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Robert Sheardy Jr.

Grand Valley State University

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ROBERT SHEARDY, JR.

Mary Cassatt's Paintings of Men

Mary Cassatt (1844-1926), the American Impressionist who worked with Degas, Manet, and Berthe Morisot, is best remembered today for paintings about women. Her later works, in particular, are so packed with mother and child images that she has become known mainly as *Un Peintre des enfants et des meres*.¹ Images of women predominate in her earlier work as well, but they are portrayed in activities *other* than child caring. Her only paintings of men also date from that earlier period. What brought about this change in her work? What do those very few paintings of men reveal about the artist? Some Feminist writers have examined the manner in which Cassatt portrays women as others have studied male artists' images of women, but what of her images of men? Only six such paintings survive, other than portraits of friends or family members, and all six are from periods in the artist's life of intense activity and change. These paintings deserve a closer look. They should not be viewed casually, along with her other work, nor even as exceptions to that work, but in a new context altogether, as images of men by a woman artist of the nineteenth century. The goal of this paper, then, is to approach a better understanding of Cassatt's art as a whole, and its relationship to her life and times, by taking a closer look at her paintings of men in particular.

Cassatt's first representations of men are from her student days in Paris, 1872 to 1874. It was a time of rapid development in her style from genre—realism toward true Impressionism and recognition by fellow artists. These early paintings reveal the influence of her first masters — Gérôme and Couture, and Manet, Degas, and Courbet — men whose work she admired. They deal with Spanish themes reflecting the then current interest in Goya and seventeenth-century picaresque subjects. Three were painted while the artist was wintering in Seville. *Toreodor* (Chicago) and *Torero and Young Girl* (Clark Institute) were painted in 1873 and make use of the same male model who, in the second work, is offered a glass of liquid refreshment by a coquettish young woman. *On the Balcony During the Carnival* (Philadelphia) was shown at the Salon of 1872 under the name of Mary Stevenson suggesting that her family may

not have approved either of the painting in particular or of Cassatt's choice of career in general.²

These early scenes of men and women together remind us of other works on the theme because they reflect a tradition — a tradition of the male-centered-art-world in which Cassatt moved. The slightly suggestive undertones in the Spanish pictures are there because they were part of that tradition, as in seventeenth-century “Procuress” scenes of coquettish ladies and amorous men.

The Musical Party of 1874 (Petit Palais, Paris) is of the same era of study and growth. It too reflects themes typical of the art of male painters. It builds on both the “procuress” and “balcony” formats for its composition, especially in the placement of the women and the removing of the man to the shadowy depths — much as in balcony scenes by both Manet and Goya. The musical associations here look back to the tradition of Vermeer and Watteau. But something is subtly different. One woman interposes herself between the man and the other woman. He *does* look over her shoulder, as in past pictures, supposedly to read the sheet music she holds, but it is the rapport between the two women I find of interest. They are women who enjoy the company of other women to the exclusion of the man. These women neither flirt with the man who dominates their group, nor do they seem even to care about his presence. Though they are still subject to his attention, they seem unmoved by his nearness. They are going about *thier* business, still under his watchful eye, but independent of his influence.³

What does this subtle difference reveal about Mary Cassatt during this period of introduction to the art world? Does it suggest the beginnings of a quiet, barely detectable rebellion against the male-centered tradition? She was thirty the year of this painting and unmarried. Her student days were over and she was about to embark upon a career as a professional artist — a woman artist. She was on her own in Paris. Her family had not yet joined her, and she'd not yet become friends with Degas and the other Impressionists. In *The Musical Party*, Cassatt tells us something of her growing sense of independence, a theme she will reiterate many times in later life — both in letters and in paintings. Thus far, she had studied art mostly on her own. Though her work shows the influence of her brief associations with Gérôme and Couture and her awareness of the European tradition, she had developed independently as an artist, as an American in Paris, and as a woman in a male-centered world. Her parents and her ailing sister Lydia joined her in 1877. They remained with her until their deaths, and she depended more and more on them for companionship. She met Degas in 1878 and began depending on him for artistic guidance. Their friendship, though rocky at times, was always one of great mutual respect. She began show-

ing with the Impressionists in 1879, eventually becoming quite close to Berthe Morisot — a sister painter.

