

MARY CASSATT American Impressionist Painter

by George Constantourakis

Mary Cassatt was born on May 22, 1844 in Allegheny City Pennsylvania, into a well-to-do family. Her father, Robert Cassatt, was a successful stockbroker and financier. Her mother, Katherine Kelso Johnston, came from a banking family. The Cassatt family was of French Huguenot origin; they escaped persecutions and came to New York in 1662. Between 1851 to 1885, the family travelled in Europe, lived in France and Germany. In 1855, returning to Pennsylvania, the Cassatt family settled in Philadelphia. In 1861, at the age of 16 Mary decided to become an artist and enrolled at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, apparently against the wishes of her father. She took art classes for 4 years (1861-65), and then travelled extensively in Europe, finally settling in Paris in 1874.

Before 1875, the most important influence on Cassatt was exercised by Edouard Manet, although he did not accept students, she saw his works and they were much discussed both by painters and art critics. In 1877, she made the acquaintance of Degas, with whom she was to be on close terms throughout his life. Degas advised her to join the Impressionists. *"I accepted with joy. Now I could work with absolute independence without considering the opinion of a jury. I had already recognized who were my true masters. I admired Manet, Courbet, and Degas. I took leave of conventional art. I began to live."* A close friendship with Degas began, which lasted until Degas' death in 1917. Despite her admiration for Degas, she was no slavish imitator of his style, retaining her own very personal idiom throughout her career. From him, and other Impressionists, she acquired an interest in the rehabilitation of the pictorial qualities of everyday life, inclining towards the domestic and the intimate rather than the social and the urban (*Lady at the Teatable*, 1885; Metropolitan Museum, New York), with a special emphasis on the Mother and Child theme in the 1890s (*The Bath*, 1891; Art Institute of Chicago). She also derived from Degas and others a sense of immediate observation, with an emphasis on gestural significance.

The early years in Paris were a particularly happy time for Mary Cassatt (see *Figure 1*), and this is reflected in the subject matter she chose for her paintings. She depicted young women taking tea, knitting and reading. Her elder sister, Lydia, joined Mary in Europe. Lydia became her closest friend and also her model. There are 11 known works with Lydia, among them are *The Cup of Tea* (1880), *Woman Reading in the Garden* (1880) (see *Figure 2*). Lydia died at the end of 1882 of Bright's disease, and it was a severe blow to her. Mary Cassatt especially liked children and her portrayals of childhood reveal naturalism and sensuality e.g. *Children Playing on the Beach* (1884) (see *Figure 3*). This is a close-up on a pair of toddlers with their short arms and dollish faces. Cassatt became known as a portrait painter and was sought after by American visitors to France: *Mary Ellison Embroidering*, *Reading Le Figaro*. Her work differed from the stiff academic tradition of portrait painting as a mere likeness insofar as most of her subjects were either engaged in some kind of activity or caught in a casual pose e.g. *Child in a Straw Hat* (1886) (see *Figure 4*). Her earlier works were marked by a certain lyrical radiance and gentle lighting, but by the 1890s, as a result of the exhibition of Japanese prints held in Paris, her draughtsmanship became more emphatic, her colors clearer and more boldly defined.

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(Figure 1) MARY CASSATT (b.1844 - d.1926). Issue: Nov. 4, 1988.

For: Great Americans. Cancel: First Day, Philadelphia PA.

(Figure 2) WOMAN READING IN A GARDEN (1880) at the Art Institute of Chicago. Cassatt's sister Lydia is represented in what may be Cassatt's first painting outdoors.

Issue: Aug. 7, 2003. For: Mary Cassatt's paintings. Cancel: Nov. 1, 2003, Pittsburgh PA, special illustration and mention: "CASSATT PITPEX STATION".

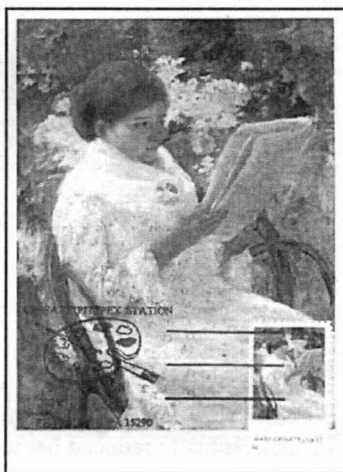
(Figure 3) CHILDREN PLAYING ON THE BEACH (1884) at the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. This is a rare example of Cassatt venturing beyond the garden. Even on the beach the close up attention on the children, suggests an interior world.

