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MARY CASSATT

Modern Woman or the Cult of True Womanhood?

By Norma Broude

"Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman" was the title of an impressive and long-overdue exhibition of the work of this American expatriate artist, mounted by the Art Institute of Chicago in the fall of 1998.[1] That title, apparently a provocative one in some quarters because of the extra-aesthetic issues it raised,[2] both referred to and was derived from the title of the ambitious "Modern Woman" mural painted by Cassatt to decorate one of the lunettes in the central Gallery of Honor of the Woman's Building at the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893 (Fig. 1).[3] Needless to say, it was most unusual in that period for a woman to receive a commission to decorate a public building. For this and other reasons, the segregated Woman's Building provided an important professional opportunity for Cassatt, who was still little known in America at this time. Largely responsible for her selection was Bertha Palmer (Mrs. Potter Palmer), a prominent social leader and philanthropist in Chicago, who was president of the Board of Lady Managers, authorized by Congress to oversee the Woman's Building. It was the energy and determination of Mrs. Palmer that persuaded Cassatt to accept the commission in spite of what she perceived as American hostility to women artists. "After all," Cassatt wrote a friend in 1893, "speak to me of France. Women do not have to fight for recognition here if they do serious work. I suppose it is Mrs. Palmer's French blood," she continued, "which gives her her organizing powers and her determination that women should be *someone* and not *something*."[4]

That determination was also very much Cassatt's own. Nearly 50 years old in 1892 when she was offered the commission, Cassatt had never married, and lived what we might today regard as an alternative lifestyle for a woman of her period. Her own mother had recently described her as a woman who was "intent on fame and money." "After all," she had continued, pragmatically and perhaps somewhat defensively, "a woman who is not married is lucky if she has a decided love for work of any kind and the more absorbing it is the better."[5]

Cassatt's mural in three panels, an allegory in modern dress, shows the freedom of modern woman to pursue knowledge, art, and fame. In the panel on the left, young girls pursue fame, with fame as a nude female child who leads them upward and onward as she flies freely through the sky. This allegorical image, I propose, relates to and perhaps makes self-conscious reference to one of the "Vending of Loves" motifs from the well-known wall paintings at Pompeii, an image in which young women are shown pursuing a putto, a symbol of love in flight (Fig. 2). Here Cassatt plays audaciously on an ancient image and a traditional stereotype of femininity, inverting it meaningfully for the "modern woman." In the panel at the right, three modern young women are presented as the arts, music, and the dance. And in the central and largest panel, Cassatt takes as her subject "Young Women Plucking the Fruits of Knowledge and Science." In an outdoor setting, women working together carry baskets, climb ladders, and reach to pluck and eat the ripe fruit that swings overhead, which they then pass on to the next generation of young girls. In this central panel, Cassatt again boldly inverted the gendered meanings of familiar imagery and iconography, in this case, the innumerable fin-de-siècle Garden of Eden images by such artists as Edvard Munch and Paul Gauguin, in which woman or Eve is presented in various guises as the evil femme fatale, the instrument of the devil who caused man's fall by tempting him to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. At the end of the 19th century, of course, the fruits now at stake were those of contemporary knowledge and science, still widely regarded as forbidden fruits for women and girls in an era when expert medical opinion held that education and intellectual exertion might make them infertile or even drive them insane.

Cassatt's "Modern Woman" mural was not a critical success, not least of all because there were no male figures in it, causing one critic to comment that, as a result, the painting "seems too trivial and below the dignity of a great occasion."[6] The absence of male figures had been an issue even while the work was in progress. In a letter to Mrs. Palmer, Cassatt had reported: "An American friend asked me in rather a huffy tone the other day, 'Then this is woman apart from her relations to man!' I told him it was. Men I have no doubt are painted in all their vigor on the walls of other buildings."[7] A witty retort, certainly, and one that was entirely worthy of Cassatt's "modern woman." But then she went on to soften, qualify, and justify it in terms that may no longer seem so modern and which can begin to illuminate Cassatt's predicament as a woman artist, even a relatively emancipated and successful one, at the end of the 19th century. Men may be depicted in all their vigor on the walls of the other buildings, she says, but then continues: "to us the sweetness of childhood, the charm of womanhood, if I have not conveyed some sense of that charm, in one word, if I have not been absolutely feminine, then I have failed."[8]

These statements deserve sustained attention because they present some revealing contradictions. Despite Cassatt's own resistance to patriarchal norms of proper femininity—her mother described her as a woman who wanted to achieve fame and money through her own accomplishments—and in spite of the recognition that she enjoyed in Europe, she here cloaks and masks those unseemly ambitions in conventionally gendered language. She walks a fine line, one that respectable women of her class apparently still had to negotiate even at the end of the century. In her mural, Cassatt gave expression to the modern woman's desire for autonomy and access to the public sphere, a desire based on modern doctrines of rationality, progress, and ambitious individualism. But her words betray signs of a conventional, almost essentialist belief in "women's qualities," a femininity of sweetness and charm, an acceptance of the gender stereotypes that the mural seems to defy. What we see here, I propose, is an important and widespread pattern of resistance on the one hand and simultaneous complicity on the other, a pattern typical of many Euro-American women artists and intellectuals who achieved fairly notable positions during the 19th century. Like Cassatt, these women desired autono-

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my, success, and fame, but they had also absorbed the patriarchal values of their bourgeois, Victorian era.[9] And in a century of dynamic and discomforting social change, their own ambivalence may have been the necessary price, or even the necessary condition, for their extraordinary achievements.

