

Part I: The Extent of Women Artists'

Participation in the New Art Movements

The first women artists discussed were members of a group of painters known as the Impressionists. These painters initiated a movement that stylistically drew from the past but only as a means to an end: the new interpretation of the visual world. Impressionism was a forward-looking movement, the beginning of "modernism" because it espoused a new way of seeing. This it was the movement that marked the beginning of a dramatic change in art that took place primarily within the years 1890 to 1910. Realism continued to be abandoned by progressive artists until Kandinsky produced the first truly non-representational paintings. Artists all over Europe participated in different movements such as Cubism, Rayonism, Futurism, Expressionism, Orphism, Dadaism, and surrealism. All these movements, some quite different, some developing out of earlier and similar movements, with centres of initial impetus in different parts of Europe, some with political associations, others pure visual research, had their beginnings in the years from 1890 to 1920. The concentration of all these movements within such a short time span lent to art an incredible sense of drama. The focal point for art was Paris where all of these art movements began or were assimilated by a city to which artists gravitated from all over Europe, the United States and even Canada. Paris was where the art schools were located: L'Ecole des Beaux Arts that was still very much the champion of the French Academic tradition, L'Academie Julien, L'Academie Colarossi, and many others. Here ideas could be exchanged, and new works exhibited or viewed. In addition, the art world of Paris travelled to New York in 1913, spreading the ideas and doctrines of the new art to artists in North America. However, modernism was not necessarily as popular as the realistic art of the Victorian era in England or the realistic French academic tradition in France. Because they did not have a buying public or even an appreciative public, the artists who participated in the new movement did so with little expectation of financial remuneration. They were caught up in the need to express themselves, and to express their relationship with the new industrial age of the twentieth century.

Art historians have dealt at length with the art movements of this period. Just about every aspect of the art community that existed in Paris has been researched, and understandably so, because it was an exciting period. However, did traditional art history provide any information about the participation of women artists in these new art movements? Were there any women artists who contributed to the development of "modernism"? Until recent years, traditional art history texts gave the impression that women's contributions were negligible or that women artists were mentioned only because of their associations with male artists as mistresses,

disciples, pupils or followers. Women artists were not referred to as collaborators, innovators or artists in their own right. Research done by feminist art historians has brought forward information that women artists were frequently collaborators with male artists. This is information that was often overlooked in the past or obscured by the fact that a number of women artists deferred in terms of their careers and artistic reputations to the male artists with whom they were associated.

It was only somewhat easier for women to become artist during this period. Barriers to art education were slowly rescinded, but barriers to the Ecole des Beaux arts, the bastion of the French academic tradition, were removed for women at a time when the male artist were no longer interested in attending the conservative academy art school. The alternatives to the Ecole des Beaux Arts were the independent studios or ateliers. Women flocked from all over Europe, the United States and Canada to study art in these ateliers, although for women, learning took place more by osmosis than by contact or critiques from the teaching masters. The ateliers often accepted both men and women, but segregated them within the atelier. The Academie Julien for example had an upper and lower school, the lower school being for women and for which they were charged more for the privilege of attending. The situation did not exist yet where both men and women could set their easels side by side and work from the nude figure. Women worked from the draped figure and from the female nude figure if their Victorian sense of propriety permitted them to do so. The art education that women received was still inferior to that available to their male counterparts at the turn of the century, and limited equality would not be achieved until the twentieth century.

But how was it that women were even permitted to study art? Many of the women who participated in the Parisian art scene had the example of a more strident feminism and suffrage movement in existence at the end of the century that suggested that women should be able to determine their own destiny, that they were entitled to their independence. Pursuing an artistic career was still hardly a conventional choice for a woman but it was not impossible. What was virtually impossible was for a woman to be accepted as a serious artist. For each of the women artists considered in the unit, there were different sets of circumstances that determined the extent of their participation in the art world, including, as in the example of the Russian women artists, a political revolution. For each of the women artists, the style of work is different because the movements to which they belonged were different. Some of these women artists were innovators, some were collaborators, but all were participators in a new art, and for this reason deserve recognition.

THE PARTICIPANTS

In the past, references made to the Impressionist painters Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot in standard art history texts described them as fringe members of impressionism. Sometimes they were not mentioned at all in listings of impressionist painters. Both were associated with male artists, Cassatt with Degas and Morisot with Manet, and both referred to as followers with the attendant implications of being influenced by and of secondary importance to these male artists. Now most texts have reintegrated these women artists into the history of Impressionism. In recent years, with monographs and major exhibitions of the work of both these women artists, they have come to be seen as significant artists in their own right.

It was not always so. For example, E.P. Richardson's *A Short History of American Painting*, published in 1956, recognized the importance of Mary Cassatt when he stated that she was "one of the few American painters known to European critics and mentioned in European histories of art." However, as he continued his comments became less favourable: "as a consequence she has been given, I suspect, a somewhat disproportionate place in our story of art." Richardson goes on to describe what he believed Cassatt's contributions to art history to be: the introduction of Impressionism to her wealthy American friends; her encouraging them to buy Impressionist paintings (which now grace the walls of American art museums); and finally he credited Degas with introducing Cassatt to the Impressionist circle. Phoebe Pool, in her book *Impressionism*, published in 1976, presented a more complimentary description of Cassatt and her contributions to Impressionism and in fact, it has been women art historians who have taken the lead in recognizing and researching this artist.

