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Mary S. Cassatt, The Child's Bath

[ELISKA MRACKOVA]

Mary Cassatt's *The Child's Bath* (1893, oil on canvas, 39 ½ x 26 inches) was one of a few paintings created by a female artist that was ever exhibited together with other Impressionist masterpieces painted by Manet, Monet, or Degas. *The Child's Bath* illustrates an intimate scene between a mother and her young daughter inside a contemporary Parisian bedroom. Mary Cassatt was born in the United States in 1844 but spent most of her adult life in France, where she was influenced by her close friend Edgar Degas, advances in photography, as well as widely popular woodblock prints from Tokugawa, Japan. This non-western influence shaped her unique style and subject matter that distinguished her from other male contemporary artists. Mary Cassatt unconventionally played with the traditional theme, bold patterns and outlines, as well as flattened perspective on a relatively small canvas, which directly reflected the intimacy of love between a mother and her child, but at the same time displayed aspects of the avant-garde and modernism.¹ Furthermore, this sensitive portrayal of a mother and her child reflects the most advanced nineteenth-century modernist ideas about raising children and thus challenged the traditional Christian subject matter of Mary with Jesus using non-western art. Cassatt defined the world through the eyes of women as she often portrayed women as independent public figures, women pursuing interests, which were not just fulfilling the interests of others and thus, establishing new social roles for emancipated modern women.

Linda Nochlin, in her famous essay, raised an interesting question: Why are there no great women artists? In this essay, she argued that although women possess the same talent and the social attitudes, institutional discrimination disadvantaged many women

1 Anne Mooney Hudson, Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran, "Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 35, no. 3 (1973): 562, doi:10.2307/350599, 53.

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Cassatt, Mary S. *The Child's Bath*. 1893. American Art, Gallery 273, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL. In *About This Artwork*. <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/111442>.

from succeeding in the art world.² Indeed, compared to Cassatt's contemporaries, she never depicted the nightlife of bars and cafes in Paris, but rather focused on women in the privacy of their households represented with children and other domestic responsibilities. In the beginning of institutional art education, women were never allowed to paint from nude models. This lack of training prevented women from creating great commissions and restricted them to more inward-looking paintings.³ Like Edgar Degas, Mary Cassatt focused on the human figure and particularly on the sensitive portraits of mothers with their children. As a female artist, Mary Cassatt specialized on small compositions, often depicting the intimacy and safekeeping of the ideal role of a woman in nineteenth-century France, that of caring for a child. Although to many people in 2017, *The Child's Bath* might seem boring and very feminine, it is undoubtable that in 1899 viewers were shocked by the modern images of progressive women. In *The Child's Bath*, Mary Cassatt invites us to enjoy a warm scene in which the female figure firmly, but lovingly holds her daughter in her lap while softly whispering calming words into her ear. Mary Cassatt's composition renders the love between a child and its mother and thus, further emphasizes the social role of child-rearing that women had in nineteenth-century France.⁴

Cassatt's early work was inspired by Edouard Manet and Gustave Courbet and was accepted at the salon.⁵ Nevertheless, soon her works started to be rejected and the rigid rules of the Salon and the passion for creative freedom drove artists to independent exhibits.⁶ Already the First Impressionist Exhibition (Salon des Refusés) in 1874 at 35 Boulevard des Capucines became very successful. It kept long hours until 8 in the evening, rented one of the most renowned artistic spaces in Paris, the studio of the photographer Nadar. The Impressionists also offered a ten percent discount for their art exhibited at the exhibition. Marketing became an important consideration for many artists including Mary Cassatt. Although her father supported her financially he refused to fund her art.⁷ As all artists paid an entrance fee, even Cassatt had to become an independent

2 Hudson, et al., "Woman in Sexist Society."

3 Ibid, 56.

4 Norma Broude, "Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman or The Cult of True Womanhood?" *Woman's Art Journal* 21, no. 2 (2000): 36, doi:10.2307/1358749, 14.

5 Polyxeni Potter, "Women Caring for Children In "The Floating World"" *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 12, no. 11 (2006): 1808-1809, doi:10.3201/eid1211.ac1211.

6 Ibid.

7 Paul Tucker, "The First Impressionist Exhibition and Monet's Impression, Sunrise: A Tale of Timing, Commerce and Patriotism," *Art History* 7, no. 4 (1984): 465-476, doi:10.1111/j.1467-8365.1984.tb00117.x, 151.

