

Title: The Fitting 1890-91

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Artist: Mary Cassatt (1844-1926)

Type of Art: dry point and aquatint printmaking

Brief Biography of Artist:

Mary was an American born into an upper middle-class family near Pittsburgh, who later moved to Philadelphia at age 6. She was able to travel abroad at age 7 with her family including Paris (1851) which reportedly sparked her interest in art. In fact, the family lived in Europe (e.g. 2 yrs. in Germany) and she learned multiple languages.

At age 16, Mary attended the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and at age 20, she preferred to study in Paris. According to historian David McCullough, this plan caused her father to “explode but he finally relented. In European travel, Mary welcomed the influences of Caravaggio in Italy and of Velasquez in Spain, all the while flouting traditional art. She briefly fled back to America during the Franco-Prussian War (1870) Mary settled in Chicago thinking it would provide a good market for her art, but even lost her paintings in the Great Chicago Fire.

In settling back in Paris, she became involved with other impressionists and even becoming a close friend of Degas. (1875) Mary was enamored of Manet’s work, and related to Pissarro and Renoir, becoming accepted into the group around 1872. Her paintings were displayed in Salon 1879. She was skilled in oil painting and learned pastels alongside her friend Degas. Although constrained throughout her history in an environment designed for men, Mary became famous for captivating mothers and children in emotionally intimates poses, and everyday routines.

Of special note, Mary was successful in developing relationships with various dealers, and collectors who agreed to bring Impressionist art to America. (See Havemeyer collection & the Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Mary Cassatt’s adventure into printmaking subsequent to embracing influence of Japanese art:

There was a dramatic exposure to Japanese visual arts of the Edo Period (circa 1853) which had not been available during the previously 200 yrs. Isolation of the country. Reportedly, Mary was in extasy from seeing Ukiyo-e woodblock print paintings detailed moments of their slices of life which was exhibited in Paris in 1890. 2 art critics have cited Mary Cassatt as one of the most gifted impressionists in her drawing ability. Thus, she was poised to learn and master drypoint etching and aquatint (2 of at least 8 different intaglio printmaking techniques.

She would have first done the drypoint by using a sharp pointed tool to draw the design onto a copper plate Next, she would have used acid to create which sections to hold ink thus creating the aquatint.

R. Stanley Johnson in his book on her graphic arts makes the case that there is so much benefit to this printmaking so that different stages of the production can be kept vs. paintings that can keep some brushstrokes hidden

The Fitting: as a work of art

In this piece, we can see Mary Cassatt's combination of the drypoint, and aquatint techniques creating subtle tones and shades (almost like the softness of a watercolor). Evidence of her drypoint is seen in the lines drawn in the face, and hair. It would seem important to think about the purpose of her insertion of a mirror image of the lady. Asymmetrical lines & composition are reminiscent perhaps of the Japanese art influence. The diagonal line helps with perspective and guiding the eye across with the complement of vertical axis of the figures. The flatness and decorative motif can also mimic Japanese art. Patterns helped solidify the composition.

The gaze of the client indicates no real interaction with the seamstress who has her back to the viewer. At that time period, class lines were drawn, and so the seamstress is not emphasized. Furthermore, the colors Mary used are of a rather muted brown vs the client. There are more details in the face vs. what would be done in Japanese art.

Ideas for tours: Certainly, Mary Cassatt could be highlighted in showing other works by women artists., and /or showing women. Perhaps, the Fitting could be grouped with works of art depicting a slice of life, and everyday routines.

Sources:

McCullough, David, The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris (New York: Simon & Schuster 2011)

KIA library books:

Mathews Mowls, Nancy Ed. Cassatt: a Retrospective (China: Hugh Lauter Levi Assoc. 1996)
Johnson, R. Stanley, Mary Cassatt: Early Graphic Works 1878-1891 (Chicago: R.S. Johnson International Gallery 2011)