



1st Grade: APRIL

The Letter

Mary Cassatt

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About the Artist

The following information is provided to give classroom teachers a comprehensive understanding of the artist and artwork. Use your judgment on what to share with your students based on their level of curiosity, observation/inquiry skills, comprehension and age-appropriateness.

Mary Cassatt

Mary Stevenson Cassatt was born on May 22, 1844, in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania. She was the daughter of well-to-do parents, her father a successful stockbroker and her mother a well educated woman. Living in a privileged home provided Cassatt with opportunities not available to others, such as traveling in Europe. Mary Cassatt traveled with her parents and four siblings throughout Europe, spending considerable time in France and Germany. The impressionable young Cassatt easily adjusted to her new life, becoming fluent in both French and German. In 1855, following this four-year stay in Europe, the Cassatt family moved back to the United States and settled in Philadelphia.

Perhaps the style of her early life and her travels led Cassatt to grow into a confident, modern woman. At age fifteen Cassatt announced to her parents her choice of art as a profession. Keep in mind, it was very rare for a young woman in the mid-1800s to choose a profession because it usually meant choosing it over marriage. Determined to follow her heart, Cassatt enrolled at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia at seventeen. Cassatt attended classes for four years and began to think beyond traditional American education. Looking for opportunities to study art abroad, Cassatt decided to advance her studies and went to Paris more-or-less with her parent's approval and support. While it was not acceptable for women to attend respected art schools in Paris, Cassatt, being independently wealthy, was able to study privately in the studios of accomplished painters where she developed her own work. She also worked as a copyist at local art museums where it was usual to copy the works of Old Masters. By age twenty-four, Cassatt was becoming a respected local artist, exhibiting at the annual Paris Salon, a major accomplishment for an American, let alone a woman.

In 1877, well-known painter Edgar Degas befriended Cassatt, who invited her to join the Impressionistic group after seeing her work. Impressionists represented their subject matter by painting freely, using rapid brushstrokes and colors to capture the effects of light. This approach differed from the traditional and therefore was controversial. Those who followed this approach to painting formed an alliance and often exhibited their work together. Among this radical group of men Cassatt shed her ladylike de-

meanor to reveal an independent thinker, a savvy business-woman, and a bit of a rebel who was quite eager to broaden her existing ideas. While Cassatt had great respect and appreciation for the work of Degas, she was not interested in painting the same subject matter. What interested Cassatt more was capturing women in daily rituals of domestic and social life: sipping tea, writing letters, or caring for children. Cassatt didn't sacrifice her reputation as a successful artist to take on domesticity as subject matter. Her work exquisitely reflected the role of women with an honest awareness of their inner strength and the importance of relationships. The essence of those domestic and social relationships was revealed in the details of Cassatt's work—the tender touch of a child, the glimmer of the silverware, the quiet pause of conversation between two friends, or the eyes shifted away from the point of contact. Cassatt will always be remembered for these works. Many of her famous works were executed in oil paints and pastels, a chalk material containing color pigments.

In addition to being a world class painter and pastel artist, Mary Cassatt was an active and innovative printmaker in her own right. This interest in printmaking was, in part, credited to a Japanese exhibition in Paris in 1890. She made several visits to the exhibition, admiring the delicate lines, tones, and overall composition which inspired her to focus more on making her own color prints. Over the next year, using her own technique, Cassatt created a series of ten prints using colored drypoints and aquatints. These prints were so advanced and complex from a technical perspective that critics considered them landmarks in the history of printmaking.

In the 1880s, when her career as an artist was at its height, Cassatt was confronted with challenges. She lost family and close friends. She also suffered from diabetes and cataracts on both eyes, which made her partly blind. She lived her last years virtually alone with the exception of her longtime housekeeper. Cassatt died on June 14, 1926, in Paris.

Cassatt's work was exhibited next to the great works of Degas, Monet, Pissarro and Renoir. Her work was highly sought after and exhibited both in Europe and America. Her outstanding artist career earned her membership in the Society of American Artists, the National Academy of Design, as well as the French Legion of Honour.

About the Art

The Letter was printed in 1891 as a soft ground etching, aquatint, and drypoint, printed in color, third state. It is 13 5/8 x 8 13/16 inches and is part of the Chester Dale Collection at the Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Discipline-Based Art Education

The following components are integral to students having a complete, well rounded art experience.

Art Aesthetics

Providing opportunities to develop perception and appreciation of visually expressed ideas and experiences.

Art Production

Providing opportunities to develop skills and techniques for creative visual expressions of emotions and ideas.

Art History

Providing opportunities to develop an understanding of the visual arts as a basic component of personal heritage.

Art Criticism

Providing an opportunity to develop an intellectual basis for analyzing and making aesthetic judgments based on an understanding of visual ideas and experiences.

ELEMENTS OF ART

- Line: A continuous mark
- Shape: Area enclosed by a line
- Color: Hue, reflection of light.
- Texture: Surface quality, real or implied
- Form: 3D shape or illusion of 3D
- Value: Graduated areas of light/dark
- Space: Illusion of depth

PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN

- Repetition: Imagery repeating pattern
- Variety: Contrast/variation
- Rhythm: Issues of eye movement
- Balance: Even visual weight
- Emphasis/Economy: Dominance/minimalism
- Proportion: Compare size relationships

COMPOSITION

- Symmetrical: Mirrored imagery
- Asymmetrical: Random placement
- Radial: Mirror image from center point
- Repetition: Repeating pattern, motif

ARTISTIC STYLES

- Realism: Realistic representation
- Abstraction: Personal interpretation
- Non-Objective: No recognizable depiction

ELEMENTS OF DESIGN IN PICTURE BOOKS

Children's literature that relate to this lesson due to elements of art or story content are:

- *Madeline* by Ludwig Bemelmans
- *Mail by Pail* by Colin Bergel
- *Mailing May* by Michael O. Tunnell
- *The Post Office* by Gail Gibbons
- *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak
- *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* by Verna Aardema

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- Hughes, Robert. *American Visions, The Epic History of Art in America*. New York. Alfred A. Knoph. 1997
- Janson, H.W. *History of Art*. New York. Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1999

Directed Observation

Show students an image of *The Letter* and tell them it was created and printed (not painted) in 1871 by Mary Cassatt. Invite students to quietly study the work. After some time for thinking, encourage students to share what they see. Welcome all comments. The following questions are provided to help students use art vocabulary to talk about the work.

1. Take a few moments to look at the wallpaper and the woman's dress in Cassatt's work. Do you see any patterns? How do patterns in this print make the image more interesting? Patterns make the eyes move around the work. Look around the classroom and find patterns in the room. Consider the various textures felt or implied with patterns.
2. Relate the patterned wallpaper and the patterned fabric to the time period the work was created. Is this style of clothing or wallpaper what we would see today? How is this style different?
3. Look for lines in the work. What kinds of lines do you see? Thick? Thin? Straight? Curvy? The various lines add interest and help move your eyes around the work.
4. Search the print for shapes. What kind of shapes are there? Make note there are rounded, curvy shapes as well as shapes with straight lines. The shapes help to make the eyes move around the work.
5. If it didn't come out in the initial conversation ask what the woman is doing. A long time ago, women didn't work outside the home. Before telephones and e-mail, the only way to communicate with distant friends and relatives was to write a letter and send it through the mail. Women spent time during the day at their writing desks to keep up with their correspondence. Can you imagine how exciting it was to receive a letter in the mail from someone?
6. Do you like this work? Why or why not? Would you like it better if you knew the women in the print?
7. The name of this print is *The Letter*. Can you think of another name for the print?
8. Share information about Mary Cassatt with your students. Perhaps you could locate Pennsylvania and Paris on a globe.

Things to Do

1. If you have a painting on hand or an image of a painting, invite students to compare and contrast the differences and similarities between the painting and the print. The print should reveal a flat surface quality versus the layers of paint and brushstrokes.

2. Introduce students to the idea of print-making where multiple images are reproduced. A copy machine is a good example to get a conversation going. Discuss the advantages of being able to make multiple copies of art.
3. Create simple monotypes by placing masking tape around the edges of a plastic or glass sheet to cover any sharp edges. Quickly paint an image on the sheet using tempera or acrylic paint. Mist with water if paint starts drying. Place a sheet of white newsprint or construction paper on top of the paint and rub with the back of a wooden spoon. This process transfers the image to paper. Lift up one corner of the paper and gradually pull the entire paper off the surface. Let dry.
4. Mary Cassatt liked to paint a person doing an everyday task. Observe someone at home or at school doing a task and have them sketch or photograph it. The sketch or photo can serve as a reference for a painting the next day.
5. Think about the woman in Mary Cassatt's work. Encourage students to develop a story about the woman. What is her name? To whom is she writing and where do they live? What did she say in her letter? Why does she look sad?
6. Think about the person receiving the woman's letter. Create a drawing of the person receiving and/or reading the letter. Remember to use a variety of lines, shapes, and patterns to create an interesting painting.
7. Help students think about other tasks the woman did in her home. Draw a picture of the woman wearing the same dress doing something different.
8. Write a letter to someone you know or engage in a pen pal relationship. Enjoy writing and receiving letters in the mail.
9. Cassatt was an artist in a time when most artists were men. Invite students to share stories when they had to do something that required some degree of bravery.
10. Discover patterns! Create the pattern in the dress using crayons, stamps, or paint.
11. If you could interview Mary Cassatt, what would you ask her? Consider writing a letter to her with your questions.
12. When Mary Cassatt's parents took her on trips, she fell in love with new places. What other place have you visited? Draw a picture of you in that place. Include clues indicating the season or time of day.
13. Collect photos or magazine clippings of a parent and child doing various activities together. Use the images to "draw a story" about the parent and child.