

Great Artists: Mary Cassatt

Mary Cassatt was born in Pennsylvania in 1844 and grew up in Philadelphia. Her father was a wealthy man, a banker by profession, and her family traveled to Europe often throughout her childhood. Her father was delighted with her painting talents and sent her to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts to study art. During this period of time, it was considered appropriate and refined for a woman to learn to paint and to use this talent at home, but when she decided to paint professionally, her father was not happy about that decision.

When she turned 21, Mary Cassatt chose a career as an artist over marriage and left America to study in Europe against her father's wishes. She became friends with Edward Degas who was part of a new and controversial art movement in Paris called [Impressionism](#). Degas had a strong influence on her work and she eventually exhibited her paintings along with other Impressionists in Paris.

Like Degas, she often used pastels because of their freshness and spontaneity. Her artwork mostly depicts the relationships between women and children, portrayed up close and physically interacting. To emphasize her subjects, she took special care to draw their faces and hands in a realistic manner, while their clothing, as well as the backgrounds, were rendered sketchily with less detail.

Mary had an independent spirit, refusing throughout her life to be associated with any art academy or to accept any prizes for her work. Her work is very unique in that she depicted the activities of women in their worlds: caring for children, reading, crocheting, pouring tea, and enjoying the company of other women.

At the age of 56, her eyesight began to fail from diabetes, and by 70 she was forced to stop working on her art. She died in 1926 in Paris.

Things to notice about Mary Cassatt's work: she depicts the close relationships between two people through an embrace, eye contact, holding hands, or simply sharing an activity. Today, we're going to make some art in the style of Mary Cassatt.

PROJECT: <http://www.artforsmallhands.com/2010/02/in-style-of-mary-cassatt.html>

Explain that their drawings should depict a relationship, or special feeling, between an adult and a child or between two friends. Discuss some ways to show affection, such as holding hands, placing an arm around a shoulder, eye contact, or sharing an activity. Have some of the children demonstrate how arms appear when wrapped around a friend's shoulders or holding a baby.

Discuss how Mary Cassatt made people the most important part of her pictures by drawing their faces and hands as realistically as possible, while drawing the rest of the picture in a looser, sketchier manner.

Slides:

1. Words: "Mary Cassatt, 1844 - 1926" under her photo (see <http://www.3pipe.net/2011/01/passion-of-mary-cassatt.html>)
2. Map of Pennsylvania with Philadelphia pointed out
3. Picture of Paris (we've used before)
4. Word: "Impressionism" – under a Monet painting: <http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/claude-monet/the-japanese-bridge-the-bridge-in-monet-s-garden-1896>
5. Word: "Edward Degas" – with one of his paintings http://oilpaintingdiscount.com/index.php?main_page=index&cPath=11_62
6. Series of Mary Cassatt's work: especially paintings showing relationships (Let's look through the images on Google together)