

Mary Cassatt, Auguste Renoir

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, many painters turned their attention to scenes of modern life—Parisians enjoying themselves in the countryside, streets crowded with traffic and pedestrians, performers and habitués of the city's theaters and café-bars. For the two artists featured here, Mary Cassatt and Auguste Renoir, images from the lives of women and children, especially, provided lifelong inspiration.

Mary Cassatt, born to a wealthy Pennsylvania family, chose a life very different from most of her contemporaries. At the age of twenty-two she left home to study painting in France, returning to the United States only for brief periods thereafter. Both her choice of career and her success at it were unusual. In some of her paintings of young women we detect the same forthright determination with which she herself was often described. Cassatt was the only American to participate in the impressionist group exhibitions, yet she, like her friend Edgar Degas, was never comfortable with that label. Her own work, rather than relying on the spontaneity of impressionism, was based on careful drawing and rigorous composition.

Perhaps more than the work of any other artist, Renoir's sunlit scenes reflect the *joie de vivre* that is so appealing in impressionist painting. Yet, by all accounts, he was a diligent student, and more ready than his colleagues to learn from art of the past. This led him to experiment, as can be seen in the works here. *Diana* calls on Salon convention and the realist style of Courbet, while *Odalisque* is redolent of Delacroix's exotic subjects and free technique. In *Girl with a Watering Can* we find Renoir the impressionist, but in later pictures, such as *Girl with a Hoop*, he gives his painting a more monumental quality.



Mary Cassatt
American, 1844–1926
The Loge, 1882

A number of artists, including Degas, Renoir, and Cassatt, depicted women at the theater. While Degas took many of his subjects from the stage and orchestra pit, Cassatt and Renoir focused on the audience. Reflected behind these two young women are rings of theater seats and a massive chandelier—clearly, they are sitting in luxurious boxes with mirrored walls. Like Cassatt herself, they belong to wealthy, proper families. Their careful posture is reserved, almost stiff with decorum. It would have distinguished them, despite their bare shoulders, from some other women in the audience—coquettes brought to the opera by their lovers.

Not all the display at the theater occurred on stage, and the young women are equally on view. They sit forward to be seen, but the social code prohibits proper, unmarried young women from looking themselves. The woman holding the fan is probably Mary Ellison, a friend of the artist visiting from Philadelphia. Even from behind this screen her gaze is cast modestly down. The other woman, perhaps the daughter of poet Stephane Mallarmé, is more forthright than her companion. The two seem to be mirror reflections of each other—while the young Philadelphian hides shyly, her friend is poised with self-confidence to receive the attention of other theater patrons.

Oil on canvas, .798 x .638 m (31 3/8 x 25 1/8 in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.96



Mary Cassatt
Girl Arranging Her Hair, 1886

It was Edgar Degas who invited Cassatt to participate in the impressionist exhibitions, and the two remained close associates. Degas respected Cassatt's work, seeing in her careful compositions an approach to art that was deliberate and well thought out, like his own. Degas was known for his sharp criticism of other artists' work. He once complained to Cassatt: "What do women know about style?" She took his words as a challenge to produce a work whose appeal derived, not from a conventionally pretty subject, but purely from artifice, the painter's skill, and style. This painting is the result.

She chose a subject that Degas himself had often depicted: a girl she described as "a servant type, the most vulgar kind" at her toilette. The beauty of the picture comes from the rigor of the composition and its harmonized contrast of pinks and blues—in her nightdress, in the background, and even in her skin. While the moment is casual, even private, the girl's pose and the arrangement of furniture behind her are artfully contrived. Note, for example, how the chair back, the dry sink, and mirror-frame rise in stairsteps parallel to the motion of her arms, echoing and enhancing their upward sweep.

Oil on canvas, .751 x .625 m (29 5/8 x 24 5/8 in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.97



Mary Cassatt
The Boating Party, 1893/1894

This bold composition reveals the influence of the flat, patterned surfaces, simplified color blocks, and unusual angles of Japanese prints, which enjoyed a huge vogue in Paris in the late 1800s. The dark figure of the man compresses the picture onto the flat plane of the canvas, and the horizon is pushed to the top, flattening space in the distance. Our high vantage gives us an oblique, bird's-eye view into the boat. Its form is divided into decorative shapes by the intersection of its horizontal supports.

After 1893, Cassatt began to spend many summers on the Mediterranean coast at Antibes. Under its intense sun, she began to experiment with harder, more decorative color. Here, citron and blue carve strong arcs that divide the picture into assertive, almost abstract, shapes. This picture, with its bold geometry and decorative patterning of the surface, positions Mary Cassatt with such post-impressionist painters as Gauguin and Van Gogh.

This painting, one of her most ambitious, was the centerpiece of Cassatt's first solo exhibition in the United States, in 1895. Her contacts with wealthy friends in the United States did much to bring avant-garde French painting into this country.

