

# Mary Cassatt



## The Bath

Mary Cassatt (1844-1926)  
Oil on Canvas, 1891-1892 Size of original: 39 X 26"  
The Art Institute of Chicago  
AE134

### INTRODUCTION

Mary Cassatt was an artist, born near the city of Pittsburgh, in the state of Pennsylvania, in the United States of America. Although she is considered an American artist, she does not reflect America in her art—the American scene or the American consciousness. Mary Cassatt painted in France with artists such as Degas and Manet, and Impressionists Renoir and Monet; she absorbed into her work, not only the art and the influences of these French artists but, in her outdoor scenes, the French countryside as well.

Mary Cassatt lived at a time when America had no distinctive art of its own. Artists who wished to study art still went to Europe to study the great works, and many, such as John Singleton Copley (see *Watson and the Shark*), and Gilbert Stuart (see *The Skater*) were settling in

studios in England with other expatriate artists to make their art and their reputations. But moving and reestablishing oneself in another country was not easy even for men at that time; and Cassatt was a woman. A proper and respectable young woman, especially one from a socially prominent family such as Cassatt's, if she showed artistic tendencies, was permitted to engage in such activities as flower painting on china plates, or making delicate watercolors or pencil sketches. For a woman of her era to attend an art school where nude models were used to teach anatomy, and to work side by side with men was simply not done. Cassatt's determination and high ambition had not only to overcome the limitations of her social status and her sex, but those of the time in which she was born. But she did attend the Pennsylvania Academy of Art, and

then, having exhausted all the resources available to her in Philadelphia, she, too, went to Europe to study the work of the old masters, where she was eventually to earn a place for herself alongside some of the most prominent artists of the time.

### HISTORY

Every art is "of its time": it reflects not only the culture, but the social, political, and artistic climate as well. At the time when she painted *THE BATH* in 1891-1892, Mary Cassatt had visited the great Japanese exhibition at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Although she was already an admirer of the Japanese woodcuts that were being introduced into Europe, this exhibition would prove to be of great influence to her work, as it would be to the work of other artists of the time. Some artists, such as van Gogh, would not only include images of Japanese woodblock prints in their works, but would also make their own versions of the work of such Japanese artists as Hiroshige (see *A Sudden Shower at Ohashi*); others, such as Degas and Lautrec, would utilize the composition—the graceful curves and body gestures of the figures, the cut-off edges, the odd angles of vision; for others, such as Monet, it was an overall effect of the Japanese prints that was to influence their work, and a fascination with detail, particularly the many-patterned Japanese kimono. Mary Cassatt would borrow not only the themes and the subjects, but the attitude of the figures, the motifs, and the style. Even the straightforward, matter-of-fact, unsentimental depiction of the mother and child, which was to become the theme of the works for which Cassatt is best known, was a frequent theme of the Japanese artist, Utamaro.

### CRITICISM

Wherever one's eye enters the painting of *THE BATH*—whether at the pink-rimmed washbasin or the white pitcher that stands to the right of the basin in the lower corner of the painting; or whether the eye is drawn to the strong white accent of the towel about the child's waist or the dominant vertical stripes of the mother's dress; or perhaps centers on the heads of the mother and child with their downturned eyes—the heavy outlines, dark shades of purples and browns (but never the blacks of the Japanese prints) carry the eye

## Mary Cassatt's *The Child's Bath*, 1893

### **Project: Assembly Line Drawings**

**Let's Look:** Have the class look very closely at the poster. Make a list of each element in the painting such as the water basin, the pattern on the rug, the little girl's feet, etc. The list will help the class see all the details in the painting. Being aware of the details will help them when they draw their own version of *The Child's Bath*.

**Materials:** Paper, black marker or pen. Crayons, colored markers/pencils, or pastels are optional.

**Getting Started:** Arrange the room. The class should be sitting in a big circle. Hand out a piece of paper and a black marker or pen to each student. Ask each students to write their name on the back of the paper. Discuss how an assembly line works (many people working together, each person adding on a part to build a complete item, like a car). In this case, the class will form an assembly "circle" to create a series of drawings. Every person in the class will work on every drawing. Every drawing will be of Mary Cassatt's painting *The Child's Bath*. Review "Assembly Line" rules before beginning.

1. When the teacher announces "on your mark, get set, and go" begin to draw. Each student should draw a part of the painting (either an object, a pattern, a part of the child, etc.)
2. There will only be 15-30 seconds to draw, so draw quickly.
3. When the teacher says switch, everyone stops drawing and passes their paper to the left.
4. Begin drawing as soon as you receive your next piece of paper.
5. Try to draw something different on each paper.
6. This pattern of passing the paper to the left and drawing continues until the original piece of paper returns to its owner.
7. Make sure to contribute to every drawing.
8. Details are important.

**Variations:** This project is active and can be completed quickly. Consider repeating the "Assembly Line " with slightly altered rules. Perhaps allow more or less time between switching, or have each student use a different color marker in order to create multi-colored drawings. Another way to extend the project is to have the students color their drawings. Pastels would be best, however crayons or markers work as well.