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artist to even afford to exhibit at the Impressionist exhibition in Paris.⁸ This could explain why Cassatt depicted a traditional subject matter of child rearing resembling Mary with Jesus, and still introduced an innovative approach to a traditional subject matter.

Cassatt exhibited her art at the Impressionist exhibitions and her talent as an observer of a revolutionized subject matter of motherhood was widely recognized by her contemporaries as well as many art critics.⁹ Cassatt became famous for her neutrality which allowed her to depict extraordinary, yet compelling pictures of people engaged in seemingly inconsequential activity.¹⁰ Nonetheless, her paintings are not just pictorial clichés of maternal love. Until the eighteenth century in France, children were seen as burdens who impinged upon a woman's life at court or salon. Mary Cassatt perfected the technique of showing young children in a naturalistic style.¹¹ The change came with the publication of *Emile* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in which he argued for a more intimate relationship between mothers and their children. This change in society caused women being seen as domestic beings.¹² Moreover, several cholera epidemics in the mid-1880s prompted the official promotion of regular bathing as prevention against the disease. And after 1870, French mothers were encouraged to take care of their own children instead of employing caretakers and to use modern hygiene practices.¹³ Although Cassatt never had children of her own, she brilliantly captured the change in the relationship between mothers and their children.

During Cassatt's life in Paris, Japanese Tokugawa woodblock prints were becoming a valuable commodity and many artists started to collect them. Woodblock prints in Japan were produced for huge audiences thus, the technique had to be inexpensive to capture popular subjects. The medium of printmaking originated in China in the ninth century CE and in the sixteenth century came to Japan.¹⁴ The production of Ukiyo-e prints was based in the capital city Edo.¹⁵ The

8 Pauline de Tholozany, "Paris: Capital of the 19th century, The Expositions Universelles in Nineteenth Century Paris," Brown University Library Center for Digital Scholarship, last modified December, 2014. <http://library.brown.edu/cds/paris/worldfairs.html#de1867>.

9 "Notes from The Worlds Columbian Exposition Chicago 1893," *Scientific American* 68, no. 16 (1893): 243-244, doi:10.1038/scientificamerican04221893-243.

10 Steven Munson, "Mary Cassatt, Modern Painter - Commentary Magazine," *Commentary Magazine*, 2017, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/mary-cassatt-modern-painter/>.

11 Ibid.

12 Broude, "Mary Cassatt," 14.

13 Potter, "Women Caring for Children In 'The Floating World.'"

14 Tinios, *Japanese Prints Ukiyo in Edo, 1700-1900* (Burlington: Lund Humphries, 2010), 15.

15 Ibid, 17.

majority of prints produced in Edo were made using the technique of relief printing on cut blocks of wood. A design was drawn on the surface of a wood block, and the parts that were supposed to be white were gouged away, which left the areas that were supposed to be colored elevated. Therefore, the artist was able to achieve great contrast between light and dark, which resulted in dramatic emotional effects.¹⁶ The artists were commissioned a design; Japanese artists rarely decided upon the subjects. The artists were mainly expected to produce marketable commodities. The Impressionists, as well as Japanese artists, relied heavily on the marketing of the exhibitions. In fact, for the first time, the lower social classes were also exposed to art.

The first time Mary Cassatt encountered Japanese woodblock prints was at the World's Exhibition in 1867.¹⁷ Impressionists immediately started imitating color schemes, composition, and subject matter from Tokugawa Japan, applying the social life from Tokugawa Edo to Paris, thus juxtaposing the Western and non-western art in a novel style of Impressionism. As Cassatt herself wrote in a letter to Berthe Morisot "You who want to make color prints wouldn't dream of anything more beautiful.... You must see the Japanese."¹⁸ Mary Cassatt slowly started inventing her own techniques and adopted Japanese aesthetics to convey the private mood and intimacy of her domestic scenes such as *The Child's Bath*.