Mary Cassatt

Mary Cassatt (1845-1926, American) was the daughter of a Philadelphia banker of French ancestry who took his family to Europe so that Mary Cassatt spent much of her childhood in France. The family returned to the United States but after receiving four years of art training at the Pennsylvania academy of the arts, Cassatt wanted to study art in Paris. Her father, initially reluctant to let her go and not in favour of her becoming an artist, relented. Cassatt left for Paris with her family secure in the knowledge that she would be lodging with family friends. Young women such as Cassatt frequently found themselves in a similar position, free but carefully chaperoned by family or friends or a paid older woman companion. Cassatt submitted work to the Salons of 1875 and 1877, but her work was rejected as had been the work of the Impressionists. It was Degas who suggested that she join the Impressionist circle of friends. He said that "she and he had identical dispositions and an identical predilection for drawing." From this statement, one might be led to

believe that he placed her on the same intellectual and artistic level as himself. Yet he also used Mary Cassatt as a model for paintings in which he tried to show "a woman's crushed respect and absence of all feeling in the presence of art" suggesting that Degas possessed a characteristic Victorian male sensibility. He and Cassatt were, however, close friends, perhaps lovers, and her assistance to him in a positive way was considerable. It was Degas who suggested the mother and child theme to Cassatt as one that had been untouched by other artists. She devoted herself in her work to this theme and to themes derived from her knowledge of a woman's life. *The Letter* and *Maternal Caress* provide examples of this subject matter as well as representative examples of her style of work.



Mary Cassatt: The Letter

(1890–91)

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/9/9b/Mary_Cassatt_-_The_Letter.jpg/421px-Mary_Cassatt_-_The_Letter.jpg

Cassatt's work possesses a linear quality because drawing was one of her strengths and a design quality that is derived from Japanese prints with their cut-off figures and asymmetry. The compositional innovations introduced by the Impressionists

are all found in her work. Both she and Degas experimented with the graphic arts and it is in her coloured lithographs and etchings done in the 1890's that her work is most successful, again with the subject matter devoted to the portrayal of women as real people and not as voyeuristic objects. The aforementioned E.P. Richardson commented that to the effect that it was unfortunate that Cassatt had chosen the unimportant subject matter of mother and child and that it diminished her status as an artist.

It is difficult to know what Mary Cassatt felt about herself as a woman and as an artist. Her life was unconventional in that she pursued an artistic career and never married in order to pursue her career, but her life was conventional in that as an unmarried daughter, she dutifully supported financially and looked after her aging parents and seriously ill sister when they moved to France. She did make a contribution to early feminine concerns in her mural for the Woman's Building of the World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893. The mural was entitled *Modern Woman*, a large-scale work, twelve and a half feet high at the centre panel that depicted women picking fruits of knowledge from trees in an orchard and handing them down to their daughters. The left panel depicted three women pursuing an allegorical figure of Fame and the right panel depicted women involved in the various arts. The mural was certainly a positive statement about women's ability to achieve in the arts, but unfortunately with the end of the exposition came the end of the mural, its fate unknown. The artist Mary Cassatt, in terms of women's art history, represents just such a woman artist of genuine achievement.

Berthe Morisot

Berthe Morisot (1841-1895, French), the other significant woman Impressionist painter, also chose to depict women and their lives in painting, often combining the figures of women with her other particular area of interest, landscape painting. Everything was painted in a soft, loose, sketchy "impressionistic" manner. Morisot was another member of the Impressionist circle who shared their aims, exhibited with them, but was not listed in the standard texts except in terms of her relationship to Manet. Morisot received her art training by copying paintings of the Venetian masters in the Louvre. Her family was wealthy enough also to be able to hire a tutor, thus circumventing the problems of art training for a female art student. It is worth noting that when this tutor saw that Berthe Morisot's interest in art was so great that she might devote herself entirely to art, he felt obligated to warn her mother against this "catastrophe."

Morisot pursued an independent career as an artist, assisted by Manet. Stylistically, they probably influenced each other, but the influence of Morisot's loose handling of paint and sketchiness is more evident in Manet's later work than any stylistic influences he might have had on her work. Critics have commented that Morisot led Manet away from his flat outlined forms when in fact she introduced Manet to Impressionist technique of which, in the medium of oils, she was a master.



Berthe

Marisot: Eugene Manet and His Daughter in the Garden (1883)

[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/d/d7/Eugene Manet and His Daughter in the Garden 1883 Berthe Morisot.jpg/774px-Eugene Manet and His Daughter in the Garden 1883 Berthe Morisot.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/d/d7/Eugene_Manet_and_His_Daughter_in_the_Garden_1883_Berthe_Morisot.jpg/774px-Eugene_Manet_and_His_Daughter_in_the_Garden_1883_Berthe_Morisot.jpg)

The remaining women artists in this part of the unit number among those artists who made a contribution to abstraction and were often mentioned in terms of their relationships to male artists than as artist in their own right. Again, feminist art history has brought their work and their contributions to the new art movements forward. As you read, note the subject matter choices.