Despite Cassatt's view of France, her adopted country, as a place where "women do not have to fight for recognition...if they do serious work," that was not and had never been universally the case. In France, as elsewhere during the 19th century, women were defined primarily by their maternal capacities, and motherhood within the parameters of the patriarchal family was the virtuous norm for the respectable woman. To the extent that education was advocated at all for women, it was justified, by liberals and conservatives alike, only as a tool that could better enable women to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers. Whereas in the 18th century women had been faulted by philosophers such as Rousseau for their lesser natures and weaker characters, in the 19th century social philosophers such as Auguste Comte and historians such as Jules Michelet began to credit women's nature not only as a source of difference but also as a source of superiority confined entirely to the moral and spiritual realm. In Comte's Positive system, which had a Cult of Woman at its core, a gendered, bourgeois order was inscribed as the modern ideal for French society; women were praised as the vehicles of feeling over reason, morality over politics, and they were assigned the special mission of moralizing society and guarding the domestic realm. Women's presumed weaknesses thus became their strengths, and they were placed on a pedestal that effectively barred them not only from equal citizenship but also from professionalism and from any real voice in the public realm.[10]

As an upper-middle-class woman who, atypically, became a professional artist in the public realm—and not what was far more common in her day, a "lady painter"—Mary Cassatt had to negotiate very carefully her relationship to this "cult of true womanhood." Nevertheless, in an era of change and transition, Cassatt did occasionally use her art to challenge or at least to wryly expose an aspect of the period's gendered social relations. For example, *At the Opera* (1877-78; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), one of the most widely discussed and analyzed of her works in recent feminist literature, is certainly a self-conscious statement about the gendered experience of looking and being looked at in public from the female point of view. In the foreground, a mature and sedate woman in black looks out toward the stage through her opera glasses, while a man in a distant box has his glasses focused on her—or, more likely, it now seems, on another woman, in daring décolleté, whom we glimpse sitting in the box immediately behind her.[11] And in a similarly transgressive spirit, in the late 1870s Cassatt chose to paint pictures of her sister Lydia (*Lydia Reading in a Garden*, 1878-79; Art Institute of Chicago) and her mother (*The Artist's Mother Reading "Le Figaro,"* 1878; Private Collection), both utterly absorbed in reading the daily newspaper. While this activity, as a subject, seems entirely normal and harmless today, we must bear in mind that within the context of this period and its debates over women's capabilities and natural place, Cassatt was in fact making a particular kind of claim for the educated woman—a claim that, in some quarters, could still cause discomfort and be considered daring and destabilizing. For even though 1880 was the year in which a controversial education law was passed in France, authorizing for the first time the establishment of secondary schools for girls, that law, the Camille Sée law, carefully defined a course of study for girls that would not prepare them for the baccalaureate examination and would consequently bar them from higher education and access to the professions.[12] In a political climate that thus effectively acted to preserve the longstanding definition of education for women as education for submissive motherhood, the activity of reading—in particular the reading of newspapers—could still be regarded as problematic, implying gender role reversal through an "unnatural" engagement with the public and the political sphere.

At other times, of course, especially from the late 1880s on, Cassatt produced those attractive and sometimes powerfully evocative, but nevertheless basically repetitive, images of happily sequestered mothers and children, which have been emphasized and made so familiar to us by the subsequent literature. These images supported and continue to support a conservative view of woman's nature and position. It was Cassatt's own political astuteness, at least in equal measure to the conservatism of her social and class conditioning, that was responsible for this complex pattern that I here identify and emphasize in her art, a pattern of guarded social resistance on the one hand and complicity on the other. And this ambivalence can also be observed in the multiple, shifting identities that Cassatt assumed in representing herself as well as other women.

For despite her own very modern ambitions, and her undeniable political skills in negotiating a professional world still constructed to exclude women, Cassatt's social conditioning as an upper-middle-class woman could still make it very difficult for her to reconcile her personal and professional identities. She insisted at all times, for example, on preserving the public facade, or masquerade if you will, of proper femininity in her own self-presentations. Nevertheless, Cassatt's self-portraits communicate the self-conscious anxiety of self-presentation that must have existed for her in a world where men normally possessed the gaze and women were its objects, where men were the artists and women their models. In a small watercolor self-portrait of about 1880 (National Portrait Gallery), she presents herself absorbed in the work on her drawing board, barely suggested by a few diagonal lines at the right. With her face obscured in shadow, the features smudged and imprecise, she seems withdrawn and inaccessible to the viewer. In another more formal self-portrait of about 1878 (Fig. 3), Cassatt gives herself firmer but not conventionally pretty features; but she is no less ambivalent about the production of her own body image, as woman and as artist. She places herself here not in the role of a working artist but of a prettily attired feminine object who leans against the arm of an overstuffed chair. But again she eludes the male viewer's gaze through a twisted and somewhat uncomfortable body placement that masks and obscures her female attributes. She does not look out at the viewer but instead stares resolutely beyond the frame, deflecting the viewer's gaze from her own person and thus helping to reinscribe for herself, in some measure, the masculine subject position of the one who looks rather than the one who is being looked at—the position that was essential to her identity as an artist but also at odds with her classed notions of femininity and decorum.

