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Mary Cassatt between Paris and New York: The Making of a Transatlantic Legacy

By Ruth E. Iskin

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Mary Cassatt (1844–1926) was the only American to exhibit with the celebrated French Impressionists, yet today’s museum visitors are unlikely to see her works installed alongside those of her colleagues. Instead, they will typically find her paintings in permanent collection galleries dedicated to American art. In her attentive book on the artist, Ruth E. Iskin investigates what is at stake in the “multiple identifications” (1) of Cassatt—in her lifetime and in the century since her death—and sheds light on the artist’s complex allegiances that defy strict categorization. As a corrective to conventional accounts on Cassatt, which have claimed her primarily as either an American artist or a French Impressionist, Iskin foregrounds her transatlantic endeavors.¹ In doing so, the author offers a new perspective on Cassatt’s contributions as an artist and art advisor, specifically her role in “bridging the Parisian and New York art worlds both through her own artistic reputation and in the unique impact she had through advising American collectors on acquiring contemporary French art” (1). As the first comprehensive study of Cassatt to employ a transnational framework, this book questions the tensions, challenges, and opportunities that arose from Cassatt’s coexisting identities. Tracing these queries through an introduction and seven chapters, Iskin arrives at a revised understanding of Cassatt’s life, career, and posthumous legacy.

The introduction provides an overview of the transatlantic system that shaped the international art markets of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It focuses on the demand for French art among American collectors to specifically address Cassatt’s central role in this movement of objects and ideas. Iskin argues that Cassatt’s persistent efforts to encourage Americans to collect European art, particularly French modern painting, “should not remain external to her artistic legacy but should be recognized as an important part of it” (9). This ongoing project to enrich the cultural holdings of her



homeland correlated with the other causes Cassatt passionately supported: French Impressionism, artistic independence, and feminist aspirations to expand women's opportunities to participate in the public sphere. Iskin reveals not only the extent of Cassatt's sustained advocacy for each cause but also the interconnectedness of these pursuits.

Surveying Cassatt's personal and professional networks, the first chapter demonstrates her rootedness in American social circles throughout the decades she lived in France. Fitting the definition of neither *expatriate* (which suggests not merely leaving but renouncing one's native country) nor *cosmopolitan* (a "citizen of the world" without national allegiance), Cassatt held fast to her American identity while she resided in France for over fifty years. Iskin traces Cassatt's social ties to the United States by focusing on five key individuals: banker and art collector James J. Stillman, artist Sarah Choate Sears, architect Theodate Pope, curator Sara T. Hallowell, and critic Forbes Watson. The chapter emphasizes her friendships rather than family relations, pushing back against the narrow, domestic scope to which historical accounts still relegate women artists. In doing so, Iskin recognizes the artist as an active agent in her transatlantic network. By maintaining her relationships with friends who primarily resided in the United States, Cassatt both sustained contact with her homeland and remained engaged in American culture and politics, exerting an influence from afar.

Iskin devotes a separate chapter to Cassatt's most significant personal and professional connection to the United States. Chapter 2, "Cassatt and Louisine Havemeyer: Collaboration, Suffrage, Alliance, and Affective Bond," sheds light on the understudied friendship between the artist and Louisine Havemeyer: Cassatt's patron, collaborator, and confidante. Iskin argues that the two friends' shared dedication to promoting the cause of women's suffrage merits equal consideration to their project to build an exemplary collection of modern French art in America. The author gained considerable insight into Cassatt's concerns, motivations, and allegiances from her in-depth study of hundreds of unpublished letters from Cassatt to Havemeyer held in the archives of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, which is also the home of the Havemeyers' art collection.² These decades of correspondence reveal ongoing conversations on the topics of art, current events, and their personal lives. Cassatt's political sentiments and patriotic attachment to the United States, as attested in these letters, underpin not only this chapter but the entire book. Notably, Iskin characterizes these missives as having "the candidness of a diary" (56) and claims that the artist had "no notion that they might be published" (3). Given the volume of letters over the decades—and Havemeyer's evident dedication to preserving them—it would have been worthwhile for Iskin to interrogate further whether Cassatt composed with posterity in mind. Such a notion would not necessarily undercut the sincerity of affection expressed within the correspondence, and it might underscore the deliberateness of Cassatt and Havemeyer's joint project.

Chapter 3, "Cassatt and Degas: Camaraderie, Conflict, and Legacy," likewise concentrates on one of Cassatt's most important friendships. Among her French colleagues, her closest relationship was with Edgar Degas (1834–1917). Iskin briefly reviews the literature on the two artists to reveal the persistence of a one-sided dynamic, which tends to wrongly characterize Cassatt as Degas's follower or protégé. As a corrective to previous scholarship, this chapter demonstrates the mutual encouragement and respect between the two artists. Iskin's revisionist narrative of their friendship reasserts Cassatt's own

agency as well as the crucial role she played in supporting Degas by providing critical feedback and promoting his work to American patrons. The author ultimately foregrounds the centrality of this dynamic to Cassatt's transnational endeavors: "Cassatt's choice to advise American collectors to acquire Degas's art was integral both to her friendship with him and to her passionate dedication to developing her homeland's art collections" (125).

Having established the significance of Cassatt's transatlantic network in the first three chapters, Iskin shifts focus to the interplay between her art and politics. The fourth chapter analyzes Cassatt's feminist positions on the issues of women's suffrage, citizenship, marriage, financial independence, and the freedom to pursue a career. Cassatt honed her political outlook while living in France and supported women's voting rights everywhere. Nonetheless, she directed her attention and efforts toward developments in the United States. She never abandoned her American citizenship, and in her letters, she always referred to her native country as her "home." Citing the artist's correspondence, Iskin addresses Cassatt's more progressive principles but also the racism, xenophobia, and other prejudices she shared with much of the American upper class, including many suffragists. Born into an affluent family, Cassatt benefited from considerable privilege and financial security. Nevertheless, Iskin reveals how the artist was committed to economic self-sufficiency, lived on the income from selling her own artworks, and promoted women's professional ambitions.