Issue: Aug. 7, 2003. For: Mary Cassatt's paintings.

Cancel: Nov. 30, 2003, Washington DC.

(Figure 4) CHILD IN A STRAW HAT (1886) at the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. Issue: Aug. 7, 2003. For: Mary Cassatt's paintings.

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Between 1879 and 1882 The *Independents*, as the *Impressionists* used to call themselves, held their group exhibitions annually, thus providing Cassatt with the opportunity to show her work. In the US she was exhibiting regularly with the Society of American Artists in New York.

The 1890's and 1900's proved to be a highly successful and productive period for Cassatt. She focused almost exclusively on the depiction of mothers and children, these works today are her best-known and most popular, e.g. *Mother and Child* (1897) (see Figures 6 & 7) *Breakfast in Bed* (1897) (see Figure 8). Almost all of Cassatt's mother and child scenes do not depict actual mothers with their own children, since the artist preferred to select his models and match the appropriate physical types in order to achieve the desired results. In 1891, Mary Cassatt had her first one-woman show at the gallery of Durand-Ruel. In 1892, she was invited to paint the south tympanum in the Women's Building at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago - a commission she gladly accepted, as she had always been a champion of the feminist cause. Her chosen theme was "*Modern Woman*", which she illustrated with a three-part composition. In the center she showed "*Young Women Plucking the Fruits of Knowledge and Science*", on the left-hand panel she showed "*Young Girls Pursuing Fame*", and on the right she depicted the arts of Music and Dancing.

The winter of 1893-1894 found Mary Cassatt in Antibes, recovering from the effort of producing the mural for Chicago. It was there she began to paint one of her largest canvases, *The Boating Party* (1893/94) (see Figure 5), which closely resembles *Manet's* painting *Boating* of 1870, which Cassatt admired enormously. In 1898 Mary returned to the US for the 1st time in over 25 years, visiting relatives, friends and collectors. In 1901 she visited Italy and Spain, in 1908 made the last trip to the USA. In 1910-12 she travelled extensively in Europe and in the Middle East. In 1904 she was accepted into the Legion of Honour and in 1910 became a member of the National Academy of Design in New York.

Cassatt's last years were overshadowed with the loss of close people, relatives and friends. She suffered from many diseases, like diabetes and had cataracts on both eyes, which eventually reduced her to near blindness. She lived in solitude at the Château de Beaufresne, accompanied only by her long-time housekeeper, Mathilde Valet. Mary Cassatt died at the Château de Beaufresne on June 14, 1926, and was buried in the family vault at nearby Mesnil-Théribus. The majority of Cassatt's works today are in American collections, while just a small number of paintings remain in France, where she worked. Although her name is not as well known as other Impressionist painters like Degas, Manet and Renoir, her talent does not yield to those better known painters.

P.S. Besides the Maximum Cards shown here, Mary Cassatt's paintings also appear on a few more stamps as follows: 1).- Rwanda, Scott #665, issued Sept. 1, 1975 "*The Bath*" (1891), at the Art Institute of Chicago. 2).- Rwanda, Scott #986, issued Aug 4, 1980 "*Young Woman Sewing*" (1902), at the Metropolitan Museum. 3).- United Nations - Geneva, Scott #180, issued Nov. 17, 1989 "*Young Woman Sewing*" (1902) and 4).- U.S.A., Scott #3804, issued Aug 7, 2003 "*Mother and Child*" (1888), at the Art Institute of Chicago.

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(Figure 5) THE BOATING PARTY (1893/94) at the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. Issue: Nov. 17, 1966.

For: American Artist. Cancel: First Day, Washington DC.

(Figure 6) MOTHER AND CHILD (1897) at the Musee du Louvre, Paris.

Issue: Jan 21, 2006. For: The Impressionists Painters.

Cancel: First Day, Paris, special illustration and mention: "LES IMPRESSIONISTES"

(Figure 7) MOTHER AND CHILD (1897) at the Musee du Louvre, Paris.

Issue: May 3, 1977. For: World Association of Friends of Children.

Cancel: First Day, Monaco, special.

(Figure 8) BREAKFAST IN BED (1897) at the Huntington Library, San Marino CA.

Issue: Aug. 27, 1998. For: Four Centuries of American Art.

Cancel: Sept. 20, 1999, Pasadena CA San Marino (place kept).