Those standards of decorum were undoubtedly at the root of Cassatt's professed aversion to the portrait that Edgar Degas painted of her in the early 1880s (National Portrait Gallery). It shows her seated indecorously and informally, bent forward with legs spread and elbows on knees as she pauses in her examination of some cards, variously identified as tarot cards and as cartes de visites, which are fanned out in her hands. Similar tensions involving issues of identity and decorum were addressed in an even more unconventional way by Degas in his several images of Mary Cassatt at the Louvre. In Figure 4, for example, Cassatt is seen from the rear and presents a corsetted and exaggeratedly feminine body type. But in her black suit, she is dressed far more simply and severely

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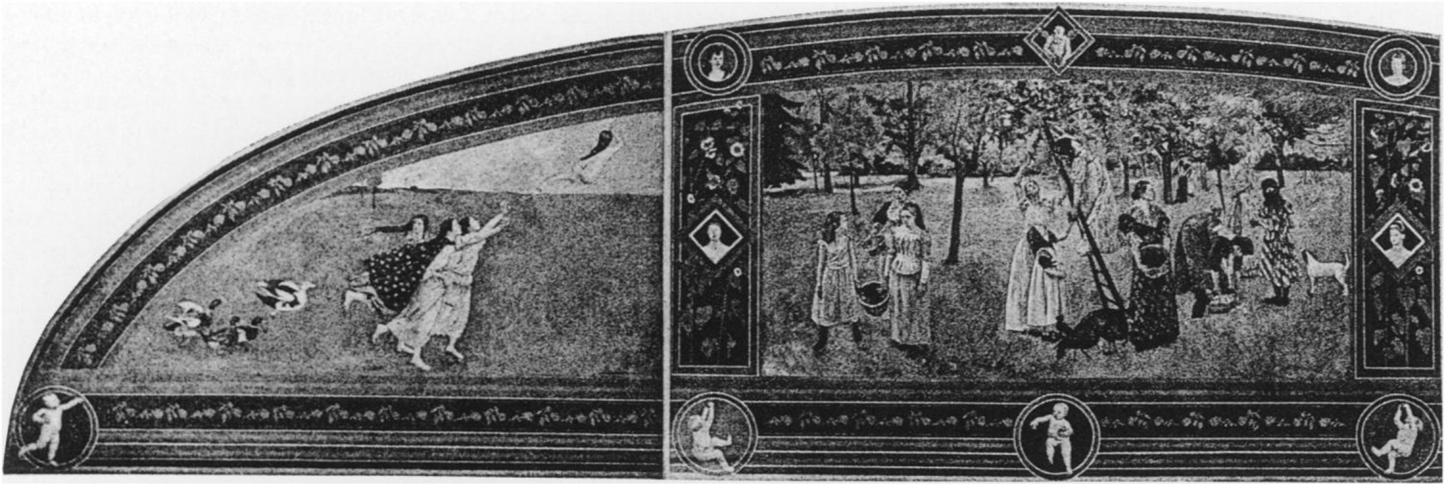

Fig. 1. Mary Cassatt, *Modern Woman* (1892-93), oil on canvas, 12' x 58' (presumed destroyed), mural for the Woman's Building, World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago.

Fig. 2. *Cupid in Flight*, fresco from Pompeii, before AD 79, detail from a copy by Antonio Canova (c. 1799). Photo: *La Gipsoteca Canoviana di Possagno* (1992), 114.

than was the norm for ladies of her era; and she leans not on a woman's parasol but on a man's umbrella.[13] In this subtle but critically destabilized image of the artist as *femme-homme*, Degas seems to have been seeking a different way of balancing Cassatt's position as feminine model—and hence, in this instance, as object of the gaze—with a suggestion of the more masculine subject position that she did perforce assume in her professional life, a position that was integral to her unconventional identity as an artist.

As a woman artist Cassatt was obliged to negotiate not only her relationship with the "cult of true womanhood" but also her special relationship to prevailing, hierarchized concepts of art and nature and related notions of artistic style, all of which were thoroughly gendered concepts during the 19th century. The idea that "Nature is to Culture as Female is to Male" has, of course, been a very influential formulation in Western thought for many centuries. In the dualistic Western philosophical tradition, the idea that nature is female goes back to the writings of Plato and Aristotle. The tradition of gendering nature as female survives and flourishes in innumerable examples of 19th-century art, for example, Gustave Courbet's image of his studio, a "real Allegory," as he called it, in which he depicted himself seated at his easel, engaged in painting a landscape, while a nude female figure, who represents naked truth and female nature, looks over his shoulder approvingly (1854-55; Musée d'Orsay, Paris). The concept of nature gendered as female is also central to the cultural meanings that attach to the women and animals who are among Courbet's favorite subjects, depicted typically as passive and submissive, both to the predatory male hunter and to the active gaze of the male artist and his male patrons.

