the most important forms of classical, renaissance and postrenaissance art, and knowledge of anatomy, on which the painting of the nude is based, was a prerequisite for any artist who aspired to the serious pursuit of the most elevated and respected form of high art, the history painting. However, by the mid-nineteenth century the conviction of classical art dissipated and Charles Baudelaire, the theorist of "modernity," had argued, in "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863), for new treatments of the human figure that would show it nude only in places and positions in which it was so to be found in actual life—for instance, in bed or bath. As a woman, Cassatt was in no position to study the nude in either a classical or contemporary form. Nonetheless, she seems to have found a way by turning to the infant nude, with its even more taxing problems of conveying implicit anatomical structure beneath the overlay of immature fleshiness and undeveloped physique. In *Mother and Child* the image of the nude child after a bath, which Cassatt had so often portrayed in the 1890s, is infinitely more serious and

Figure 13.10 Mary Cassatt, *Mother and Child*, c. 1905. Oil on canvas, 36¼ × 29 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Chester Dale Collection.

monumental by virtue of its explicit juxtaposition with the clothed adult, which creates once again the polarities of innocence and freedom opposed to artifice and convention.

A further layer of meaning is suggested by the mirror, a device that Cassatt, like Degas and Manet, had used so frequently to elaborate the spatial organization of a painting or to include the spectator by reflecting the space in which the viewer stands. However, in this work the mirror's shape echoes within the picture that which the frame of the painting itself presents to the viewer. This device, while referring to the reflective, looking-glass idea of painting, actually subverts the idea of a picture as a reflection of reality by explicitly including within the painting a mirror that offers another view of the same subject on the reflection of its plane. The mirror, possibly derived from Japanese prints, also recalls the use the old masters made of the device, and a particular link can be established between the nude and the mirror, on the one hand, and Velázquez, whose *Rokeby Venus* (National Gallery, London) springs to mind. This reference points to another iconographic tradition, that of Vanity, traditionally represented by a nude woman gazing at her own reflection in a mirror. In using the nude and

the mirror, Cassatt again profoundly transformed yet another of the longstanding images of women in European iconography.

The mother, dressed in garments that befit her class and age, holds out a mirror to her nude daughter, who looks away from the viewer, as do so many of Cassatt's women, and gazes at her own reflection in the mirror. I have previously discussed how Cassatt perceived and captured in paintings those ephemeral but truly significant moments in a child's development toward a sense of its own personal identity. Jacques Lacan has elaborated the psychoanalytic theory of infantile psychological development by introducing "the mirror phase." At this stage the child perceives its own reflection in a mirror and inevitably can only recognize that novel image as Other than itself. A child which has hitherto experienced itself only as a part of the world around it, and specifically as a part of its mother, sees itself as separate for the first time. In the subtle and puzzled expression seen in the small mirror, this painting seems an unwitting document of this decisive phase.

However, the image that is reflected in the mirror is neither consistent in perspective nor truthful as a mirror image. Such an inaccurate effect can also be found in Japanese prints. The effect of this distortion is twofold. It presents the viewer more directly with the reflected image, thus breaking the hermetic quality typical of Cassatt's faces and suggesting a greater involvement of the artist herself. Second, it gives the mirror image the appearance of a miniature, of the close-up snapshot portrait. In this way the *smaller* mirror acts as a commentary on the nature of painting.

Furthermore, although the mirror phase is experienced by children of both sexes, it is of particular relevance to the female child, whose notion of self in our society is much more narcissistically related to how she appears, how she is seen. As John Berger has written in *Ways of Seeing*, "men act and women appear":

> To be born a woman has been to be born within an allotted space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. . . . And so she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within herself as two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. . . . One might simplify this by saying: *men act* and *women appear.* Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed fe-

> male. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.[12]

As a woman painter, Cassatt herself surveyed, observed, analyzed, and studied the world in which she was confined. As a painter of women she slowly constructed a body of works depicting women in all the ages and phases of their well-bred lives, which radically questions that very notion of women as spectacle, as an *object* of vision, by the way in which she averted the gaze of her women from the viewer and turned their attention to their own invisible, *subjective* world, by commenting ironically on the spectacle of art in her loge pictures, such as *In the Loge* (see fig. 13.5), or by making women viewers only of their own children and miniature selves, as in the mother-and-child themes. In this late great work, *Mother and Child*, the radical implications of her work are most manifest, for she confronted the issue with absolute fidelity to both psychological and social reality, by juxtaposing the immature and presocial nude child with the future that lies before her and by presenting her fashionably dressed mother in the act of initiating her own daughter into the place in society which she herself occupies and which is her daughter's future. This rich image resulted from Cassatt's profound study of the old masters and of tradition, and from her familiarity with the call for "modernity" and stylistic innovations of contemporary art. It is clear, therefore, that her female gender and her involvement with impressionism are inseparable elements in her considerable achievements as an artist.

The two main concerns of this essay, to explain her success and her subsequent neglect, are thus also intimately related. Because she was a woman artist she has been overlooked or looked down on. But it is the very fact that she was woman that accounts for her vision and the underlying thematic unity of her work.

Notes

This essay is excerpted from the author's book *Mary Cassatt* (London, 1980). Locations are provided for paintings that were illustrated in the original but are not reproduced here.

The first epigraph is from Achille Segard, *Un peintre des enfants et des mères—Mary Cassatt* (Paris, 1913), 127. The second is from Adelyn Breeskin, *Mary Cassatt: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Oils, Pastels, Watercolors and Drawings* (Washington, 1970), 15. The third epigraph is quoted in John Bullard, *Mary Cassatt: Oils and Pastels* (New York, 1972), 11. The fourth is Mrs. Cassatt, the artist's mother, to Alexander Cassatt, the artist's brother, July 23, 1891, quoted in Nancy Moull Mathews, ed., *Cassatt and Her Circle: Selected Letters* (New York, 1984), 222.

1. Louisine Havemeyer, *Sixteen to Sixty: Memoirs of a Collector* (1961; rpt. New York, 1993), 272.
2. Florence Nightingale, "Cassandra," in Ray Strachey, *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* (1928; rpt. London, 1978), 405–6.
3. Robert Cassatt to Alexander Cassatt, Dec. 18, 1878, quoted in Nancy Moull Mathews, ed., *Cassatt and Her Circle: Selected Letters* (New York, 1984), 143.
4. Segard, *Peintre*, 7–8.
5. Quoted in Nancy Hale, *Mary Cassatt* (New York, 1975), 103–4.
6. Edith Valerio, *Mary Cassatt* (Paris, 1930, 6 (author's translation).
7. May Raphael, "The Struggle to Understand Art," in *The Demands of Art* (London, 1969), 199 (italics added).
8. Mrs. Ellis, "The Daughters of England: Their Positions in Society, Character and Responsibilities," in *The Family Monitor and Domestic Guide* (New York, 1844), 35.
9. Mary Cassatt to Maria Lois Buchanan, Aug. 1, 1869, quoted in Mathews, *Cassatt and Her Circle*, 61.
10. Quoted by Frederick Sweet, *Miss Mary Cassatt: Impressionist from Pennsylvania* (Norman, Okla., 1966), 29.
11. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London, 1972), 9 (italics added).
12. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London, 1972), 46–47.