

F.A.M.E. III October 2006

Mary Cassatt

1844 - 1926

(Costume: white ruffled skirt, white blouse, white hat with lace)

Biography

Our artist today has been called America's greatest woman painter. Her name is Mary Cassatt. Mary was born over 160 years ago to a wealthy Pennsylvanian family. Even as a young girl, Mary had a mind of her own. She did not take to the activities most girls from wealthy families enjoyed: painting teacups, needlework, playing the harp, etc. Instead, she wanted to paint pictures for money, which was very shocking at the time.

Her family traveled to Europe quite extensively. By the time Mary was ten, she had visited many of the European capitals. Mary wanted to study art, much to the displeasure of her family. She studied art at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts for four years. She didn't like the slow pace of instruction or the patronizing attitude of the male students and teachers. She left the Academy and persuaded her family to allow her to travel to Europe and moved to Paris in 1866. This was a bit shocking for the mid 1800s. Normally women in those days would have to be escorted everywhere.

She traveled back to the U.S. and in 1871 the archbishop of Pittsburg commissioned Mary to paint copies of the paintings in Italy. She traveled back to Europe, finally settling in Paris. She declared, "Women do not have to fight for recognition here if they do serious work." After her father retired, the entire family moved to Paris.

In Paris, at the Salon of Beaux-Arts, a committee would select acceptable paintings to be shown at the Salon's exhibitions. Being selected at the Salon could mean financial success for artists as art dealers would sell their works and collectors became interested in collecting the art. The Salon indicated to Mary that her paintings were too accurate of her subjects and she used colors that were too bright, however, in 1872, they accepted Cassatt's first painting. Mary felt very restricted by the standards at the Salon; she even reluctantly changed a painting to please the committee. It was around this time that she noticed the pastels of Edgar Degas in a window. She wrote to a friend, "I used to go and flatten my nose against that window and absorb all I could of his art. It changed my life. I saw art then as I wanted to see it". Degas and Mary became friends. It was Degas who invited Mary to display her painting with the "Independents", who were what we refer to today as the Impressionists.

Mary never married. In the late 1870s, Cassatt quit painting to care for her mother and sister. Her sister died, her mother's health improved and Mary resumed painting in the mid 1880s. Her art style continued to evolve, to a much more simpler, straightforward approach. As the 1900s approached, Mary served as an advisor to art collectors.

Mary Cassatt suffered from diabetes and unfortunately was forced to stop painting in 1914 when she became blind. She was a feminist and worked in the movement to allow women the right to vote.

She died on June 14, 1926 at the age of 82. She was buried in France.

Art

Mary painted in a special style called Impressionism. Impressionist painters tried to create a mood or show their feelings in their paintings, different from the realistic artists. An impressionist painting is not like a photograph. When you get too close to an impressionist painting, you can lose sight of what's portrayed. If you step back several feet, then the images are clearer. Impressionist painters also used natural light. Many painted outdoors (but even indoors, the scenes were bright and colorful).

Many of Mary Cassatt's paintings were of women and children. Mary used her family as models in many paintings.

Painting *Woman with Dog*

Let's look at one of Mary's paintings.

What was life like in the town in the background (were there cars, computers, TVs?)

The woman in the painting may be Mary's sister Lydia or her housekeeper's cousin. We know that the dog in the picture is Mary's dog, Batty. Are there mostly warm colors or cool colors in the pictures (show wheel). Does the painting make you feel happy or sad? (Light colors convey a bright, uplifting mood).

What color is the woman's dress? (Class will say white). Let's look closer, do you see other colors in her dress? (blues, pinks, lavender, grays). Impressionists did not pre-mix their colors on the palette. A white dress is made up of many different strokes of color, depending on the light.

Where does Mary use darker colors? (green bush/tree). Would you say there is a balance of dark/light colors? Dark colors tend to turn away the eye whereas light colors draw the eye.

Is the woman in the center of the painting? (no) The painting is slightly asymmetrical, but it is balanced. Is there a lot of detail in the background? (no). The impressionists want you to focus on the immediate moment, the main subject of the painting. Does the woman seem close or far away? (close). We could be on the balcony or looking out into it. By cutting out the details of the surrounding scene, Mary draws you close to the painting.

I have a book of Cassatt's artwork, with many of her famous pieces marked. If time permits, show the students a sampling of Cassatt's artwork. (A photograph of an elderly Mary Cassatt is marked in the front of the book).

Art Activity

There are pieces of paper with a landscape and an animal. Have the children be the impressionist artist by using short "brushstrokes" (crayons) to color the pictures. An example is on the cart, along with copies of the outline.