Although child-rearing is one of the oldest continuously treated subjects in art history, thanks to the non-western influence of Japanese prints, Cassatt truly revolutionized the depiction of womanhood.¹⁹ Depicting everyday subject matter was typical for Ukiyo-e prints and as many Impressionists wanted to break from the art restrictions of Romanticism and Realism, they started to represent subjects in everyday environments with non-western elements helping to draw a line between the old and new style.²⁰

Cassatt's models were families and female friends often sitting in social settings such as the loge at the opera, tea party, or reading and knitting.²¹ Most of the women represented in Japanese woodblock prints were celebrated professional women, who catered to the need of Daimyo in Edo, who were forced by the Shogun to spend six months in this district without their families. The prints were representing women

16 Tinios, *Japanese Prints Ukiyo in Edo*, 18.

17 Henry M. Sayre, *A World of Art* (New York: Pearson Education, 2013), 506.

18 Potter, "Women Caring for Children In 'The Floating World.'"

19 Tinios, *Japanese Prints Ukiyo in Edo*, 7.

20 Alicia Faxon et al., "New Light on Cassatt," *Woman's Art Journal* 6, no. 2 (1985): 50, doi:10.2307/1358000.

21 Potter, "Women Caring for Children In 'The Floating World.'"

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as geishas, who were female entertainers often patronized for sex.²² Japanese artists didn't attempt to represent recognizable portraits of women, but rather the idea of an ephemeral female beauty with characteristic shaved hairline, pale skin, small fingers, and petite lips.²³ Artists such as Edgar Degas also depicted beautiful young women as young ballet dancers. Degas's ballet dancers were usually young girls and we, as viewers, are placed in Degas' voyeuristic viewpoint on the sexualized female figures. Although Cassatt also preferred to work with non-posing models placed in asymmetric settings, seen from unusual vantage points, her paintings conveyed a different atmosphere compared to Degas. She flattened forms and perspective, contrasted colors and decorative patterns, and used background to establish spatial relationships and shift the focus of perception; nevertheless, she did not intend for her models to be represented as beautiful. Cassatt once famously wrote: "women should be someone and not something."²⁴ This quote shows that in her art, Cassatt wanted to represent the real woman of the nineteenth century and not just idealized beautiful young female figures. The woman in *The Child's Bath* is an anonymous average woman, who represents the modern ideas of nineteenth-century motherhood. Although Cassatt differed from Degas in the sexualized representation of women, like him she portrayed her female figures with the influence of Japanese Woodblock prints.

The naked body of the child is beautifully rendered in a 3D naturalistic way whereas the body of the mother is covered by a long dress that only suggests the shape of her body which, highlights the inferiority of the importance of the mother over the child's presence. The two bodies together form an asymmetrical triangle, which is framed by the floral motif of the room design. The 3D character of the child's body is contrasted with the flatness of the background combined with the flatness of the mother's dress, emphasizing the chubbiness of the child's body. Additionally, the child's body is further highlighted by a soft blue contour line surrounding her left arm that contrasts with her light skin, which further emphasizes the circle of touch that extends from the woman's hand on the child's foot to the child's hand on the woman's knee. This blue highlight resembles contour lines that were often present in the Tokugawa woodblock prints. The unification of the positive shape of the two bodies further detaches the viewer from the scene that is only happening in complete ignorance of the audience viewing this intimate act between a mother and her child.²⁵

22 Richard Kendall, *Degas and the Art of Japan* (Reading: Yale University Press, 2007), 28.

23 Tinios, *Japanese Prints Ukiyo in Edo*, 68.

24 Hudson, et al., "Woman in Sexist Society," 56.

25 Susan Fillin Yeh, "Mary Cassatt's Images of Women," *College Art Association* 35.4 (1976): 282.

Furthermore, Mary Cassatt decided to angle the faces of the mother and her child in a way that the viewer cannot identify their exact features. The heightened anonymity in *The Child's Bath* suggests that Mary Cassatt did not intend to paint two particular figures but rather the ideal of motherhood in nineteenth-century France.²⁶ Furthermore, Mary Cassatt painted the daughter with greater attention to detail than her mother and placed the child in the center of the painting, which further emphasized the importance of a child over the importance of the mother.

To further emphasize the intimacy of this scene, Mary Cassatt decided to challenge the traditional western sense of perspective by flattening the scene, figures and by applying the bird's eye view.²⁷ As viewers, we are looking down at the basin of water almost at the same angle as the implied lines created by the focused looks of the mother and her daughter. This unorthodox vantage point allows us to observe the intimate act between the mother and her child. Nevertheless, we as viewers are removed from the scene and thus, cannot participate. Moreover, this unusual perspective generates an unpleasant feeling in the viewer, who feels uncomfortable in spying on this private act of love. In order, to effectively render the unconventional perspective, Mary Cassatt foreshortened the mother's and child's faces to create the illusion of space. All elements seem to follow the same vantage point except the vase at the bottom right corner that is distorting our overall sense of the room in which the intimate act takes place. Furthermore, Mary Cassatt placed the vase outside of the frame, creating an illusion of the continuation of space, fostering the viewer's participation in this intimate scene and thus, contradicting our insecurity of spying. The fine wallpaper and sofa, ornamented with floral motifs, do not follow the linear perspective as one might expect in traditional western paintings.

