Gender Space and Looking

Pollock readings and discussion questions

Round I Access and subject matter

How might the places women artists could enter affect what they painted?

What is one place you need permission to enter?

Pollock excerpt

Space can be grasped in several dimensions. The first refers us to spaces as locations. What spaces are represented in the paintings made by Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt? And what are not? A quick list includes:
dining-rooms
drawing-rooms
bedrooms
balconies/verandas
private gardens (See Figures 3.4–3.11.)

The majority of these have to be recognized as examples of private areas or domestic space. But there are paintings located in the public domain, scenes for instance of promenading, driving in the park, being at the theatre, boating. They are the spaces of bourgeois recreation, display and those social rituals which constituted polite society, or Society, Le Monde. In the case of Mary Cassatt's work, spaces of labour are included, especially those involving child care (Figure 3.10). In several examples, they make visible aspects of working-class women's labour within the bourgeois home.

Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," Vision and Difference (1988), p.56.

Check the reading

1. Which examples show women spending time outside the home?

2. Which activities involve leisure, and which involve work?

Which part of the passage supports your answer? Can you explain it in your own words?

Look at The Tea



Mary Cassatt, The Tea, about 1880. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Which details in The Tea connect it with her account?

Which detail makes you think that? How does it support your answer?

Return to the main question

How might the places women artists could enter affect what they painted?

Read and discuss the questions in class. Use the margins or your notebook for notes. […] marks an omission from Pollock's text.

Round II Pictorial space and the viewer

How do Morisot and Monet give us different relationships to the people and city?

Pollock excerpt

A remarkable feature in the spatial arrangements in paintings by Morisot is the juxtaposition on a single canvas of two spatial systems – or at least of two compartments of space often obviously boundaried by some device such as a balustrade, balcony, veranda or embankment whose presence is underscored by facture. [...] In On the balcony, 1872 (Figure 3.14), the viewer's gaze over Paris is obstructed by the figures who are none the less separated from that Paris as they look over the balustrade from the Trocadéro, very near to her home.[12]



Berthe Morisot, Woman and Child on the Balcony, 1872. Artizon Museum, Ishibashi Foundation.

The point can be underlined by contrasting the painting by Monet, The garden of the princess, 1867 (Figure 3.15), where the viewer cannot readily imagine the point from which the painting has been made, namely a window high in one of the new apartment buildings, and instead enjoys a fantasy of floating over the scene.



Claude Monet, Garden of the Princess, Louvre, 1867. Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College.

What Morisot's balustrades demarcate is not the boundary between public and private but between the spaces of masculinity and of femininity inscribed at the level of both what spaces are open to men and women and what relation a man or woman has to that space and its occupants.

Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," Vision and Difference (1988), p.62.

Word help: Balustrade: a railing supported by small posts. Facture: the handling of paint, including visible marks.

Historical note: The Allen Memorial Art Museum documents Monet's Louvre windows and special permission in April 1867. This corrects the apartment-window setting in the excerpt.

Check the reading

1. What does Pollock say interrupts our view of Paris in Morisot?

2. How does she describe the viewer's experience in Monet?

Which part of the passage supports your answer? Can you explain it in your own words?

Compare the paintings

How close do the people seem in each painting?

Which details create that difference?

What does each viewpoint allow us to notice?

Which detail makes you think that? How does it support your answer?

Return to the main question

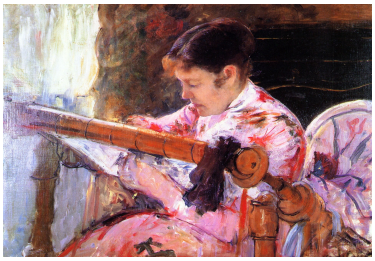
How do Morisot and Monet give us different relationships to the people and city?

Round III Compression and confinement

How convincing is the interpretation that compressed space represents women's confinement?

Pollock excerpt

In a previous monograph on Mary Cassatt I tried to establish a correspondence between the social space of the represented and the pictorial space of the representation.[13] Considering the painting Lydia, at a tapestry frame, 1881 (Figure 3.8), I noted the shallow space of the painting which seemed inadequate to contain the embroidery frame at which the artist's sister works. I tried to explain its threatened protrusion beyond the picture's space into that of the viewer as a comment on the containment of women and read the painting as a statement of resistance to it.



Mary Cassatt, Lydia at a Tapestry Frame, c. 1881. Flint Institute of Arts, gift of The Whiting Foundation.

In Lydia crocheting in the garden, 1880 (Figure 3.9), the woman is not placed in an interior but in a garden. Yet this outdoor space seems to collapse towards the picture plane, again creating a sense of compression. [...]



Mary Cassatt, Lydia Crocheting in the Garden at Marly, 1880. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. CC0.

I argued that despite the exterior setting the painting creates the intimacy of an interior and registers the garden, a favoured topic with impressionist artists, not as a piece of private property but as the place of seclusion and enclosure. I was searching for some kind of homology between the compression of pictorial space and the social confinement of women within the prescribed limits of bourgeois codes of femininity. [...] But such an argument is only a modified form of reflection theory which does not explain anything (though it does have the saving grace of acknowledging the role of signifiers in the active production of meaning).

Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," Vision and Difference (1988), p.63.

Word help: Homology: a proposed correspondence between forms or structures. Reflection theory: an account that treats an artwork primarily as a reflection of its social conditions.

Check the reading

1. What connection did Pollock make between shallow space and women's lives?

2. Is she now questioning whether women faced restrictions, or how she explained the paintings?

Which part of the passage supports your answer? Can you explain it in your own words?

Return to The Tea on page 1

Which details in The Tea support or challenge a confinement reading?

Which detail makes you think that? How does it support your answer?

Return to the main question

How convincing is the interpretation that compressed space represents women's confinement?

Your final interpretation

What can we now argue about The Tea?

Develop or revisit one claim, two visual details with their effects, and one limit to what the image can establish.

Julia Child and Martha Rosler

What did Julia Child teach us to expect from a cooking demonstration, and where does Rosler unsettle that expectation?

Before viewing

What changes when someone demonstrates an everyday object to an audience?

Recall the cup and gesture in The Tea. Note an initial expectation about a person demonstrating a kitchen tool to an audience.

Julia Child French Omelette

Watch the selected excerpt once for the movement of her hands, then again for her voice and address to the viewer.

When does she name a tool, show what it does or let her voice reassure the viewer?

Martha Rosler Semiotics of the Kitchen 1975

Watch the complete video without stopping. After viewing, quietly recall one gesture, word or sound. Explain your interpretation of that moment to a partner.

Which pace, gesture or sound supports that reading?

What expectation does it change, and how?

Which detail makes you think that? How does it support your answer?

Return and respond

What does your partner's example make you reconsider or defend?

What did Julia Child teach us to expect from a cooking demonstration, and where does Rosler unsettle that expectation?

Return to your initial expectation. Explain how the selected moment supports a revision or a reasoned defense of your answer.

Word help: A sign carries meaning through its use and context. A gesture is a movement or position of the body that can communicate meaning. Semiotics is the study of how signs produce meaning.

Video sources: Julia Child on PBS, French Omelette (The French Chef, Season 1), youtube.com/watch?v=N40qglGNRIA. Martha Rosler, Semiotics of the Kitchen (1975), MoMA collection record: moma.org/collection/works/88937.