In the later 19th century, Impressionist landscape painters came to be defined as social outcasts in relation to this gendered paradigm seen so clearly in the art of Courbet. Because they were said to take a "passive" and responsive rather than aggressive and controlling attitude toward their subjects in nature, they risked—and invited for themselves and for art in general—stereotypical feminization. The perception of the feminized character of this branch of Impressionism was in fact widespread, and it had to do not only with what was perceived as these artists' passive and hence unmanly attitude toward nature but with the very techniques they chose to use, techniques that many critics of the period objected to in gendered terms.[14]

Interestingly, the work of Berthe Morisot, who along with Cassatt and Marie Bracquemond exhibited on a fairly regular basis with the Impressionists, was consistently praised by critics for the same qualities that they objected to in the work of her male colleagues. These qualities included the quickness and fluidity of her brushwork, what they described as her exclusive concern for superficial sensation rather than draftsmanship and compositional structure, and her responsive and imitative facility. In 19th-century France, scientific opinion held that women were physiologically less capable of rational and creative thought than were men, and that they were, by their very biological nature, more given to imitation, to emotionalism and superficiality. And so, for art critics of the period, Morisot's paintings seemed a perfectly natural and appropriate expression of the artist's femininity, for which she should be praised and approved. But it was only in those terms, as an art for and by women, that Impressionism in general could be justified. For a man to work in this manner, critics made clear, was an unsuitable and repugnant abdication of his God-given intellectual gifts, a betrayal of his very biological identity as a man, and hence a threat to the social order.[15]

Mary Cassatt's stylistic choices and strengths were also in this sense a threat to the social order. Already commonplace in 19th-century France was a polarized gendering of the elements of artistic style: line and color. Drawing was regarded as rational and color as emotional. In the words of Charles Blanc, Beaux-Arts administrator and historian, "drawing is the masculine sex of art and color the feminine one."[16] Cassatt's strong drawing, which distinguishes her style from that of Morisot, was not what a woman was supposed to be biologically capable of doing. According to Cassatt's own report, Degas once said of her work that "no woman has a right to draw like that,"[17] an admiring comment, certainly, but at best a backhanded compliment that reflects the prejudices and as-

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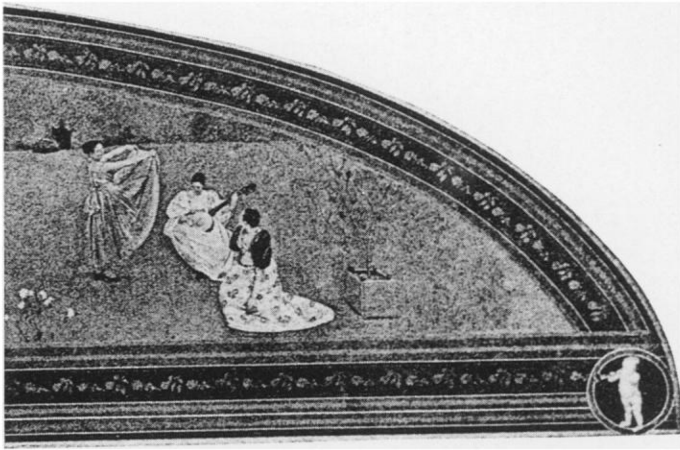

Photo: Chicago Historical Society.

sumptions of this era. Degas admired Cassatt's strengths as a draftsman, but saw them as an exception to what were widely assumed to be the limits of creativity and achievement for women.

Both Cassatt and Morisot were born at a time when a respectable lady was not supposed to go about unchaperoned in public; nor, if she were suitably modest, would she allow her eyes to meet the gaze of a man who was not a member of her immediate family. Despite their status as exceptional women, functioning as professionals in a wider arena, these artists were forced to negotiate such conventional notions of respectable behavior for women of their class. And their professional identities and careers were inevitably shaped by these classed notions of feminine propriety, which limited their choice of subjects for the most part to the domestic realm and also limited the kinds of professional contacts they might have with their male colleagues. Rarely, for example, did these artists paint the adult male, and when they did, their models were usually members of their own family, as in Morisot's painting of 1883, in which she depicted her husband, Eugène Manet, overseeing their daughter Julie at play out-of-doors (Private Collection), or in Cassatt's portrait of 1884, of her brother Alexander J. Cassatt, who sits reading the newspaper while his young son Robert looks over his shoulder (Philadelphia Museum of Art). Although intimate depictions of mothers and children have long been a staple of art and artists in the Western tradition, the subject of fathers and children, and in particular fathers and daughters, is rare outside the realm of the formal family portrait. In the late 19th century, though no less rare as a subject, fathers and children did appear in the work of Degas in the 1870s, and in the 1880s more predictably in the work of women artists such as Cassatt and Morisot. Here, then, is a notable example of how these women were able to turn their cultural limitations into an advantage, creating unorthodox images that uniquely defied the cultural stereotypes and that began to explore in a contemporary manner the nature of fathering as a role for men—or, more specifically, for upper-middle-class men—in the modern world.

But it was for their more culturally orthodox and more numerous representations of mothers and children that these artists were best known and most appreciated, in their own time and for long afterwards. The title of the first monograph on Cassatt, published in 1913 by Achille Segard—*Un peintre des enfants et des mères—Mary Cassatt*—says it all. Much earlier, in 1881, the critic Joris Karl Huysmans had written of Cassatt that only a woman could so successfully paint children,[18] a remark that had reportedly annoyed her.[19] But, nevertheless, from the 1880s on, she turned her attention to the subject of motherhood, garnering wide success and approval for images that often had unabashed overtones of traditional Madonna and Child and Holy Family imagery.

Why the repeated images of mothers and children from an artist who was not a mother and who in her own life was reported to have taken note of children only insofar as they could serve her as models?[20] To answer this complicated question, we must get beyond the usual cant that has been promoted since the 19th century, the myth that these happy mothers and beautiful children are natural expressions of Cassatt's femininity and therefore more truthful as images of the mother-child bond than any previously painted. And we must consider instead the specific social and market contexts that framed Cassatt's choices and the reception of her work.