Impressionists, including M. Cassatt, found in the Japanese prints vindication of their own ideas and agenda. The early collectors understood very little about the imagery in the Ukiyo-e prints nevertheless, the formal qualities of colors and composition were highly appreciated.²⁸ Color was the central concern of Impressionist artists and the bright, clear, flat colors, the suppressed cast shadows, found in Japanese woodblock prints amazed the Impressionist artists as well as Mary Cassatt.²⁹ In *The Child's Bath*, Mary Cassatt chose to play with a variety of colors. The two figures of the mother and her child are

26 Potter, "Women Caring for Children In 'The Floating World,'" 17.

27 Ibid, 18.

28 Tinios, *Japanese Prints Ukiyo in Edo*, 17.

29 Broude, "Mary Cassatt."

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rendered in cold hues of blues and greens, which contrasts with the warm character of the seemingly tilted floor in the room. The overall composition is controlled by visual rhythms. The white color repeats on the woman's dress, child's cloth, water basin and the vase in the bottom right corner. This repetition of color is disturbed by the presence of the saturated red seat with floral patterns. This contrast of colors in the center of the painting attracts the viewer to the most important part of the painting, the warm embrace of a mother and her child. The mother's dress is somewhat monochromatic, repeating only tertiary colors with white that create a pattern of vertical and horizontal stripes leaving only her hands and her face uncovered. Her face is reflected in the beautifully rendered water's surface and is repeated in a lighter tone on the child's body. Furthermore, Mary Cassatt used visual texture to further emphasize the contrast between the background and the two main figures, whose dress realistically resembles the real 3D texture of the fabric. In Japanese art, Geishas were drawn with curvy, delicate lines to form the courtesan's features and clothing, which contrasted with the broad two-dimensional background.³⁰ Interestingly, Cassatt used rather rough paint strokes that contrast with the delicate subject matter of child-rearing and contradicted the Japanese influence of delicate lines but reinforced mark-making favored by the Impressionists.

Impressionists such as Mary Cassatt were famous for using loose unblended brushwork to render naturalistic landscapes, industrial cities, or human bodies. Her brushstrokes are extremely vigorous and rapid thus, revealing that her primary concern was aesthetic, and the subject matter came only second.³¹ When we look at *The Child's Bath*, we notice that, although the two figures at first seem to be captured with a great amount of detail, the opposite is true. The mother's ear lacks any anatomical detail, as well as, we are quite unable to determine the exact character of the room or the time of the day in which the scene is taking place. This timelessness is further stressed by the unfinished left side of the painting, where the oil painting did not cover the entire surface of the canvas, which highlights the ephemeral character of the loving act. Japanese artists also often depicted moments in Edo's life as their philosophy was in many ways similar to nineteenth-century Parisians who wanted to seize every moment of their hectic lives.

30 Munson, 19.

31 Albert Ten Eyck Gardner, "A Century of Women," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 7, no. 4 (1948): 110, doi:10.2307/3257348.

Currently, *The Child's Bath* is located on the second floor of the American wing in the Chicago Art Institute. Although Mary Cassatt was an American born artist, she spent most of her life in Paris. Although now Mary Cassatt's paintings are neighboring the Whistler's *Mother* exhibition which attracts visitors, compared to the Impressionist exhibition in the Art Institute, the American wing is much less crowded. Instead, Mary Cassatt's paintings should be installed at the side of her contemporaries and friends such as Edgar Degas or Claude Monet as they were originally intended at the Impressionist exhibitions in Paris.

As a female artist, Cassatt was disadvantaged from her early training as an artist. Nevertheless, thanks to the arrival of Japanese woodblock prints to Parisian markets, she was able to revolutionize the representation of women. Her own personal life of an unmarried woman reflected the social changes in nineteenth-century Paris. She represented her models as active, loving mothers, educated suffragettes, and women independent of men. *The Child's Bath* illustrates how the ideal of modern womanhood was highlighted by the non-western elements of a bird's eye view perspective, contoured shapes, and the repetition of patterns and colors. Without the Japanese woodblock prints, Mary Cassatt would not have achieved such greatness as a female artist and served to influence generations of suffragettes and feminists of the twentieth century.