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. That title, apparently provocative in some quarters because of the extra-aesthetic issues it raised, 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). 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.”

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.”

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, inventing 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.” 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.” 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.”

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 auto-
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attributes. She does not look out at the viewer but instead stares
comfortable body placement that masks and obscures her female
body image, as woman and as artist. She places herself here not in
an a source of difference but also as a source of superiority confined
to the moral and spiritual realm. In Comte's Positive system,
which had a Cult of Woman at its core, a gendered, bour-
geois order was inscribed as the modern ideal for French society;
were praised as the vehicles of feeling over reason, morality
over politics, and they were assigned the special mission of mor-
alizing society and guarding the domestic realm. Women's pre-
sumed 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 pro-
fessional artist in the public realm—and not what was far more
common in her day, a "lady painter"—Mary Cassatt had to negoti-
ate very carefully her relationship to this "cult of true woman-
hood." 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 femini-
st movement, 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
decolleté, 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 harm-
less today, we must bear in mind that within the context of this pe-
riod and its debates over women's capabilities and natural place,
Cassatt was in fact making a particular kind of claim for the edu-
cated woman—a claim that, in some quarters, could still cause dis-
comfort 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 establish-
ment 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 long-
standing definition of education for women as education for sub-
missive 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 im-
ages supported and continue to support a conservative view of
woman's nature and position. It was Cassatt's own political astute-
ness, at least in equal measure to the conservatism of her social
and class conditioning, that was responsible for this complex pat-
tern 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 undeni-
able political skills in negotiating a professional world still con-
structed to exclude women, Cassatt's social conditioning as an up-
per-middle-class woman could still make it very difficult for her to
reconcile her personal and professional identities. She insisted at
times, for example, on preserving the public facade, or mas-
quarade if you will, of proper femininity in her own self-presenta-
tions. 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 un-
comfortable body placement that masks and obscures her female
attributes. She does not look out at the viewer but instead stare
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 professsed aversion to the portrait that Edgar Degas pain-
ted 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 vis-
etes, which are fanned out in her hands. Similar tensions involving
issues of identity and decorum were addressed in an even more un-
conventional 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
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.

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.

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." Cassatt's strong drawing, which distinguished 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," an admiring comment, certainly, but at best a backhanded compliment that reflects the prejudices and as-

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.
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, a remark that had reportedly annoyed her. 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? 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 décoratif (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.

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. 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
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. 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 the 1890s 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 Louise 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).

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-
Jean Beraud’s La Pâtisserie
bourgeois woman who re-established that served young working woman—probably a shopgirl—who confronts the temporary reports, re-patisserie, the kind of refreshments at an elegant class women taking re-
of 1881-82 (Courtauld clearly respectable middle-
carnavalet, Paris), we see women as objects of male desire and
the Second Empire. Even
boulevards of Paris during
Gloppe (1889; musée
in such telling images as
32 3/6s " x 27 7/14s ". national museum of American art, Smithsonian
institution. Gift of william t. evans.
Fig. 5. Mary Cassatt, the caress (1902), oil on canvas,
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 so-
cial and psychological terms by contrasting the wariness of the mid-
class woman, for whom riding on this public conveyance consti-
tuted 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.

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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eternity 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 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.”

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 work of Mary Cassatt not simply a reification of the 19th-century 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 depreciatingly classified as mere decoration, for example, the textile designs of Sonia Delaunay. And in 1989, the Guerrilla 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 semina with 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—they 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 1993, 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.

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as radical feminist positions.\(^9\) 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, “Women 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.


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.


7. Mathews, Cassatt and Her Circle, 238.

8. Ibid.


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).


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


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.


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


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


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