**Mary Cassatt (American, 1844 - 1926)**  
***On a Balcony, c.1878***  
***The Letter, 1890-91***  
***The Child's Bath, 1893***

**About the Artist**

Mary Cassatt was an American painter who, after 1875, lived and worked permanently in France. Raised in a supportive, well-to-do family in Philadelphia, Cassatt was determined to pursue a professional artistic career at a time when it was extremely uncommon for women to pursue a serious career in art. At age 16 she enrolled in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. She soon became tired of the strictly regimented curriculum and the condescending attitudes of many of her male professors who felt that art was no more than a valuable hobby for a woman. She left for Paris to take private lessons, studied in Spain and Italy, and in 1871 she came to Chicago to try to sell some of her paintings only to have several destroyed in the Great Chicago Fire.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed many profound changes in the art world. Many artists, such as the Impressionists (a group of avant-garde artists who exhibited outside of the juried academic exhibition called the Salon) spurned the restrictive styles codified by academic traditions. Cassatt was the only American artist to become an established member of the Impressionists in Paris where her colleagues were Edgar Degas and Camille Pissarro. In 1886 she helped to organize the eighth and final Impressionist exhibition. In the early 1900s, Cassatt became active in the women's suffrage movement in the United States.

Like many of the Impressionists, Cassatt concentrated on scenes from everyday, late-19th-century life. She is most famous for her particularly sensitive, yet unsentimental, portrayal of women and children. In her paintings, prints, and pastels, she examined women across their life-cycles from infancy to adulthood and old age.

***On a Balcony, c. 1878*** This painting invites us to explore the lifestyle of a modern, middle class woman in late-19th-century France. Relaxing against the backdrop of lush flowers and foliage, she takes advantage of leisure -- a new lifestyle created by the Industrial Revolution. This new-found ritual of reading the daily newspaper had just been made possible and popular with the recent increase of Parisian newspapers from six to twelve. Recent conservation made visible the green railing which subtly appears behind the sitter's head, thus allowing scholars to link it with its proper title of *On a Balcony*.

***The Letter, 1890 - 91*** This print is one of 220 that Mary Cassatt created during her prolific career. It belongs to a series of ten prints that emphasize daily rituals in the lives of Parisian women. Other prints in this series reveal women involved in other active roles of bathing, dressing, visiting, riding public transportation, and caring for children. The decorative use of pattern, flat colors and clear lines were inspired by Japanese wood block prints. To create this print, Cassatt cut (or etched) an image into a copper plate (a thin metal sheet). She left the leftover metal debris from etching the image on the copper plate to trap ink. This created a velvety, slightly blurred line known as **drypoint**. She then colored and inked the plate. Finally, she created multiple prints by pressing a piece of paper onto the inked and colored plate.

***The Child's Bath, 1893*** One of Cassatt's most famous works, *The Child's Bath* is typical of her art due to its emphasis on the figure and the common theme of woman and child. *The Child's Bath* was painted over one hundred years ago, when many homes still lacked running water and separate rooms for bathing. Unlike Renaissance painters who tried to create an illusion of reality and depth by using scientific perspective, Cassatt's composition tilts toward us as if we were looking down from above. Yet in spite of bold contrasts such as those between the woman's striped dress and the diamond-patterned carpet, our attention is continually drawn to the tender interplay of the woman bathing her child. Both figures are totally absorbed in this task, the woman supportive, the child slightly wary. It is this quiet exchange, so prevalent in Cassatt's work, which continually celebrates the tender within the everyday.

## INTRODUCING ART

### MARY CASSATT

1. Mary Cassatt was born in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania, May 22, 1845. The family moved several times during her childhood. When she was 7 years old the family moved to Paris, France. In 1855, after the death of her brother, they moved back to Pennsylvania to settle in Philadelphia.
2. When she was 17 years old she entered the Pennsylvania Academy of Art. She attended this school for 4 years.
3. Mary wanted to study in Europe and after much pleading from her father, she was allowed to go. Having a career and traveling abroad were not considered proper for young women. She lived with friends while studying at the Chaplin studio. During the war between Prussia and France she returned home.
4. In 1872 Mary returned to Paris. After many years her parents and sister joined her. Often times her brothers would stay with her. Paris had a lower cost of living than Philadelphia and the family living standard improved while in Paris. Her mother's and sister's illnesses took much of Cassatt's time. She seldom returned to Philadelphia because she became very seasick on several journeys.
5. At the suggestion of Edgar Degas, her friend, Mary began to paint women and children. It became her favorite subject and the one for which she is most well known.
6. Mary worked long hours into the night painting and printmaking. Her family was pleased that she was able to earn money selling her art but never really appreciated her talent. After her death, relatives were surprised that their Aunt Mary's work was so valuable.
7. After her parents' death, Mary bought a home in the country. Many people visited her, she contributed to the school, helped young women find work, and borrowed their children for models.
8. In later life Mary developed diabetes. Her sight failed and she became irritable. She died at the age of 82 years old.

Title: "The Bath"

See Art Education Inc. print

~~I do not have a copy of this painting to view for criticism purposes.~~

K-6

