ART APPRECIATION

Mary Cassatt
The Tea

Gender, space and looking

1844–1926
American painter and printmaker
Settled in Paris in 1874
Exhibited with the Impressionists from 1879



An American artist in Paris



Mary Cassatt, In the Loge, 1878. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Complete painting.

Mary Cassatt (1844–1926) was an American painter and printmaker. She studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts before continuing her training in Europe.

She settled in Paris in 1874. Degas invited her to exhibit with the Impressionists in 1877; she first showed with them in 1879.

She built a professional career within a society that offered men and women unequal access to artistic training and public life.

Painting modern women



Mary Cassatt, The Child’s Bath, 1893. Art Institute of Chicago. Complete painting.

The Impressionists made contemporary life a central subject. Cassatt brought women’s experiences into this modern art.

Her subjects included theater audiences, readers, social visits and the care of children. She worked in oils, pastels and prints.

Her care scenes give everyday actions sustained attention. Gesture, touch and the relationship between bodies make these subjects psychologically compelling.

Experimenting with form



Cassatt was an experimental printmaker as well as a painter. Close framing, unusual viewpoints and broad areas of color shaped her modern style.

A Paris exhibition of Japanese prints in 1890 helped inspire her color prints of 1890–1891.

In The Letter, repeated pattern and an angled desk bring surface design and depth together. Familiar subjects became a means of formal invention.

Mary Cassatt, The Letter, 1890–1891. Color drypoint, softground etching and aquatint. National Gallery of Art, Washington.

The modern city as a subject



Gustave Caillebotte, Paris Street; Rainy Day, 1877. Art Institute of Chicago, Charles H. and Mary F. S. Worcester Collection. Public domain.

Caillebotte places us among strangers moving through a rebuilt Paris street. The broad intersection and receding buildings open a view into public urban life.

Cassatt's The Tea brings us close to a domestic social visit. Both are modern subjects, shaped by different encounters and positions of looking.

Backstage: work and unequal access



Edgar Degas, Dancers Backstage, 1876–1883. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection, 1970.17.25. Public domain.

Degas shows dancers at work and a man in evening dress backstage. Wealthy male subscribers to the Paris Opéra had privileged access to this space.

Women were present in modern public life, but a working dancer and a bourgeois woman visiting the theatre occupied very different social positions.

Looking and being looked at



Pierre-Auguste Renoir, La Loge, 1874.



Mary Cassatt, In the Loge, 1878.

In Renoir, the man scans the audience while the woman holds her opera glasses lowered. Her dress and frontal pose make her highly visible.

Cassatt makes the woman's own act of looking central. A man in the distance also watches her.

The same public setting can give women different roles within the picture.

Renoir: Courtauld Gallery, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust). Image courtesy of the Courtauld, CC BY-NC 4.0. Cassatt: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Gender, space and looking

How can a painting make social limits visible, and what can it tell us about the people within them?

Access and subject matter

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

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Access to subjects

Places and permission

What is one place you need permission to enter?

Access and subject matter

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

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

Access and subject matter

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

Checking the reading

Which examples show women spending time outside the home?

Which activities involve leisure, and which involve work?

Which part of the passage supports your answer?

Can you explain it in your own words?

The Tea



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

Reading the visual evidence

Which details in The Tea connect it with her account?

Which detail makes you think that?

How does it support your answer?

Access and subject matter

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

Use the passage and visual evidence to explain your answer.

Griselda Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” p.56

Pictorial space and the viewer

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

The viewer’s position

Pictorial space and the viewer

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.

Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," Vision and Difference (1988), p.62 · Omissions marked […]

Pictorial space and the viewer

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.

Griselda Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” Vision and Difference (1988), p.62 · Omissions marked […]

Pictorial space and the viewer

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 · Omissions marked […]

Checking the reading

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

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?

Woman and Child on the Balcony



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

Garden of the Princess, Louvre

The documented viewing place

The museum records Monet painting from the Louvre’s windows with special permission in April 1867.

This corrects the apartment-window setting in Pollock’s passage.



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

Two positions of looking



Morisot ·1872 · Artizon Museum



Monet ·1867 · Allen Memorial Art Museum

Reading the visual evidence

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?