On one level, in the surprisingly seductive and even Michelangelesque babies sometimes portrayed by Cassatt in their mothers' arms, for example, *The Caress* (1902; Fig. 5), we may be seeing, in a guarded and limited form, this artist's only respectable access to the unclad figure and to the high art tradition of the nude. But in more far-reaching terms, I would reiterate that Cassatt was a self-conscious and skillful player in a game of professionalism and identity still constructed to exclude women. And in light of what we know about the network of discourses—philosophical, moral, medical, and aesthetic—that defined the female creative subject, the woman artist in the 19th century, Cassatt's choices are really not surprising. In that context, we may readily see how the subject of mothers and children—at first apparently resisted, then later embraced by this artist—would have provided for Cassatt one of the few, narrow gaps of possibility within which she, as an ambitious woman artist of the upper classes, could fully grasp and define for herself a socially acceptable professional status and identity. And the success of her strategy—as strategy I believe it was—is easily measured by the sudden outpouring of articles and in particular by the proliferation of reproductions of Cassatt's works that began to appear in popular journals both in France and the United States from the turn of the century onward. These included such diverse publications as *Scribner's Magazine* (1896), *Brush and Pencil* (1900), *L'art decoratif* (1902), *Les modes* (1904), *La revue de l'art ancien et moderne* (1908), *Harper's Bazaar* (1911), *Les arts* (1912), *Arts and Decoration* (1915), *Town and Country* (1916), and many others.[21]

If Cassatt's presumably natural and spontaneous images of mothers embraced by children who hang affectionately upon their necks remind us not only of Renaissance madonnas but also of the happy mothers of 18th-century bourgeois art, that, too, is not accidental. The oeuvres of many late-18th-century painters, from Sir Joshua Reynolds to Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, graphically portray the joys and rewards of family life and particularly of motherhood, often depicting physical intimacy between mother and child or showing us the adoration of a secular infant. And as we now know, such images were part of a wider, late-18th-century program of moral edification and reform that encouraged women to assume and indeed to wallow in the joys of maternal responsibility, at a time when such behavior had not, in fact, been the cultural norm.[22] A century later, during the 1880s and 1890s, when Cassatt began to devote herself so successfully to the production of similar images, it may have been, in large measure, because a similar kind of social problem existed in France, and visual representation was once again being called upon to play an important, propagandistic role in helping to redefine and reshape the social order.

Cassatt's images of happy and fulfilled mothers, surrounded by children who are the personifications of goodness and innocence, these pictures that deify motherhood and its joys, were painted in an era of great, even hysterical public concern over declining birthrates in France, when the issue of motherhood and family

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had taken on special political and social significance for the nation. In this time of change, as middle-class women were gradually gaining legal access to education and even, after 1884, divorce, debates over the *femme nouvelle* suddenly flooded the Parisian press; and the "new woman's" desire for independence and education over traditional values of marriage and family was not only seen as a threat to the structure of the family but was also being publicly blamed for the declining birthrate. Images proliferated during this period, in the popular press and magazines as well as in high art, equating motherhood with patriotism and promoting women's traditional role in the home as the anchor of bourgeois domesticity.

The good of family and country was thus used as a persuasive argument in efforts to control and limit women's access to higher education and the public sphere. But depending on who was doing the arguing, the good of family and country could also be used as an argument for cautiously widening that access, and it frequently was so employed during the1890s by liberals and some feminists. Interestingly enough, French feminists of the 1890s included many wives and relatives of prominent republican statesmen and educators. Predictably, these well-placed, upper-middle-class women were no friend of the *femme nouvelle*. Instead, they embraced the concept of "equality in difference" and advocated the sexual division of labor in society and the family.[23] And like their counterparts in the United States, women such as Louisine Havemeyer and Bertha Palmer, these conservative feminists constituted an affluent segment of the market that might be counted on to welcome images like Cassatt's, images that enhanced the role of motherhood and acknowledged women's "natural" place in the home.

Although one might never know it from Cassatt's paintings of mothers and children, even those for which she often used her servants as models, being poor and pregnant in Paris in the 19th century was not an uplifting experience for women. The realities of infanticide and infant abandonment are graphically suggested by a chilling cover illustration (Fig. 6) for a story on unwed mothers that appeared in the magazine *L'Assiette au Beurre* in 1902. Despite the development of social welfare programs designed to prevent it, infanticide was very much a class issue in France and had a great deal to do with the phenomenon of depopulation that so obsessed the national leadership at the end of the century. A less desperate and more common solution to the problems of unwanted pregnancies for poor working-class women is seen in an image by Jean Geoffroy, "At the Hospice des Enfants Assistés," which appeared in the Parisian journal, *L'Illustration*, in 1882, and in which a distraught, working-class woman legally abandons her child to the state-run Hospice for Needy Children (Fig. 7).

Fig. 3. Mary Cassatt, *Self-Portrait* (c. 1878), gouache on paper, 23½" x 27½". Metropolitan Museum of Art. Edith H. Proskauer Bequest.

Fig. 4. Edgar Degas, *Mary Cassatt at the Louvre: The Painting Gallery* (c. 1879-80), etching, drypoint, and aquatint, 14⁹⁄₁₆" x 8¹³⁄₁₆". National Gallery of Art. Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection.

Throughout the 19th century, large numbers of children born out of wedlock as well as legitimate children born to poor families—as many as 31 percent of such births in 1869—were abandoned to a state-run foundling home system, which many did not survive.[24] In this light, then, we might view Cassatt's famous images of motherhood not so much as "truthful" recreations of a universal feminine experience at the end of the 19th century—as art audiences are today prone to do—but rather as a classed projection of a conservative and repressive social ideal, an ideal that existed in fact for relatively few women, and certainly not for the working poor, during this era.

