Mary Cassatt’s Portrait of her Sister Lydia
A Free Study for *The Cup of Tea*

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Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum Stockholm
Volume 28:1
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Fig. 1 Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), *Portrait of the Artist’s Sister Lydia. Study for The Cup of Tea*, c. 1879–80. Oil on paper mounted on canvas, 39.5 × 60 cm. Purchase: Hedda and N.D. Qvist Fund 2021. Nationalmuseum, NM 7618.
Mary Cassatt (1844–1926) was the daughter of a rich banker from Pittsburgh. The family can be traced back to the Cossarts, French Huguenots who arrived in New York in the 17th century. Cassatt was precocious and adopted a feminist stance at an early age. She first studied painting in Pennsylvania, starting in 1860, before continuing her studies in Paris under teachers who included Jean-Léon Gérôme. Cassatt returned to the US in 1870, due to the Franco-Prussian War, and then just four years later definitively settled in France. She first encountered Impressionist painting in 1875. Cassatt herself described how astounded she was on seeing a pastel work by Edgar Degas exhibited in a Paris display window. By then, Degas was already familiar with her piece shown at the 1874 Salon, Portrait de Madame Cortier, and expressed himself in a very positive fashion about his colleague’s painting: “Voilà quelqu’un qui sent comme moi.” Exactly when they first met is not known, but it soon developed into a close friendship. This may appear surprising, as Degas was known for his somewhat misogynist attitude, but one explanation could be that both Cassatt and Degas were fundamentally intellectual artists, thoroughly testing their ideas and compositions, as well as different angles and positions, relationships between surfaces and depth, and so on. Degas thus held a lifelong respect for Cassatt. He was the one who invited her to participate in the Impressionists’ independent exhibition of 1879, which resulted in Cassatt becoming one of three significant female Impressionists, known as les trois grandes dames, in a group otherwise dominated by men.

Once they had laid the foundation of their friendship, both Cassatt and Degas started experimenting with graphic techniques. The results of their joint activities are distinguished by a noticeably generous artistic freedom and innovation. Cassatt’s work, in particular, is characterised by unusually rough representation for its time, and for liberal experimentation that tends

Fig. 2 Edgar Degas (1834–1917), Mary Cassatt at the Louvre, 1879–80. Aquatint, line engraving, stipple engraving and drypoint on paper, 30.5 × 12.7 cm. Nationalmuseum, NMG 420/1950.
towards abstractionism. Despite this, the unique graphic works produced by both Degas and Cassatt in the early 1880s have somehow ended up in the shadows of art history, and have not received the attention they deserve. The Nationalmuseum collections also include a contemporaneous sheet by Degas, on which he has depicted Cassatt during a visit to the Louvre (fig. 2). He produced numerous variations on this theme, and used Cassatt as a model for several oil paintings.

In parallel, we can see how strongly Cassatt’s painting was affected by Degas, but without her becoming an epigone. She created her very own form of expression, often in the psychological interaction between the models. The artist’s independent approach is also visible in her experimentation with pastel painting, where she worked with various blending techniques which, in turn, affected her oil painting. The influences of pastel techniques can be seen particularly clearly in this painting, recently acquired by the Nationalmuseum. It is a figure study from c. 1879–80, depicting Cassatt’s sister Lydia, a sibling to whom she was very close (fig. 1). The model is shown apparently unaware that she is being observed, drinking tea. Cassatt’s sister appears as a model in various compositions from this time, either in a salon or a garden (fig. 3). The works feature the most everyday activities, such as needlework, reading the newspaper or socialising over a cup of tea. All these paintings have a clearly sensual and lyrical touch. Compared to Manet and Degas, the colours are blonder, with contrasting complementary colours. Cassatt also worked using a more virtuoso sketch-like technique, without the rapid brushwork becoming superficial and solely for effect. Despite the
ACQUISITIONS/MARY CASSAT’S PORTRAIT OF HER SISTER LYDIA

Fig. 4 Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), The Cup of Tea, c. 1880–81. Oil on canvas, 92.4 × 65.4 cm. From the Collection of James Stillman, Gift of Dr. Ernest G. Stillman, 1922. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 22.16.17.
sketch-like character of the Museum’s painting and the impression of it being unfinished, it still possesses balance, as the composition is fundamentally clearly considered and produced. Just a few highlights were enough to provide the coordinates for the picture’s construction. The artist’s preparatory drawings are especially revealing, in which she tested compositional elements, light and shade. Unfortunately, she destroyed most of this material.