Pictorial space and the viewer

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

Use the passage and visual evidence to explain your answer.

Griselda Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” p.62

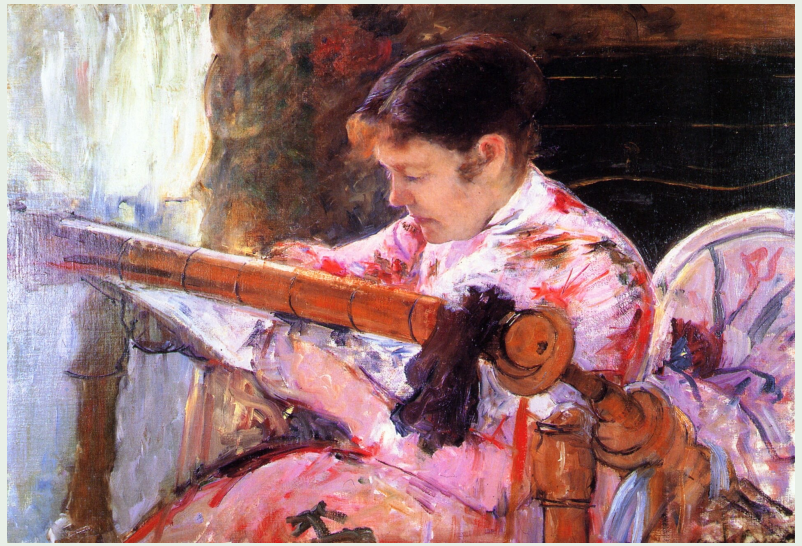
Compression and confinement

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

The limits of an interpretation

Compression and confinement

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.

Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," Vision and Difference (1988), p.63 · Omissions marked […]

Compression and confinement

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.

Griselda Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” Vision and Difference (1988), p.63 · Omissions marked […]

Compression and confinement

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 · Omissions marked […]

Checking the reading

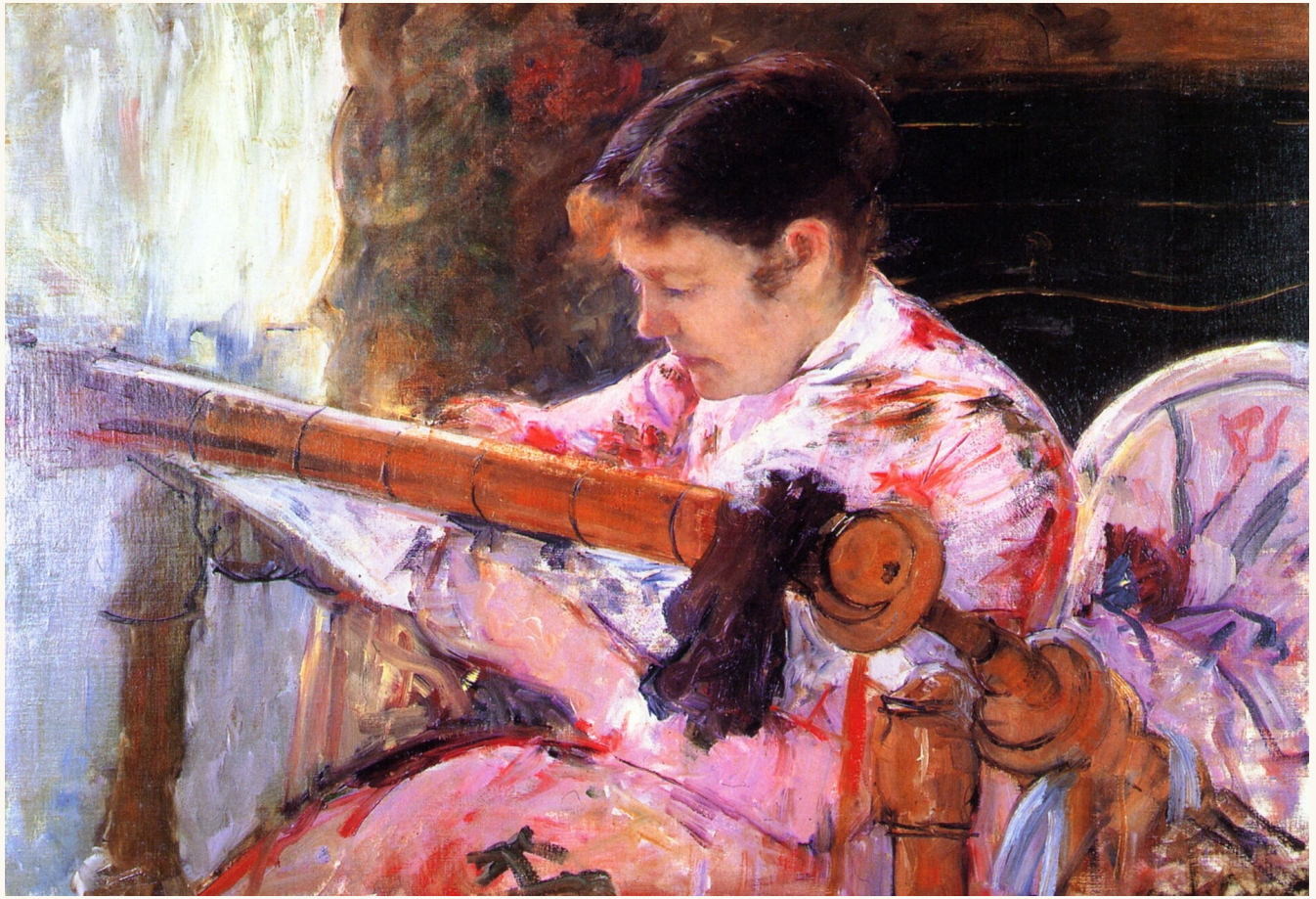
What connection did Pollock make between shallow space and women’s lives?

