





Mary Cassatt (detail), 1914. Courtesy of Frederick Sweet's research materials on Mary Cassatt and James A. McNeill Whistler, 1872–1975, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

1

An American in Paris

Mary Stevenson Cassatt (1844–1926) is best known for her paintings of mothers and children. She became a successful professional artist at a time when it was very difficult for a woman to do so.

Cassatt was born into an affluent family in Pennsylvania. Her parents believed it was important for women to receive an education, so she attended school and traveled in Europe during her childhood. This early exposure to the art and culture of Europe greatly influenced the young girl.

After studying art in Philadelphia, Cassatt wanted to return on her own to Paris, then the center of the modern art world. She struggled to convince her parents, since this was a highly unusual undertaking for a young woman. They eventually agreed. Once in Paris, Cassatt studied art on her own, visiting museums across Europe and training in the studios of established artists. (The main art school in Paris, the *École des Beaux-Arts*, did not accept female students at that time.)

2

Impressionist Connection

Early in her career, Cassatt experimented with different styles of painting, and she soon began to paint scenes of modern life in Paris—but she was not a bohemian artist. Comfortable in her own social milieu, she depicted her family, friends, and their children. Ladies seated in the theater, women reading or drinking tea in their homes or gardens, mothers giving their babies a bath, and children playing were parts of her everyday world.

Cassatt's ability to capture a moment in time drew the attention of French artist Edgar Degas, who invited the artist to exhibit her work with the impressionists



in 1879. The painters known as the impressionists depicted fleeting moments in nature and human life, and they experimented with bright colors, loose brushstrokes, and innovative viewpoints. These techniques reflected a dynamic new approach to painting.

Cassatt's artistic talent, understanding of French language and culture, and independent thinking earned her the respect of this exceptional group of artists, which included Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, and Alfred Sisley. Among the impressionists, she was one of three women—and the only American.



left: Mary Cassatt, *The Boating Party*, 1893/1894, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection



3 Cassatt's Children

Cassatt transformed ordinary subjects with her fresh vision. Her ability to depict children fully absorbed in their own worlds is evident in *The Boating Party*, *Children Playing on the Beach*, and *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair*. These paintings show a restless baby squirming in her mother's lap, a toddler clumsily holding a shovel and a bucket, and a young girl sprawling in a large armchair. The emotional truth Cassatt arrested was heightened by her striking arrangements of keyed-up color and flattened space, over which brushstrokes seem to dance.

above: Mary Cassatt, *Children Playing on the Beach*, 1884, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection

explore more

“I have had a joy from which no one can rob me — I have been able to touch some people with my art.”

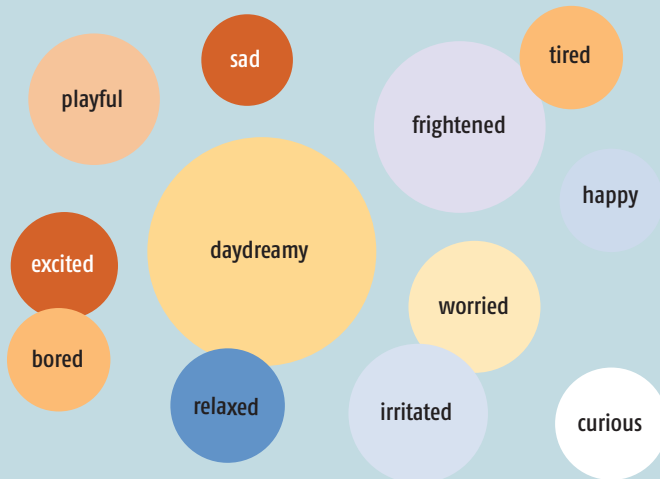
Mary Cassatt



A Girl and Her Puppy

Look closely at *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair*. What do you see?

Consider how the girl might feel. Which words might best describe her mood?



Wonder: What might she be thinking about?

Imagine: If you could talk with this girl, what would you ask her? What might she ask you?

Pretend this painting is a scene from the middle of a story. Make up the rest of the story.

Who is the girl?

Where is she?

Why is she sitting in this chair?

What was she doing before this moment?

What will she do next?

How might the story end?

Create a series of drawings that tell a story about the girl and her dog.

Mary Cassatt, *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair*, 1878, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon