

14a

MARY CASSATT [1844 - 1926]

The Boating Party, 1893/1894

Mary Cassatt decided to become an artist at age sixteen, when most women of her era and social status were looking forward only to marriage. Defying convention, she studied art in Philadelphia before heading to Europe and settling in Paris, where she remained for most of her life. As a woman, Cassatt was not permitted to enroll in the *École des Beaux-Arts*, the leading art academy in France, but she found private instruction and educated herself by copying paintings in the Louvre Museum. Years later, she recalled that her life had changed when she met the artist Edgar Degas, who invited her to join the Impressionist circle. Partly because women were not welcome in the Paris cafés where the Impressionists often discovered their subject matter, she specialized in domestic paintings, particularly of mothers and children.

In the late 1880s, when Cassatt was well established in her career, she fell under the influence of Japanese prints and dramatically altered her own style of painting. Abandoning the feathery brushwork, pastel colors, and insubstantial forms of Impressionism, Cassatt began to create bold, unconventional patterns of flat color and solid forms. *The Boating Party*, painted on the south coast of France, exemplifies the change. Rather than attempting to capture a fleeting visual impression, Cassatt arranged abstract shapes in a shallow space using saturated areas of color that may have been inspired by the brilliant Mediterranean light. To heighten the decorative effect, she flattened the scene, placing the horizon line at the top of the composition in Japanese fashion. From our unusual vantage point, the three figures look like paper dolls pasted on a vivid background.



14-A Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), *The Boating Party*, 1893/1894. Oil on canvas, 35 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 46 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (90 x 117.3 cm.). Chester Dale Collection. Image © 2006 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

The Boating Party is among Cassatt's most ambitious canvases. The composition is controlled by visual rhymes. The boat's yellow benches and horizontal support echo the horizontals of the far-off shoreline. The billowing sail echoes the curve of the boat, creating a strong visual movement to the left that counteracts the broad angle formed by an oar and the boatman's left arm. Without the sail for balance, the large, dark figure of the boatman would weigh the picture to the right, and the boating party would lose its equilibrium.

At first glance, the painting seems a straightforward depiction of a nineteenth-century middle-class outing. Yet the artist included subtle hints about the figures' relationships to one another that complicate this interpretation. Although Cassatt usually explored the familiar theme of mother and child, in this rendition the foreground is dominated by a male figure whose form is pressed against the picture plane and cast in silhouette by the sail's shadow. In contrast, the female element of the composition—the woman and her child—appears in soft, pastel shades that reflect the summer sunlight. The boatman, bending forward to begin another stroke of his oar, braces himself with one foot, while the woman maintains her stable position only by planting her feet on the floor of the boat. The sprawling baby, lulled by the rhythm of the water, looks liable to slide right off the mother's lap. This slight awkwardness is a result of the boat's movement, and the glances of the mother and child toward the boatman's half-hidden features and back again suggest a complex, personal relationship, adding psychological tension to this pleasant excursion on a sunny afternoon.

Cassatt's many paintings of mothers with children invariably recall the Renaissance theme of the Madonna and Child. Here, the woman appears enthroned in the prow of the boat, the child's sun hat encircles its head like a halo, and the man bows before them like a supplicant. In referring to this traditional image, Cassatt invests an everyday scene of contemporary life with a sense of reverence—perhaps to express her view of women as powerful forces of creativity (and procreativity). Yet the painting's meaning remains open to interpretation. Perhaps Cassatt touches on a truth that must have been evident to a woman painter who so closely observed the strictures of late nineteenth-century society; if the woman is elevated and admired, she may also be confined to the shallow space behind the oars, a passive participant without the power to control her own destiny.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to study this painting closely, including the foreground and background, and the colors used.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE

E

Have students find the boat's sail, the distant buildings, and the man's shoe.

E | M | S

Ask students to locate the horizon line. Where would a viewer have to be to see the people and boat from this angle?

A viewer would have to be located a little above them, perhaps on a dock or standing in the boat.

Where are the horizontal lines in this painting?

They occur on the shoreline and the yellow boat seats and supports.

Find the curved parallel lines of the boat and sail.

E | M | S

What is the center of interest in this composition? *It is the child.*

How has Cassatt emphasized this part of the painting?

The curved lines of the boat, oar, and adults' arms lead to the child.

E | M | S

Where did Cassatt repeat yellow in this painting?

Yellow is repeated in the boat, oars, and the woman's hat.

How does blue unify this painting?

Cassatt repeats blue in large areas of water and inside the boat.

INTERPRET

E | M | S

Why does the man have his foot on the yellow boat support?

Students may say that he is getting ready to pull the oars or is steadying himself.

Describe the movement that the boat might make in the water.

It may be rocking and surging as the oars are pulled.

Have students imagine that the man and woman are talking to each other. What might they say? What do their faces and bodies suggest about their relationship?

M | S

How is the composition of this painting like a snapshot?

It's asymmetrical, with part of the figures continuing off the picture.

Where are there broad areas of color?

Broad areas of color are found in the sail, the man's back, the yellow parts of boat, the blue shadow in the boat, and the water. (Asymmetrical balance and broad, flat areas of color were typical of the Japanese prints that became available in Europe and the United States following the opening of Japan by Commodore Perry in 1854; these prints influenced artists in the decades that followed.)

M | S

Are there any other ways in which the painting appears flat?

The boat looks tipped up and the water is painted the same way in the foreground and the background, so that the idea of distance is reduced.

M | S

In what ways do forms seem to move toward the edges of the painting?

Students may give any number of examples: the woman leans left, the man leans right; the sail pulls to one corner, the oar points to another; the edges of the boat bulge out toward the sides; the horizon nearly reaches the top; and the lower yellow boat seat continues beyond the bottom.

What pulls the three figures together?

The white area of the boat surrounds them; they look at each other; and their hands are close.

What might this feeling of expansion and contraction have to do with the subject of the painting?

It echoes the rowing motion of the man. Students might also point out that it could also emphasize this brief and precious moment—when the man, woman, and child are intimately connected.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: nineteenth-century women; women's rights movement

Historical Figures: Elizabeth Cady Stanton; Susan B. Anthony; Grimké sisters; Sojourner Truth

Civics: Nineteenth Amendment

Literary Connections and Primary

Documents: *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin (secondary); Susan B. Anthony's speech at her trial of 1873 (middle, secondary)

Arts: Impressionism; American Impressionism