Paintings from 1878 and 1879 reveal the stress and excitement of this second period of change. From this era is *Woman and Child Driving* (Philadelphia), representing an outdoor theme popular with other Impressionists. But this is not just *another* carriage scene. (Illustration 1) The models include Lydia, Odile Fevre, a niece of Degas, and the Cassatt family groom riding through the Bois du Boulogne. But here, the woman is in the driver's seat! It was customary for the groom to ride in the rear when the mistress chose to drive and Cassatt, an avid equestrienne, often drove. But it was not customary for paintings to portray the woman driving. Also, the manner in which the groom is placed relative to the woman and child — even to the rump of the horse which occupies more space — his position at the very edge of the picture plane, looking in the other direction; these facts are intriguing to contemplate. Though in clear profile, he is almost featureless — anonymous — no longer dominating the scene. He is in fact, little more than an added extra, a little touch of realism, a bit of dark color to balance the horse and to frame the pastel dresses at the same time. But note the resolute expression on the woman's face, the determined manner with which she grips the reins. There is also a deepness of hue and somberness of mood not so typical of true Impressionism. The day seems to have been overcast and gloomy. Even the pastel dresses are shaded and subdued. Further, the picture is life-sized, suggesting something like the historical realism of Manet or Courbet rather than the purely optical approach of Monet or Renoir.

Having become associated with the Independents, Cassatt herself was gaining more self-confidence as an individual: Is this not a statement of woman's right to be independent? Ironically, Lydia, the beloved sister who posed for this driver, was growing weaker and less independent each year. She died in 1882.

Cassatt's Impressionist years were successful and active, but her busiest period was yet to come — the years 1890 to 1895. Some of her boldest and most original paintings are from this period of grief and change. Her father died in 1891. Her mother and her friend Berthe Morisot died in 1895. She did two series of prints for one-person shows both in Paris and in New York, and in 1892 she was commissioned by Mrs. Potter Palmer to do a sixty-foot mural for the Woman's Building at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. She was nearing fifty. The mural project and the many works associated with it left her angry and exhausted. Letters to and from Degas of this period are filled with bitterness and lack of confidence. Their friendship suffered. Degas was critical of a woman taking on so big a project. With the loss of his advice, Cassatt's own confidence in the project weakened.



Illustration 1: Mary Cassatt "Woman and Child Driving" from the W. P. Wiltach Collection (W721-1-1) of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The *Modern Woman* mural, now lost, portrayed twelve women and some young girls in a landscape, picking fruit and playing music. When asked why she included only women in the work, she explained in a letter to Mrs. Palmer that she was trying to express “sweetness of childhood [and] charm of womanhood . . . [while] men . . . in all their vigor” would no doubt adorn the walls of other buildings at the exposition.⁴ She emphasized the feminine theme in her description of the mural, but this should not be confused with modern feminism. Cassatt was not then a suffragist, though she did believe in equal rights. For instance, she refused to lend her name to one of Mrs. Palmer’s feminist projects, the New York Art Jury, even though Palmer insisted it would help women gain more recognition in the art world should Cassatt participate. Twenty-five years later, in 1915, she did allow Louisine Havemeyer to list her among suffragists against the war in Europe, but this she did believing that the innate humanitarianism of women might urge the world toward peace by way of the ballot box.⁵

Some of the works associated with the *Modern Woman* mural project are her best. They seem to summarize the experiences, both personal and artistic, of the preceding years — from the influence of Degas and Japanese prints to the sorrow associated with loss and her growing independence as a result of those losses. Her last and boldest portrayal of the male figure is from this era. *Boating* or *La Barque* (National Gallery in Washington, D.C.) is oil on canvas, 35 by 46 inches. (Illustration 2) It was begun in the summer of 1893 and was referred to by the French title in a letter from Cassatt to her dealer, Durand-Ruel, of 1914:

About the painting, “La Barque,” I do not want to sell it; I have already promised it to my family. It was done at Antibes 20 years ago — the year when my niece came into the world.⁶

Thus she explains her reason for keeping it. But it is not a portrait of her niece, since the baby in the picture, sprawling across the woman’s lap, is at least several months old. Besides, the woman appears to be Cassatt’s maid Mathilde who posed for a number of works of the period. As for the boatman, he is once again seen in oblique profile, from the rear, and is nearly featureless, but for a prominent nose. It is clear, however, that he looks directly at the woman who returns an equally intense gaze. Even the child seems to be watching him. Apart from the figures themselves, there are other aspects, from color and paint quality to composition and mood, which are puzzling in light of Cassatt’s usual approach to theme and technique.