Chapter 5, "Cassatt's Art and the Suffrage Debates of Her Time," argues that Cassatt's feminist values are integral to the meaning of much of her work, thus building upon the author's claim that her political and artistic pursuits were as entwined as her American and French allegiances. In her critical reassessment, Iskin analyzes examples from Cassatt's celebrated depictions of mothers and children as well as paintings that treat themes less discussed by scholars: representations of older women, American fatherhood, and the bonds between women across generations, beyond the nuclear family. The passages on *Woman with a Sunflower* (fig. 1) stand out in this chapter. Acknowledging and elaborating on the insights of art historian Nicole Georgopoulos, Iskin highlights the pro-suffrage symbolism of this painting, emphasizing the sunflower as a prominent symbol of the movement.³ She further contextualizes the canvas within broader discourses on women educators and children's agency in both the United States and France in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While Iskin convincingly argues for the feminist significance underlying Cassatt's compositions, she does not address questions of how such works were received in France or the United States. Since Cassatt depended on the sale of her



Fig. 1. Mary Cassatt, *La Femme au tournesol* (*Woman with a Sunflower*), c. 1905. Oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 29 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, Chester Dale Collection, 1963.10.98. Photo: National Gallery of Art

art, as discussed in chapter 4, did she intentionally veil her political beliefs within saleable depictions of women and children? As demonstrated in the next chapter, women's suffrage remained a polarizing subject in early twentieth-century America, even among Cassatt's peers and patrons.

Although she frequently advocated for women's suffrage in her private letters, only once did Cassatt explicitly support the cause in a public setting. Chapter 6, "The 1915 Cassatt and Degas Exhibition in New York," investigates the history of an exhibition organized by Havemeyer, with Cassatt's input, as a fundraiser for the New York suffrage campaign. As demonstrated by Iskin's close reading of archival photographs, the show featured dozens of paintings by Cassatt and Degas that were presented equally, as well as a smaller selection of works by Old Masters in adjacent rooms. The critical reception was mostly positive, yet the show was boycotted by antisuffragists, including members of Havemeyer's upper-class social circle and Cassatt's own relatives. Iskin situates this fundraising endeavor within the historical context of pro-suffrage exhibitions organized by women artists and within the trajectory for exhibiting modern art in the United States. She argues that this show presaged New York's rise as a cultural rival to Paris in the twentieth century.

The final chapter contends with Cassatt's parallel afterlives in the United States and in France, focusing specifically on how museums have crafted her posthumous legacy. Distinct national interests have driven French and American museums to develop different strategies for displaying her art, resulting in two dissimilar narratives: Cassatt as a French Impressionist and as an American artist. Assessing the gallery installations of various museums in each country, Iskin considers how these choices influence the perceptions of their visitors. She argues that the competing national claims over Cassatt are a direct consequence of the artist's own transnational allegiances. The tendency of most museums to divide their holdings by artists' nationality fails to account for the complex dynamics of an individual like Cassatt. The chapter also reflects on the lasting impact of Cassatt's work as an art advisor in shaping American museum collections.

Throughout the book, Iskin provides a nuanced analysis of Cassatt's personal and professional lives in the context of her transatlantic networks, collecting activities, and politics. The transnational framework brings new insight into the career of this celebrated artist. Nevertheless, between her French and American identities, the book's balance tips toward the latter. Implied in the text but rarely addressed is how Cassatt's artistic success in Paris legitimized her work and cultural standing; this credibility enabled her to better advocate for her favored causes. Given that many American artists, collectors, and museum professionals regarded French art—and, by the early twentieth century, Impressionism in particular—as a paragon, Cassatt's membership in this avant-garde circle was key to her influence in the United States. The artist herself recognized the importance of her achievements in France to her mission. Upon receiving the title of Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur (Knight of the Legion of Honor) from the French state in 1905, she wrote: "Perhaps it will help me to a little influence with Museum Directors at home" (245). This brief passage, quoted in the seventh chapter, demonstrates that Cassatt's dual national ties were not merely entwined but rather inextricable.

Offering an astute reevaluation of Cassatt's accomplishments, Iskin sets the stage for further consideration of how nationalist influences have shaped women artists' careers

and legacies. This book arrives in advance of the many Cassatt exhibitions that will open in 2026, the centennial of her death. Iskin's readers will surely recognize the lasting impact of the artist's transatlantic endeavors in those installations.

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Notes

¹ See, for example, Marianne Delafond and Mari-Caroline Sainsaulieu, *Les femmes impressionnistes: Mary Cassatt, Eva Gonzalès, Berthe Morisot*, exh. cat. (Musée Marmottan, 1993); Laurent Manœuvre, *Mary Cassatt, au cœur de l'impressionnisme* (À Propos, 2018); Kevin Sharp, "How Mary Cassatt Became an American Artist," in *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman*, ed. Judith A. Barter, exh. cat. (Art Institute of Chicago, 1998); and Frederick A. Sweet, *Miss Mary Cassatt, Impressionist from Pennsylvania* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1966).

² Havemeyer's letters to Cassatt did not survive.

³ Nicole Georgopoulos, "'The Sunflower's Bloom of Women's Equality': New Contexts for Mary Cassatt's *La Femme au tournesol*," *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 8, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.13070>.