

College Guild
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Art of the Masters

Unit 6 of 6

Mary Cassatt (1844-1926)

In the world of Art History, there is no more remarkable story than that of Mary Cassatt. She was the first, and only, American to be invited to paint with the Impressionists. She exhibited alongside Degas, Renoir, and Monet. Her life as an artist began when she was twenty-one. She was a Philadelphia Cassatt, daughter of a conservative banker. She was proud of her ancestry, descending from French Huguenots. She entered the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, but quite abruptly decided she wasn't learning much. She departed for France, staying there for three years. She traveled to Italy, Spain, and back to Paris. She did a lot of painting, and because her work was being exhibited, she decided to settle there. In 1877, her mother, father, and sister came to live permanently in Paris.

1. What would be the first thing you would want to paint while traveling in Europe? Give a description! Now think of the first thing you would want to paint while in Africa, Asia, or Australia.

At an exhibition where some of her works were being shown, Degas took an interest in them and wanted to be taken to her studio. He was enchanted with the paintings there and invited her to join the Impressionist group. Although she was in this group, where members quite often didn't observe the proprieties of society, Mary maintained the strict standards of her upbringing. She kept to her practice of daily, uninterrupted hard work.

2. One of Degas' more famous works is titled *Dancers In Pink* (Appendix 1). Looking at the Appendix of this painting and Cassatt's work, do you see similarities between the two? Explore color, line, light, mood, subject, ect...

Amongst the group of painters she associated with was Picasso, who offered much good advice. But it was Degas with whom she connected the most. He was a bachelor, ten years older than she, and she had no desire to marry. She admired him as one of the great masters of French painting. She also became great friends with Berthe Morisot, an important French woman artist. Mary Cassatt and Edgar Degas thought alike, so he began to give her some pointers in the rendering of art. Whenever she needed advice, she turned to Degas, the master.

About this time, the Impressionists decided to split into two separate camps: Impressionists and Independents. Degas and Cassatt belonged to the latter.

One of her best paintings, done in 1880, is *A Cup of Tea* (Appendix 2), which hangs in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. It is fascinating because of its quality, but also because it portrays a part of her own life and the lives of her elegant friends. Also, up to this point, women were presented as objects. In *A Cup of Tea*, they are subjects, living beings, doing what they might normally do.

3. How does the painting portray women as *subjects*, instead of objects?

4. During this time period, many thought the painting accurately showed what women might do in their daily lives. If you had to create a painting today with women as the subject, what would you have them doing? What techniques (brush stroke, lightening, color, ect..) would you like to incorporate in the painting?

In *Girl in a Straw Hat and a Pinnafore* (Appendix 3) she paints a neighborhood French child. She's slumping her shoulders, folding her hands, giving no eye contact but staring off to the side - she has a Huckleberry Finn aspect. When Cassatt painted children, in the finished product they were not all disciplined, but natural - her personal signature in her painting.

5. How does Cassatt show the child's emotion through her painting? In other words, what aspect of the painting led you to believe the child was sad, solemn, contemplative, ect..

About eight years later, Cassatt painted *The Boating Party* (Appendix 4). In it we see her familiar favorite pair, mother and child. It hangs in the National Gallery of Art in Washington. It is one of the most widely reproduced paintings in the world and has appeared on a U.S. postage stamp.

6. Write a short scene using dialogue between the characters (use at least two lines for each of the three characters).

Young Mother Sewing (Appendix 5) is a beautiful, natural scene. A mother is paying attention to her work while the child is in a sort of dreamy state. The background of landscaping was unusual for Cassatt.

7. How does the background in *Young Mother Sewing* differ from backgrounds in her other paintings?

Mary Cassatt encouraged her American friends to invest in painting done by the Impressionists and other European artists. She urged one of her best friends, Louise Havemeyer to purchase a Degas pastel. Louise and Mary toured Italy and Spain together, locating art for the Havemeyers to purchase. She was anxious to have this work brought to and exhibited in her native land. It is interesting that towards the end of her life, she expressed the belief that it was no longer necessary for an American to go to Paris to learn how to paint.

Ultimately, Mary Cassatt became known as a painter of children. She had the rare gift of perceiving a child's individuality. The majority of her work is of motherhood and scenes of tender affection - mother and child in their wholesome simplicity, in their everyday life. Of the qualities that made her great, her integrity and her passion were outstanding.

8. Which subjects would you choose to paint and why?

9. What qualities and characteristics do you value in a person?

As she aged, her eyesight lessened. Now she was alone - her parents and siblings having predeceased her. She began to develop the role of advisor to other American art collectors.

