



## MARY CASSATT: ARTIST AND TRAILBLAZER

by Vanessa Wright

One day in Paris, in 1851, a seven-year-old American girl named Mary Cassatt went with her family to visit the Louvre, one of the world's greatest art museums. The little girl gazed up in wonder at paintings of the old masters, such as Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Titian's mythical scenes, and Rembrandt's shadowy, brooding landscapes.

"Someday," she said to herself, "I will be as great an artist as they."

A few years later, young Mary Cassatt returned with her family to America. With the images she had seen in Paris still aglow in her mind, she wanted more than ever to become a professional artist. "In fact," she said to a friend, "I am going to paint better than the old masters!"

As soon as she was old enough, Cassatt entered the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. She took drawing classes, but was disappointed because the Academy's art collection had very few great paintings for her to study. At that time, not even the best American museums had collections that could compare with the great paintings hanging in the Louvre.

Cassatt remembered watching art students in Paris learn to paint by copying the great works in the Louvre. "If I want to be a serious painter," she thought, "it seems I must return to Europe."

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brooding: gloomy



Cassatt's goal was clear, but there were many obstacles in her path. The year was 1865. Women did not have the right to vote. They were not allowed to attend the best art schools. In general, women were not expected or encouraged to become artists. And they were definitely not supposed to travel abroad alone. So when Cassatt told her father that she wished to study in Europe and become a professional artist, he strongly opposed her wishes.

But Cassatt persisted. She discussed, explained, and argued with her father until he changed his mind. Rather than resist her, he decided to support her artistic ambitions. And so in 1866, when Cassatt was twenty-two years old, she moved back to Paris, ready to fulfill her dreams.

In Paris, Cassatt studied with successful artists. She carefully copied paintings in the Louvre. She also packed up her brushes, rode out to the countryside, and painted the people and landscapes that caught her fancy.

Many people admired Cassatt's paintings of the French countryside. Her teachers admired them so much that they encouraged her to try to get them displayed in the great annual art exhibition called the Salon. At the Salon, some paintings were awarded ribbons or medals, but almost all artists whose work was chosen for the Salon would become successful. And, on the other side, it was almost impossible to succeed as a painter without exhibiting at the Salon.

It was not easy to get a painting picked for exhibition in the Salon. The jury that judged the paintings only liked a

abroad: outside one's home country

opposed: disagreed with

persisted: continued with determination

ambitions: goals; strong desires to achieve

certain kind of art. They chose paintings that resembled the work of the old masters: dark and serious, with smooth, blended colors. They wanted the subjects to be from history, mythology, or literature, arranged in formal poses, and painted to look perfect instead of like real people. They did not welcome originality.

The jury rejected the first painting Cassatt submitted for the Salon. But the next year, they accepted a painting, very much in the style of the old masters, showing a peasant woman sitting and holding a mandolin.

While it was a great honor to be chosen, Cassatt soon grew restless. She preferred to paint with bright colors and loose strokes. She liked painting ordinary people doing ordinary things. She was developing her own style, but it

was not a style that the Salon's jury

liked. "What should I do?" she wondered. "Should I paint to please the Salon, or should I paint my own way?"

One day, as Cassatt walked past a gallery, she saw a poster showing a painting by a young artist named Edgar Degas. She stopped to look at the picture, and she found it interesting. Her own. The next day she returned to look at Degas' work, and she saw a picture of a woman and a child. She liked it, and she went to see Degas' work again. She saw all sorts of pictures, and she wrote to a friend about them. "I like what Degas has done," she wrote. "I like his pictures. He has done what I wanted to do. Some time ago, Degas saw one of Cassatt's pictures, and he said she painted like the old masters. He said she was not like the old masters and he said she was not like the old masters. He said she was not like the old masters."

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is said that after he looked at her painting, he cried to his friend, "There is someone who feels as I do!"

Edgar Degas was one of the first artists known as the Impressionists, a group that also included Claude Monet and Auguste Renoir. The Impressionists were a group of experimental artists who tried to capture on canvas a brief but true impression of people, places, or objects. They abandoned the old masters' dark colors and smooth brushstrokes. Instead, they used bright, lively colors, and bold lines and brushstrokes. Instead of painting people in stiff, formal poses, they captured people in fleeting moments of everyday life. Degas, for example, painted ballet dancers in rehearsal or laundresses at work.

Degas saw hints of Impressionism in Cassatt's painting. So he hurried to her studio and invited her to exhibit with his group instead of with the Salon. For Cassatt, it meant giving up the success guaranteed by exhibiting with the Salon, but she accepted the offer. Later, she wrote to her friend, "At last I could work with complete independence without concerning myself with the eventual judgment of a

Painted *A Little Girl in*

*an Armchair*. In the painting, a little girl sits sprawled in a

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A year after she met Degas, Cassatt painted

big, comfy chair, with one hand casually reaching behind her head. A small dog sleeps on another chair nearby. The little girl does not look out from the painting. Her expression seems a little bored, as though she had just collapsed into t

experimental: trying new things

fleeting: passing quickly

laundresses: women who do other people's laundry for pay

conventional: ordinary; following accepted rules or practices

sprawled: spread out

chair and heaved a big sigh while wishing she had something else to do. The designs on the blue chairs are rendered with swift brushstrokes. Certainly, the Salon jury would not have approved of this painting!

As Cassatt experimented with the Impressionists' techniques, she began to develop her own individual style. For her subjects, she did not choose the usual landscapes or cityscapes. Instead, she often painted women going about their daily tasks, or mothers and their children sharing tender, trusting moments. Although Cassatt herself never had children, perhaps no artist has better captured the bond between mother and child.

Cassatt continued to try new techniques. After attending an exhibition of Japanese wood-block prints, she experimented with making her own prints and engravings.




Cassatt's *A Little Girl in a Blue Armchair*

rendered: made

Her friend Degas was greatly impressed, and thought her prints to be some of her best work.

Although Cassatt spent most of her life in Paris, she returned sometimes to the United States. She advised wealthy Americans who wished to buy and exhibit great European art, both the old masters as well as the best of the new paintings. More than any other person, Mary Cassatt helped introduce Americans to the work of the Impressionists. Some of the pieces Cassatt helped purchase still hang in American museums today.

Mary Cassatt was a trailblazer. Though women in her time had little freedom and few choices, she achieved her ambition to become a professional artist. She developed a style all her own, and chose the subjects that suited her, regardless of official opinions. She was the only American to exhibit with the Impressionists, and helped bridge the art gap between Europe and the United States.

"I have not done all I wanted to," she wrote before her death, "but I tried to make a good fight." 



*Mary Cassatt in 1914*

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trailblazer: one who does something new, who opens a new path for others to follow