The extension of Cassatt’s sketched study of her sister Lydia can be seen in her composition The Cup of Tea (now in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) (fig. 4), which was painted in 1880 and exhibited the following year. This was the period, up until the mid-1880s, in which Cassatt was artistically close to Degas. However, inspired by Japanese woodcuts, she soon moved on from purely Impressionistic painting and developed a more synthesised method, using bold colours and finishes. Unlike many Impressionists, she barely produced landscapes, but instead examined middle-class homes, where the emotional reflection of her models plays a huge role. Cassatt worked in oils, pastels and, not least, produced sheets of graphics featuring these subjects. Another of the museum’s new acquisitions is a drypoint from this period, c. 1903, depicting one of her nieces, Margot Resting Arms on Back of Armchair (fig. 5). We could speculate as to whether this choice of subjects was a contributing factor in Cassatt long being overlooked, despite her many qualities as an artist.

The Impressionists’ leading art dealer, Paul Durand-Ruel, soon became Cassatt’s emissary, particularly in the US, establishing a branch in New York. Despite the artist possessing excellent contacts of her own in her home country, especially among the few American art collectors, she never really felt that Durand-Ruel respected her or kept his promises. Cassatt soon realised that exporting her work to North America would be detrimental to her chances of making a name for herself in her new homeland of France, where she lived and worked.

Fig. 5 Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), Margot Resting Arms on Back of Armchair, c. 1903. Drypoint on thin ribbed paper (est. Oatmeal paper), 32.5 × 19.8 cm. Purchase: Hedda and N.D. Qvist Fund 2022 (accession 2023). Nationalmuseum, NMG 1/2023.
Finally, around 1900, she gave up and began to engage Durand-Ruel’s competitor, Ambroise Vollard, who has given a free hand to select works, particularly from her older production. This was why, at the start of the last century, Vollard began to acquire Cassatt’s earlier paintings, like the *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair* and the Nationalmuseum’s recently acquired oil painting. The latter was long in the ownership of textile magnate Raoul Bouchara (1901–1955), before being inherited by his son Jacques Bouchara (1927–2005), whose heirs sold it at auction in 2021. This is also why this painting remained unknown for such a long period and is not entered in the artist’s catalogue raisonné.

Despite Vollard mainly operating on a European market, most of the paintings he bought ended up in American collections. This, combined with Paul Durand-Ruel’s deliberate policy of milking the cash-rich North American market, contributed to Cassatt long remaining outside the most valued Impressionists in France and almost unheard of in the Nordic region. After her death in 1926, there was a long wait for the first monographic exhibition of her paintings. Cassatt is now also represented in the Nationalmuseum’s collections, accompanied by her colleague in *les trois grandes dames*, Berthe Morisot, whose painting *In the Bois de Boulogne* was produced at around the same time as *The Cup of Tea*.

**Notes:**

3. According to Achille Ségard, on this occasion Degas said: It’s true. This is someone who feels exactly the same way as I do.” Quote from Achille Ségard, (Mary Cassatt. Un Peintre des enfants et des mères, Paris 1913, p. 40), in Burns and Saunier 2014, p. 270.
4. This should have occurred no later than 1877, if Philippe Saunier is to be believed (Ibid., p. 272).
5. In 2014, the *Degas Cassatt* exhibition, organised by curator Kimberly Jones at the National Gallery in Washington, thoroughly explored the relationship between the two artists.
11. Ibid., pp. 162ff.