Early in the 1900s, the French bestowed upon her the honor of Chevalier of the Legion of Honor. In 1925, one year before she died, she was included in the exhibition "50 Years of French Painting" with her friends Degas, Pissaro, Cezanne, Monet, Renoir, Gauguin, Van Gogh, and Matisse. Her position in the world of art was officially recognized. Only Whistler had achieved such distinction in the field of international art.

Interred in French soil - she had lived for one half century in France - she had always felt she was an American. The opening paragraph of her will reads: "I, Mary Stevenson Cassatt, having my legal domicile in the city of Philadelphia, State of Pennsylvania, United States of America..."

Paul Gauguin
(1848-1903)

Paul Gauguin was born in Paris. It was said that he sprung from a family with savage blood in their veins, which would make him independent and temperamental.

10. Would you have liked to meet a talented man like Paul Gauguin despite his "savage blood"? If not him, what other artist we've talked about would you like to meet?

His family moved to Orleans, south of Paris, where he attended a parochial school. At seventeen, he decided to go to sea in the merchant marines. A few years later, he began work in a brokerage firm, earning a good living. When he was twenty-five, he met a Danish girl, Mette, and they were married six months later. They had five children. Before their marriage, Gauguin had learned the basics of drawing. He then decided to try his hand at painting. Three years later, he submitted one of his first paintings to an exhibition - and it was accepted. Five years later, he was singled out for praise for his work on a large painting of a woman: "Among contemporary painters, no other has been able to render the woman of our own day with such realism. His success is complete..." Not long after that, he resigned his position as a broker. The painter, Pissaro, who came from the Dutch West Indies, helped him get associated with the Impressionist group. As usual, Pissaro was generous with advice and help.

11. Have a look at Gauguin's painting, *Two Tahitian Women* (Appendix 6). Write a paragraph about what these two women might be looking at and thinking.

His painting was different from the Impressionists. He used bright color and exotic subjects. He had begun doing what is called Symbolist painting. Symbolists believed that a work of art was the equivalent of the emotion brought about by an experience. The visual elements would be transformed, rather than exactly represented because of the feelings they evoked. It is self-expression with spiritual significance through the emotive power of line and color.

12. How do you think a painting influenced by anger might differ from a painting influenced by happiness?

Gauguin was not very successful in the sale of his paintings so at the suggestion of his wife, they moved to Denmark, where her family could help them with potential buyers. Gauguin found it difficult to live in this situation.

Gauguin went out of his way to be disagreeable to his in-laws. In Denmark, he was a failure at a job he had selling tarpaulins and also as a painter. His relationship with Mette had deteriorated and he became disgusted with his situation there. He returned to Paris with his favorite son. He went on to Brittany where he could live cheaply and sent his son to boarding school. He settled in the remote village of Pont-Aven where he could live a simple life without worrying about society's demands.

13. What do you think are some of these demands that society places upon us?

In Port-Aven, he developed his own style of self-expression. When he wrote to his wife in Copenhagen, he said he was "working hard and successfully. I am respected as the ablest painter in Port-Aven...Englishmen, American, Swedes, and Frenchmen contend for my advice." After a few months there, he went back to Paris, although things did not go well financially. He would go without food for days. After a year, he decided to go to America and went to Panama where he lived as a native. While there he worked on the canal diggings. Next, he and a painter friend took off for Martinique. Once there, they were broke and had to sell their watches on the pier! Things got better - then worse. He contracted malaria and wanted to return to France, but didn't have the fare. He had to work his passage back as a seaman.

14. Though these experiences are unfortunate, they provided Gauguin with inspiration and matter for his paintings. Can you think of other hardships people go through that would be interesting to paint?

Gauguin brought back about fifteen paintings and drawings. In 1886, he met Van Gogh in Paris and they became friends (Appendix 7). Van Gogh, back in Provence, wrote to Gauguin inviting him to come and live there. He arrived there in the fall of 1888. He felt very much out of his element there and he and Van Gogh were not getting along. He returned to Pont-Aven where he painted *Vision After the Sermon - Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (Appendix 8). It was a blend of fiction and reality where he exercised his self-expression and freedom.