The severe composition may reflect the influence of both Degas and of Japanese prints which Cassatt had seen in 1890. A few large shapes of pattern or flat color are arranged against a planar backdrop of blue water and sky divided by a strip of



Illustration 2: Mary Cassatt, "The Boating Party" from the Chester Dale Collection of the National Gallery of Art.

dark green along the top of the picture. The boat is an acid yellow reminiscent of Van Gogh. The boatman is a flat patch of blue-black. The color of the sail is grey and the woman and child are in shades and tints of lilac and pink, in harsh contrast to the sharp yellows and deep blues. The faces are dark but for a stripe of sunlight across the child's cheek. Only the water is rendered in a divisionistic manner. In other areas, pigment is applied in wide, flat, simple strokes. The strong contrasts, the crisp contours and the smooth, hard paint imparts a two-dimensionality which can be described as Post-Impressionistic. The man's dark and sprawling shape cuts a "hole" in the foreground as the grey sail slices a corner out of the backdrop. Between these two intrusive elements, the woman sits stiffly, as if uncomfortable in the boat, with the child lying across, or nearly sliding off, her lap.

La Barque is one of three boating pictures of 1893-94 and a rare "outdoor" scene for the artist. She describes her feelings about landscape in a letter of January 1894, written at Antibes:

For anyone fond of sea, & color, & light, to say nothing of boats, this is a wonderful place — Our villa is on the sea with the snow capped mountains in the distance & below them the olive clad hills — I believe there are a number of American landscape painters here — It (the landscape), is rather too panoramic for my taste, but doubtless could be interpreted by a great man, in an artistic way; I have never yet seen it done to my satisfaction.

I content myself with a little bit as background to my figures, & ought to be thankful for the sun & long days. . . .⁷

The work has been compared to Manet's *Boating* of nearly twenty years earlier which Cassatt had urged the Havemeyers to purchase (Metropolitan Museum, Havemeyer Collection). However, *his* work reverses and flattens the composition, placing the woman in the foreground, confronting the viewer with the boatman. Both figures are in light colors and there is no horizon. Nor is there a child. A sail slices off the upper right corner. In the Cassatt, it cuts off the upper left. The shape of the boat is similar, but our position as viewer is more easily understood due to the higher horizon. We seem to be looking into the boat from the shore or a dock and the boatman returns our gaze. He is in a similar spread-leg position but now facing us. The woman, in profile, with mouth slightly open, appears to be talking. Her relaxed pose and the softness of the atmosphere on the whole, suggests a much lighter mood. The boatman seems to be watching her.

We have seen that Cassatt's earlier representations of men were drawn from the European tradition — the male-centered tradition in which she was trained. Both the images and the somewhat erotic messages associated with those images were a

part of *that* tradition. As she matured as an independent painter, those images and their associated messages changed. In *Woman and Child Driving* of 1879-80, we have a new image of the man. Though portraying real-life customs, the representation of the woman driving with the groom in the rear — as an obsolete type — was unique; even among the Impressionists. The woman is not shown involved in a woman's activity — but doing what was normally done by a man.

In *La Barque* of 1893, we see men and women playing the *same* roles — each observing the other with equal intensity. Though the woman is still the object of the man's attention, he is also the object of hers. She returns his gaze unabashedly. She confronts male-dominated reality with resolute self-assurance. The boatman is not a real man, of course. He cannot be identified like so many of Cassatt's female models. He is man in general — the voyeur under whose watchful scrutiny women go about their daily activities. Cassatt's later art becomes more woman-centered, but it is not of a world *without* men. It is only half a world. Though men do not appear in most of her paintings, this does not mean they are not present in that world. Her art reflected a world (in fact) which did not exist in reality, but like her carefully edited letters and her carefully constructed biography of 1913, it contributes to the myth of Mary Cassatt — a painter of children and of women.

¹ Cassatt herself apparently wanted to be remembered as a painter of children and mothers. The first published biography on the artist was written under her direction by Archile Segard, in Paris, in 1913, and was entitled *Un peintre des enfants et des meres*.

² See Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt*, N.Y., 1980; and Mary Mowell Mathews, *Cassatt and her Circle; Selected Letters*, N.Y., 1984.

³ Susan Fillin Yeh further explores the idea of women portrayed enjoying the company of other women in "Mary Cassatt's Images of Men," *Art Journal* (Summer, 1976). This paper is, in part, a response to that article.

⁴ Mathews, 238.

⁵ A number of letters cited in Mathews emphasize, Cassatt's unwillingness to be associated with feminist projects. Mathews notes that Cassatt's feminism was "individualist in nature," p. 271.

⁶ Adelyn D. Breeskin, *Mary Cassatt: A Catalogue Resone* (New York, 1970). The painting remained in the possession of the artist until 1914 when it was shown at Durand-Ruel's Paris gallery. It had also been shown in 1895. It was later purchased by Chester Dale and bequeathed to the National Gallery in Washington D.C.

⁷ Mathews, 252.