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?

Lydia at a Tapestry Frame



Mary Cassatt, Lydia at a Tapestry Frame, c. 1881. Flint Institute of Arts, gift of The Whiting Foundation, 1967.32.

Lydia Crocheting in the Garden at Marly



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

The Tea



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

Reading the visual evidence

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

Which detail makes you think that?

How does it support your answer?

Compression and confinement

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

Use the passage and visual evidence to explain your answer.

Griselda Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” p.63

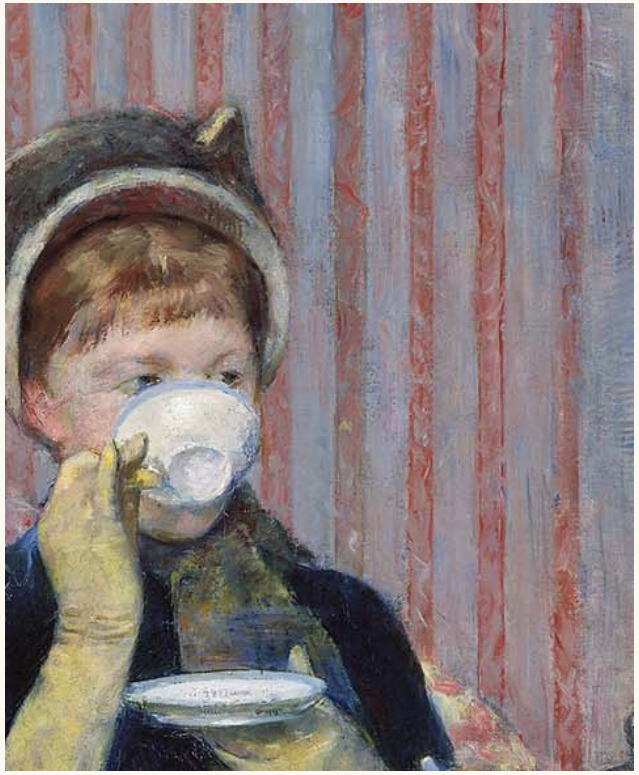
Return to The Tea

What can we now argue about The Tea?

One claim.
Two visual details, with their effects.
One limit to what the image can establish.

Domestic objects and expected gestures

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



The Tea · detail · MFA, Boston