15. Why do you think the two figures in the background are wrestling?

In 1891, after spending a few days with his wife and children in Copenhagen, he sailed from Marseilles for Tahiti, "hoping to cultivate my art there in the wild and primitive state" - and live like a savage. In order to raise money for his fare, he auctioned off his works. In Tahiti, his life came to a turning point. He had paid his debts, left his family and wiped out his past. At first he led an idyllic existence. In addition to painting, he worked on woodcarvings. Soon his funds were exhausted - so he left Tahiti in June 1893. One of the paintings he did while there is entitled *Arearea* (Appendix 9), which resides in the Louvre in Paris.

16. What do you think brought about Gauguin's wanderlust?

17. How do the people in Gauguin's paintings differ from the people in Cassatt's paintings? Think both subject matter and painting techniques.

Back in Paris he was told that an uncle had died and left him 9000 Francs. This set him back on his feet for a while. Before long, he wanted to get back to the South Seas. He sold off his things and sailed, again from Marseilles in 1895.

18. What do you think would be the hardest to give up when making the transition from a civilized life to a primitive life?

In Tahiti the second time, Gauguin again cut himself off from the past. He lived with a native wife. His health began to fail, but during this period he was able to paint the largest work he had ever undertaken. It was twelve feet wide and four and half feet tall. He put all of his energy into it. Titled *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (Appendix 10). It summed up his basic questions about life.

19. Pick out a detail in the painting you find interesting. Write a short paragraph about what you imagine is happening in this detail?

In 1901, he sold the hut he lived in and went to the Marquesas Islands. Here, he built a larger hut with the help of the natives. He urged the natives to throw off the restraints imposed by the church. For talking against the church, he was summoned to court, fined and sentenced to three months in prison. There was no time to enforce the sentence. He was suffering from syphilis, swollen legs, eczema and abscesses. Days later, a friend found him dead. The bishop came at once to his hut and took away a number of his works that he considered indecent and destroyed them. Gauguin was buried the next day in the Catholic cemetery.

A large exhibition of Gauguin's work was held in Paris in 1906. All of his faith and devotion to his art, despite hardships and disappointment, had been justified. His paintings have a tragic grandeur. He had followed his dream of a simple and primitive existence. Paul Gauguin ranks high among the masters of art.

In February, 2015, Gauguin's painting of two Tahitian girls sold for 300 million dollars - making it the most expensive work of art ever sold.

20. How do you think Gauguin's subject matter and painting style would have been different had he not chose to live a "primitive existence"?

Since this is your final Unit, we'd appreciate any feedback and suggestions you have for improving this Course!

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes

**Appendices
Art of the Masters: Unit 6 of 6**

(Appendix 1) *Dancers in Pink* c.1876



(Appendix 2) *Cup of Tea* c.1880



(Appendix 3) *Little Girl in a Big Straw Hat and a Pinnafore* c.1886



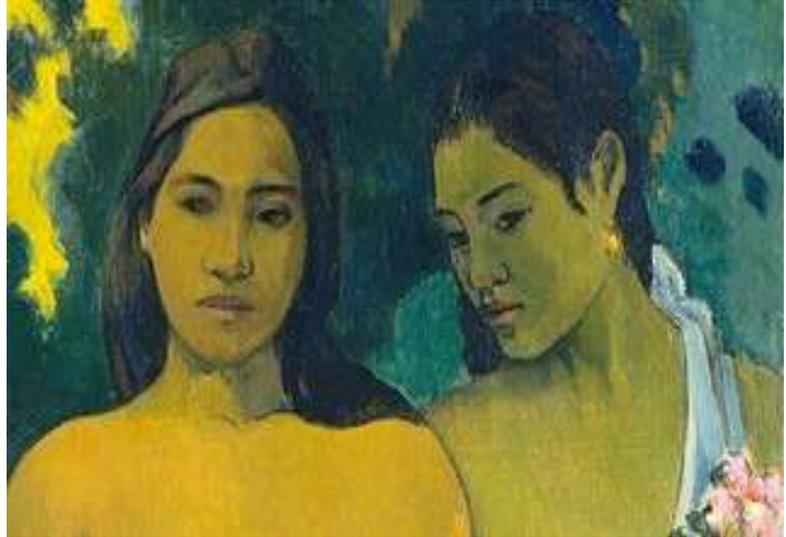
(Appendix 4) *The Boating Party* c.1883-84



(Appendix 5) *Young Mother Sewing* c.1900



(Appendix 6) *Two Tahitian Women* c.1899



(Appendix 7) *Van Gogh Painting Sunflowers* c.1888



(Appendix 8) *Vision After the Sermon - Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* c.1888



(Appendix 9) *Arearea (Joyousness)* c.1892



(Appendix 10) *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* c.1897-98