Oil on canvas, .900 x 1.173 m (35 7/16 x 46 1/8 in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.94



Auguste Renoir
French, 1841–1919
Diana, 1867

Renoir wrote that he had produced this painting as a study of a nude, the sort of exercise that was a mainstay of the academic tradition. In the pose are signs of a “life class.” Notice, for example, that the woman’s foot rests on an elevated perch and that the strain of her raised arms is relieved by a prop—such devices were necessary for a model to maintain her pose. This model, though, is Lise Tréhot, the artist’s mistress, and in the end, as Renoir admitted, “the picture was considered pretty improper.” He said he added the bow, the dead animal, and the deer-skin to transform Lise into Diana, ancient goddess of the hunt, whose voluptuous nudity would be more acceptable to a Salon jury than that of a real woman. Probably this is a fiction. But, in any case, the painting was rejected when Renoir submitted it to the Salon in 1867. It was undisguised by its mythological theme.

The picture’s style shows the influence of realist painter Gustave Courbet, for example, in the particular attention given to the blood coming from the animal’s mouth and the mossy surfaces of the rocks. This is one of the few times Renoir used a palette knife to apply his pigments—a favorite technique of Courbet. In the greens of the animal skin and the bright red accent, however, we see Renoir’s own preference for the bright, luminous colors that would distinguish his impressionist pictures only a few years later.

Oil on canvas, 1.995 x 1.295 m (77 x 51 1/4 in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.205



Auguste Renoir
A Girl with a Watering Can, 1876

This painting has long been a favorite of visitors to the National Gallery—and it seems that Renoir painted it with exactly this hope, that it would please a large audience. The first impressionist exhibition, in 1874, had brought Renoir and his fellow artists more notoriety than business, and the auction he optimistically organized for his own work the following year was a financial disaster. Unlike Cassatt, who had family wealth, Renoir, the son of a tailor, was in a constant struggle for money in his early career. He began to paint charming, light-filled scenes with women and children, like this one, in the hopes of increasing sales. He probably thought that the pretty child in her fancy dress might also attract portrait commissions. Although it was landscape that had provided the first, and most important, inspiration for impressionism, Renoir’s instinct always led him back to the figure.

The deep blue of the dress, the bright red of the bow and the girl’s lips, and the cool greens of the lush garden behind her are all given a prismatic brilliance by Renoir’s brushwork. Rather than blend his colors, Renoir has applied them in individual touches that dissolve edges and seem to shimmer with light. Impressionism sought to capture the effect of light on the senses, communicating a visual signal with each stroke of the brush.

Oil on canvas, 1.003 x .732 m (39 1/2 x 28 3/4 in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.206



Auguste Renoir
Girl with a Hoop, 1885

In the 1880s Renoir, like many of the impressionists, had become dissatisfied with the style’s reliance on observation and visual effects, and sought an art of more permanent qualities. “I had wrung impressionism dry,” he later wrote, “and I finally came to the conclusion that I knew neither how to paint or draw.”

On a trip to Italy in 1881, Renoir found new inspiration in the works of Renaissance artists, particularly Raphael, and developed a manner of painting he called “aigre,” or “sour.” The word conveys a sense of the hardness and tightness of his new style, exemplified by *Girl with a Hoop*, a portrait Renoir was commissioned to paint of a nine-year-old named Marie Goujon. The colors, though in some areas thickly applied, have a feeling of transparency. In her skin they are smoothly blended into a silky, almost liquid texture that seems to flow along the form. Brushstrokes are tight and firm—they have a smoothness like that of the girl’s skin itself. The contours of her figure are crisply defined, almost as if they were outlined. In the background, elongated brushstrokes underscore this feeling of line. Compare these hard edges with the loose and sketchy impressionist style of *Girl with a Watering Can*, where the brushwork and image dissolve in prismatic color.

Oil on canvas, 1.257 x .766 m (49 1/2 x 30 1/8 in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.58



Henri Fantin-Latour
French, 1836–1904
Portrait of Sonia, 1890

Not all the painting produced in France in the 1890s traced its lineage to impressionism or had Cassatt’s bold color and composition. This portrait, for example, with its meticulous technique and careful attention to texture and detail, seems almost anachronistic. The artist was an intimate of the impressionists and avant-garde—perhaps his most famous work is a group portrait that includes Manet, Renoir, Monet, and Zola—but Fantin exhibited at the Salon and never abandoned his allegiance to the old masters. Still, this portrait of Fantin’s niece projects a different sort of modernism. He approaches his subjects as a camera lens, sharpened to such intense focus that it illuminates a preternatural reality beyond appearance.

By the 1860s photography had become relatively inexpensive, so that most middle-class families could easily afford to sit for portraits. Fantin exploited its characteristics. The subdued color scheme is restricted to the range of browns found in sepia prints. Only the ruby and emerald of her ring sparkle with clear color. The young woman seems to be suspended in the background as if removed from time. The directed light, like that used for photographic portraits, forces our attention on the contrast of light and dark and away from the modeling effect of middle tones, with the result that the figure seems somewhat flattened and two-dimensional.

Oil on canvas, 1.092 x .810 m (43 x 31 7/8 in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.145