

## **Mary Cassatt (1844 – 1926)**

Mary Cassatt wasn't just a great woman artist, or some rich American hanger-on of the Impressionists, but, quite simply, one of the greatest artists of the last 200 years.

Mary Cassatt was born in Allegheny City, Pa. — now part of Pittsburgh — in 1844. She studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts before continuing her training in France, where she would remain for most of the last 61 years of her life. Mary never gave up her American citizenship, and in her lifetime became one of her native country's most beloved artists. In the late 1860s and 1870s, she regularly had works accepted for exhibition at the Salon. She thoroughly mastered the academic technique of the day — something few of the Impressionists, with whom she would later align herself, could claim. One of the few who could, Edgar Degas, invited Cassatt, whose experimental feints in the Impressionist direction had begun to alienate the Salon juries, to join the Impressionists in 1877. For all the American artists in Paris, Cassatt was and would remain the only American to participate in the Impressionist exhibitions. She first appeared with them at their fourth annual exhibition, in 1879. In that year she also made her first prints, and would continue as a printmaker until well into the 20th century. She learned much about printmaking from Whistler and Degas, though the style and technique she evolved were in the end wholly her own.

No American artist, ever, had or has been so fully accepted by the French as one of their own. By the time of Cassatt's participation in the last Impressionist exhibition, in 1886, the avant-garde had moved on. It was two years later that she began her series of paintings and prints of mothers and children. She seamlessly synthesized the rigorous academic training she had received in the 1870s with the radical impulses of the new art in such a way as to make one wonder why the two were ever so fiercely at each other's throats. Ever the historian and haunter of galleries, she learned from past artists who were all but forgotten in her time.

Paul Durand-Ruel sponsored Cassatt's first solo show in Paris in 1891. In addition to paintings, that show included 10 color prints. She used drypoint, aquatint, and etching in innovative combination, and sought effects like those of ukiyo-e woodblock prints — only better, with finer line and more varied color. It took her a year to produce 25 prints of each of the 10 images, but the result was one of the greatest artistic and technical feats of printmaking in history.

From the mid-1890s on, Cassatt's art grew more conservative just as French art was going wilder. In part this may have been a result of Cassatt's deep immersion in art history as she helped her dear friend Louisine Havemeyer build her stupendous, encyclopedic collection (which we can now enjoy at the Metropolitan Museum of Art). By the beginning of World War I, cataracts had taken away most of her eyesight. Still vigorous, if unable any longer to be a visual artist, she, like Edith Wharton, remained in France throughout the war, performing humanitarian deeds and otherwise aiding the French cause.