

# Mary Cassatt's Prints Put Domestic Instincts In Post-Impressionism.

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In the ranks of the 19th-century Paris avant-garde, Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) was at once an anomaly and a sensation--an American lady from a family of Philadelphia bankers who was invited by no less an artistic eminence than Edgar Degas to show her work with the Impressionists in their groundbreaking exhibitions in the years 1879-86. She was the only American painter to join the group at a time when it was still very much at odds with the standards of the official Salon.

Two other American expatriate painters who were far more famous than Cassatt--John Singer Sargent and James McNeil Whistler--had also been invited to show with the Impressionist painters, but both declined in order to pursue less controversial styles. It was Cassatt who opted for the more radical course. As she later confided to her French biographer, Archille Segard: "I accepted [Degas' invitation] with joy .... I began to live!"

She also began to widen the scope of her artistic endeavor, acquiring a considerable mastery of various printmaking media. No sooner had she made her entry into the ranks of the Impressionists than Cassatt joined a group of writers and artists who intended to publish a journal of modern life called *Le jour et la nuit*, to which the artists were to contribute original etchings. The journal never actually appeared, but her participation in the project left Cassatt with an intensified interest in printmaking.

It's another little-known aspect of Cassatt's copious printmaking production that is the subject of a very engaging exhibition at the Adelson Galleries. The show is called *Art in a Mirror: The Counterproofs of Mary Cassatt*, and is drawn from a heretofore

unexhibited cache of counterproofs made by Cassatt in collaboration with the celebrated French print dealer and publisher Ambroise Vollard.

Don't be dismayed if the term "counterproof" is unfamiliar. It's not a term commonly used outside the highly specialized milieu of professional printmaking, as the following statement from the Adelson Galleries makes clear:

"Until now, little has been known about Cassatt's counterproofs. Indeed, the counterproof medium itself rarely has been studied. A counterproof is created when a damp sheet of paper is placed over a chalk or pastel drawing and pressure is applied, either by hand-rubbing or running the sheets through a printing press. This process creates a mirror image of the original work transferred onto a second sheet of paper. The counterproof medium, which had been employed by a number of late eighteenth-century French artists, was revived in the 1890's during a surge of interest in printmaking and a fascination with experimental mediums such as color lithography and monotype. The delicacy of the pastel surface and the counterproof, the ethereal quality of the counterproof's resulting symbolic and abstracted imagery, resonated with Cassatt and her peers, who were exploring new avenues of Post-Impressionism by this time."

This reference to Post-Impressionism alerts us to still another feature of Cassatt's career--the ease and eagerness with which she was able to make something wholly her own out of every new development in the Paris avant-garde. For what we encounter in the Counterproofs exhibition is a subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle transition from Impressionism to the even more radical coloristic innovations of the Post-Impressionists.

In this respect, it is worth recalling the observations of a now all-but-forgotten critic, Sadakichi Hartmann, writing about Cassatt in *Camera Work* in 1903:

"Her style of painting is primarily of a mosaic of irregular colored shapes. At close scrutiny we complain about bad drawing, willful accentuation of detail (in particular in the boundary lines of shapes) and the unchromatic vehemence of her coloring. There

are any amount of tiny, crisp, and angular lines and chaotic color-patches which apparently have nothing to say, and yet at a distance pull together and give a significance. A hand, represented by a few fragmentary scratches and scrawls of the brush and a juxtaposition of color, after all gives a more life-like impression than one which is faultlessly drawn and colored with all due observations of precise and pedantic realities."

You could hardly ask for a better account of Cassatt's Post-Impressionist style than that.

Still another of Cassatt's artistic audacities may be seen in the subject matter she concentrated on in the counterproofs. To a Parisian art scene dominated by male painters and their depictions of female subjects, Cassatt brought something very different: a woman's sympathetic account of maternal domesticity. The affectionate mother-and-child themes in these glowing pastel counterproofs may owe something, to be sure, to the precedents of the Madonna-and-Child paintings of the Old Masters, but they're entirely modern in feeling and style. They're also a further testimony to the independent spirit that the artist brought to her every endeavor.

Art in a Mirror: The Counterproofs of Mary Cassatt, organized by the Adelson Galleries with Marc Rosen Fine Art, remains on view at the Mark Hotel, 25 East 77th Street, through Jan. 14, 2005. The show is accompanied by a well-written and abundantly illustrated catalog.

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