Much has been made in recent feminist studies on Cassatt and Morisot of the conventional notions of feminine respectability that denied these upper-middle-class women artists access to the wider public sphere—the streets and cafes and music halls that were the prime subjects of modernity for their male colleagues, while their own experience limited them and their art to the domestic realm. These so-called "spaces of femininity" have even been seen to impact compositionally on the carefully delimited spatial stages on which women artists often placed their female subjects—for example, Morisot's *On the Balcony* (1872; Art Institute of Chicago), where mother and daughter are literally confined to the domestic sphere, fenced off from the public life of the city that lies beyond, or Cassatt's *The Tea* (1879-80; Fig. 8), which has lent itself to similar spatial and social readings.[25] But while such readings have provided a useful way to see these paintings, this kind of reductive interpretation can ultimately foster an essentialist view of these artists. The issues and attitudes embedded in these images are far more complicated and far more ambivalent. In the case of Cassatt in particular, we are looking at an art that reflects the shifting ideological constructions of gender and femininity within French and American culture during the later decades of the 19th century. And there often results from this, in her images of women going about the rituals of their comfortable daily domestic lives, a strange ambiguity of meaning and mood and intention, a challenging resistance to any singular or conventional interpretation, which becomes more evident and more problematic for early-21st-century viewers. Is *The Tea*, for example, a sentimentalized but essentially straightforward view of women's traditional place within the rites of bourgeois domesticity? Or was it meant to be read in the 19th centu-

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ry—and should we read it today—as an image of the middle-class woman's narrow imprisonment within the home? Or might we more profitably read it as an image of the modern woman's networks of sociability and the possibilities for empowerment that these networks could provide?

No one would dispute, certainly, that women artists in this era came to maturity in a gender-segregated, power-imbalanced society in which art had traditionally helped to construct women as objects of male desire and possession or as pedestal madonnas whose identities depended almost entirely on the patriarchal notion of the family. But it was also, increasingly, a modern urban world of work and entertainment, in which lower- and lower-middle-class women were joining the work force in unprecedented numbers. Women supported commerce and industry not only as producers and sellers of commodities, but also, with increasing and critical economic importance, as consumers. As a result, their appearance in public spaces, though never entirely unproblematic, and still resisted particularly among the upper-classes, was nevertheless becoming increasingly commonplace, as we might deduce from several British as well as French paintings of the 1880s. These would include images of the new woman actively engaged in sports, as in Sir John Lavery's *Tennis Party* (1885; Aberdeen Art Galleries and Museum); or the unchaperoned but respectable young working woman—probably a shopgirl—who confronts the busy traffic of a suburban boulevard from the open deck of a horse-drawn omnibus in *A City Atlas* painted by the British Impressionist Sidney Starr (1889; National Gallery of Canada).[26] Back in France, in such telling images as Jean Béraud's *La Pâtisserie Gloppe* (1889; Musée Carnavalet, Paris), we see unchaperoned but again clearly respectable middle-class women taking refreshments at an elegant patisserie, the kind of establishment that served the needs of the moneyed bourgeois woman who regularly shopped now in the department stores that had sprung up along the new boulevards of Paris during the Second Empire. Even so risqué a place as the bar at the Folies-Bergère, in Manet's famous painting of 1881-82 (Courtauld Institute, London), was a site that, according to contemporary reports, respectable ladies were known to frequent.[27] I will not dwell too long on this much contested picture, except to say that critics of the time talked about the serving girl as a prostitute, an epithet that was often applied to respectable working women. In a climate of disorienting social change and backlash, that epithet was an ever-present threat to reputation that could be remarkably effective in containing middle-class women who might now want to venture out into a public sphere that the new economy was opening up to them. The late-19th century was very much an era of transition, when women of all classes were receiving and had to negotiate mixed messages about their new—and sometimes not so new—places in a modern capitalist society.

Fig. 5. Mary Cassatt, *The Caress* (1902), oil on canvas, 32 13/16" x 27 5/16". National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Gift of William T. Evans.

In this context, what I find exceptionally truthful among Mary Cassatt's images of women and children are those that deal precisely with this much contested issue for the respectable woman of being out in public. In *In the Omnibus*, for example, a color print of 1891 (front cover), a middle-class woman, who has ventured out on a public omnibus with her nursemaid and child, looks watchfully around her, assuming a cautious and protective demeanor. While the class differences between the two women, observable both in their dress and comportment, would have seemed self-evident and probably unremarkable in the 19th century, Cassatt displays that difference here in more nuanced social and psychological terms by contrasting the wariness of the middle-class woman, for whom riding on this public conveyance constituted a transgressive act, and the oblivious comfort of the working-class nursemaid, who plays happily with the child on her lap. An equally telling painting, *Woman and Child Driving* (1881; Fig. 9), graphically presents the ambivalence and the discomfort, the anxi-

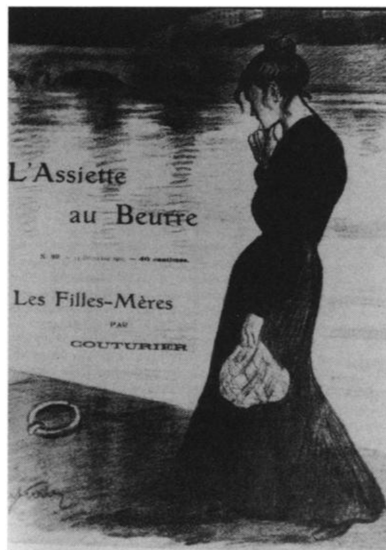

Fig. 6. Couturier, "The Unwed Mothers," *L'Assiette au Beurre* (cover). Dec.13, 1902. Photo: Fuchs, *Poor and Pregnant in Paris* (1992), 2.

