

Kids @ CAM – At Home Family Projects

Spotlight on CAM's Collection

Mary Cassatt

About the Artist:

"If painting is no longer needed, it seems a pity that some of us are born into the world with such a passion for line and color."

Mary Stevenson Cassatt (1844 – 1926) was an American painter and printmaker. She was born in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania, but lived much of her adult life in France, where she first befriended Edgar Degas and later exhibited among the Impressionists. Cassatt often created images of the social and private lives of women, with particular emphasis on the intimate bonds between mothers and children.

She was described by Gustave Geffroy in 1894 as one of "les trois grandes dames" (the three great ladies) of Impressionism. Though women of her day were discouraged from pursuing a career, Cassatt enrolled in Philadelphia's Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts at age 16. She decided to leave the program and move to Europe where she could study the works of the Old Masters on her own, firsthand. Despite her family's strong objections, Cassatt left for Paris in 1866. She began her study with private art lessons in the Louvre, where she would study and copy masterpieces. Cassatt admired the

Impressionist Edgar Degas, whose pastels had made a powerful impression on her. Degas had considerable influence on Cassatt. Both were highly experimental in their use of materials. While many of her fellow Impressionists were focused on landscapes and street scenes, Cassatt became famous for her portraits. She was especially drawn to women in everyday domestic settings, especially mothers with their children. Cassatt's portraits were unconventional in their direct and honest nature. In 1891,

she exhibited a series of highly original colored drypoint and aquatint prints, including *The Letter*, *Woman Bathing* and *The Coiffure*, inspired by the Japanese masters shown in Paris the year before. Cassatt was attracted to the simplicity and clarity of Japanese design, and the skillful use of blocks of color. In her interpretation, she used primarily light, delicate pastel colors and avoided black (a "forbidden" color among the Impressionists). Later in life, Cassatt served as an advisor to several major art collectors and stipulated that they eventually donate their purchases to American art museums.



ART AT HOME – Watercolor Resist

What You Will Need:

- Watercolor Paper or Thick Paper
- Watercolors
- Oil Pastels (crayons will work too)
- Watercolor Paintbrush
- Cups for water
- Pencil

Mary Cassatt's 'The Letter' is one in a series of prints that she created that demonstrates an influence by Japanese woodblock prints. Her lines are delicate, and her color palette is soft. Look closely at this work before you begin to create your own.

- Step 1 – With your pencil, gently sketch your version of the letter. Just try your best to make something similar. It does not need to be a perfect copy of Mary Cassatt's. Do not fill in any colors with your pencil (that will happen later with your watercolors)
- Step 2 – With your oil pastel or crayon, outline your pencil lines. Especially if you are using crayons, be sure that your lines are strong and thick.
- Step 3 – If you want to have delicate lines for details, make those with thinner crayon or oil pastel strokes.
- Step 4 – Paint in the rest of your paper using the watercolors/

Tips:

- You may need to go over your crayon lines several times to make sure the lines are bold enough. You want to be able to feel the crayon lines with your finger.
- Use your entire sheet of paper, as Cassatt does in her work.
- You will find that the oil pastel or crayon is stronger than the water color you apply over it, so it will resist or push away the watercolors if you paint over the lines, which creates a beautiful and bold effect.

Questions for Discussion:

- What was your favorite aspect of creating this artwork?
- Make up a story about the woman in your painting. Who is she? Where does she live? Describe her life.

Follow Up project Discussion:

- Think about what this letter might say, who it is to, and where it is being sent. Write the letter from the perspective of the writer and place it in an envelope, to be displayed next to your painting!