Fig. 7. Jean Geoffroy, *At the Hospice des Enfants Assistés*, from *L'Illustration* (1882). Photo: Fuchs, *Poor and Pregnant in Paris* (1992), 223.

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Fig. 8. Mary Cassatt, *The Tea* (1879-80), oil on canvas, 25½" x 36¼". Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. M. Theresa B. Hopkins Fund.

Fig. 9. Mary Cassatt, *Woman and Child Driving* (1881), oil on canvas, 35¼" x 51½". Philadelphia Museum of Art. W.P. Wilstach Collection.

ety and the determination with which middle-class women embraced the challenges and confronted the pitfalls of their changing moral and political landscape. Both images present familiar Impressionist compositions in which three figures are tightly but asymmetrically massed at the right, while their gazes lead us out into the world beyond the frame. In the painting, the woman driving the open carriage through the park is the active subject. Accompanied by a little girl, representative of the next female generation, she sits assertively, but not, we sense, without some tension and trepidation in the driver's seat, while the displaced footman sits passively behind. The woman's position—in the driver's seat—is one that metaphorically departs from the normal social order and may even carry a veiled challenge to that order; but at the same time, it is courageously normalized here by the slice-of-life point of view from which Cassatt chose to present it.

While Cassatt and other women of her class might not have thought of themselves as political "feminists" during the 1890s, the Woman's Building mural does in fact send a strong feminist message. Its central image, "Young Women Plucking the Fruits of Knowledge and Science," speaks boldly, albeit metaphorically, of the passing of knowledge from woman to woman—the feminist insistence on empowering modern woman by giving her a public voice. And it was precisely the specter of giving women a public voice that so alarmed the opponents of women's suffrage at the turn of the century. That alarm gave rise to images such as an astounding anti-suffragist postcard of 1909, which shows the suffragist, her voice choked off by a rope tied around her neck, and her offending, phallic tongue about to be cut off by a pair of anti-feminist scissors; the inscription reads, "Beware of Suffragists."[25] It was, in fact, precisely around this time that Cassatt herself became outspoken in her support for women's suffrage in the United States. In 1915, to raise money to support the cause, she organized a loan exhibition in New York City with her friend Mrs. Havemeyer that included her own works as well as those by Degas and a variety of old masters. Heavily represented here, and in the Havemeyers' holdings of Cassatt's work in general, were those increasingly ubiquitous images of children and women shown in intimate caretaking roles, images that would not have been perceived as a challenge to stereotypical ideals of femininity and which would therefore, ironically, be most effective in helping to support a conservative feminist cause.

But despite such activism and the suffragist results it eventually produced, and despite the brave hopes for modern woman that are expressed by Cassatt's mural, 19th-century notions of femininity and woman's place continued to shape female identity and define the limits of creativity and achievement for the modern woman. In 1913, the Cubist follower Roger de la Fresnaye depicted his vision of "Married Life" (Barnes Collection, Philadelphia), a traditional, masculinist, and dichotomized view of the great new modern world of the 20th century. The husband sits at his desk, surrounded by books and things of the mind, while the wife reclines in the nude for his pleasure. Male versus Female, Culture versus Nature, the clothed versus the nude: the identification of woman with nature and with various kinds of domestic service lives on here in the early 20th century, cloaked within the avant-garde language of Cubism.

In the first half of the 20th century, the gendering of style itself survived most conspicuously in the hierarchical relationship that prevailed between work designated as true abstraction—for example, that of Wassily Kandinsky—and what was deprecatingly classified as mere decoration, for example, the textile designs of Sonia Delaunay. And in 1989, the Guerilla Girls still had to ask: "Do women have to be naked to get into the Metropolitan Museum of Art?" The movement that created this kind of protest had been born earlier, in the 1960s and 1970s, when women filled the art schools but were rarely encouraged by their male teachers to become professional artists. In an era of abstraction that still equated seminal and artistic power, new models of feminist art education were developed. At Cal-Arts in the early 1970s, Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro created the Feminist Art Program, where young women were encouraged to get serious as artists, to question and abandon traditional gender roles, and to topple male hierarchies in the art world. With women teaching women, through a process of discussion and consciousness-raising, female values, female experiences and aspirations beyond the stereotypically "feminine" were consciously designated—as Cassatt's "Modern Woman" mural had also sought to do—as a legitimate and appropriate basis for the creation of "high" art and culture.

At the dawn of yet another century, I enjoin us to see in the work of Mary Cassatt not simply a reification of the 19th-century stereotypes and limitations—the spaces of femininity, the happy mothers and children—stereotypes that she and other women artists of her period had to struggle to deal with and overcome. Nor should we attempt to redeem or to glorify those stereotypes, as there is an increasing tendency of late to do, by redefining them

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as radical feminist positions.[29] Rather, we should look instead and with a sharper eye at the works of these 19th-century women for the traces of their self-conscious struggles and ambivalences and, most of all, for their patterns of complicity and resistance; for it is here, I believe, that important lessons for our own, not entirely different time can best be found. ●

NOTES

1. This article is based on the lecture, "The Woman Artist and Nineteenth-Century Culture," which I delivered as the keynote address for the symposium, "Woman as Artist and Subject: Mary Cassatt, Julia Margaret Cameron and Nineteenth-Century Art and Culture," held in association with this exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago (November 13, 1998) and for the opening at The National Gallery of Art (June 6, 1999).

2. The title elicited considerable press commentary in Chicago, and the words "Modern Woman" were dropped from the exhibition title in its Washington, D.C. venue.

3. On the organization of this fair and the participation and representation of women in the segregated context of a separate Woman's Building, see Jeanne Madeline Weimann, *The Fair Women: The Story of the Woman's Building, World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago 1893* (Chicago: Academy Chicago), 1981.

4. Letter from Cassatt to Sara Hallowell, reported by the latter in a letter to Bertha Palmer; see Nancy Mowll Mathews, ed., *Cassatt and Her Circle: Selected Letters* (New York: Abbeville, 1984), 254.

5. Letter from Katherine Cassatt to Alexander Cassatt, 1891; ibid., 222.

6. Weimann, *The Fair Women*, 314.

7. Mathews, *Cassatt and Her Circle*, 238.

8. Ibid.

9. On these issues, see the stimulating study by Deirdre David, *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1987).

10. See Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1988), especially chapter 6, "The Gendered Republic," 169-89.

11. The presence of the second woman was observed by Kathleen Adler in her paper, "Miss Cassatt at the Louvre," presented at the Chicago symposium (see note 1).

12. On the Camille Sée law, see Claire Goldberg Moses, *French Feminism in the 19th Century* (Albany: State University of New York, 1984), 32-33, 209-10, 233.

13. On the issue of Cassatt's costuming in these images, I am indebted to the observations of Bett Schumacher (The Johns Hopkins University) in her unpublished study, "Mary Cassatt in the Louvre: Freedom in Androgyny."

14. I have considered the role of socially constructed gender distinctions in shaping the reception and interpretation of Impressionist landscape painting in general, from its inception to the present, in my book *Impressionism, A Feminist Reading: The Gendering of Art, Science, and Nature in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991; Boulder, Col.: Westview, 1997).

15. On the gendered reception of Morisot's work, see Tamar Garb, "'L'Art féminin': The Formation of a Critical Category in Late Nineteenth-Century France," *Art History* (March 1989), 39-65; and Garb, "Berthe Morisot and the Feminizing of Impressionism," in T.J. Edelstein, ed., *Perspectives on Morisot* (New York: Hudson Hills, 1990), 57-66.

16. Charles Blanc, *Grammaire des arts du dessin* (Paris: Renouard, 1867), 22.

17. As reported by Cassatt in a letter to Homer Saint-Gaudens (director of fine arts at the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh), 1922, in Mathews, *Cassatt and Her Circle*, 335.

18. Joris-Karl Huysmans, "L'Exposition des Indépendants en 1881," in Huysmans, *L'art moderne* (Paris, 1881).

19. See William Wiser, "Mary Cassatt," in *The Great Good Place: American Expatriate Women in Paris* (New York: Norton, 1991), 58.

20. As reported by George Biddle, *An American Artist's Story* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1939), in ibid., 16.

21. See the lists of reproductions compiled by Adelyn Dohne Breeskin, *Mary Cassatt, A Catalogue Raisonné of the Oils, Pastels, Watercolors, and Drawings* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1970).

22. See Carol Duncan, "Happy Mothers and Other New Ideas in Eighteenth-Century French Art" (1973), in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 200-19.

23. On these issues, see the excellent discussion by Debora Silverman, "The 'New Woman,' Feminism, and the Decorative Arts in Fin-de-Siècle France," in Lynn Hunt, ed., *Eroticism and the Body Politic* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, 1991), 148-49.

24. See Rachel G. Fuchs, *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France* (Albany: State University of New York, 1984), especially chapter 4; and Fuchs, *Poor and Pregnant in Paris: Strategies for Survival in the Nineteenth Century* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University, 1992), especially chapter 9. For contemporary voices on the issues of infanticide and abortion, see Ambroise Tardieu, *Etude médico-légale sur l'enfanticide* (Paris, 1868, 1880); Paul Brouardel, *L'infanticide* (Paris, 1897); Brouardel, *L'avortement* (Paris, 1901); and Madeleine Pelletier, "Le droit à l'avortement," from *L'emancipation sexuelle de la femme* (1911), excerpts trans. and reprinted in Jennifer Waelti-Walters and Steven C. Hause, eds., *Feminisms of the Belle Epoque: A Historical and Literary Anthology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1994), 252-61.

25. See Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity" (1988) in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 244-67.

26. For reproductions, see Norma Broude, ed., *World Impressionism: The International Movement, 1860-1920* (New York: Abrams, 1990), plates 78 and 86.

27. This according to the disapproving reports of the Goncourt brothers and Louis Veuillot, cited by T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1984), 207-08.

28. For reproduction, see Liz McQuiston, *Suffragettes to She-Devils: Women's Liberation and Beyond* (London: Phaidon, 1997), 19.

29. For variants on this developing position, see Harriet Chessman, "Mary Cassatt and the Maternal Body," in David C. Miller, ed., *American Iconology* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1993), 239-59; Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt, Painter of Modern Women* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), chapter 6; and Adam Gopnik, "Cassatt's Children," *The New Yorker* (March 1999), 114-20.

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