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The Culmination of a Lifetime of Work: An Analysis of the Artistic Interests Influencing
Mary Cassatt's *Modern Woman*

The crowning achievement of Mary Stevenson Cassatt's career has been missing for over a century, and lost with it is a visual representation of her illustrious career as a whole. The work in question is Cassatt's one and only mural entitled *Modern Woman*, painted for the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition (fig. 4). *Modern Woman* was a massive, sixty four foot long mural that was last described in a 1911 letter regarding its display in France.¹ The mural was never seen again following the close of the Columbian Exposition, presumed to have been destroyed at some point. The only evidence that remains of the mural in full is black and white photographs and scant contemporary critique, leaving modern critics largely in the dark about what the mural actually looked like. Despite its lost status, *Modern Woman* remains one of the most important works of Cassatt's career because it is a visual culmination of her various artistic interests in a single work: mainly, Impressionism, Japanese-inspired printmaking, and symbolism. In examining the mural closely, many qualities of *Modern Woman* can be traced back to precedents in her career. The purpose of this exhibition is to more fully appreciate the status of *Modern Woman* as a culminating work in Cassatt's career in order to better understand her career as a whole.

¹Sally Webster. *Eve's Daughter/Modern Woman*, 138. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2004.

Mary Stevenson Cassatt was born in 1844 to a broker in what is now Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and grew up studying art. At the age of 16, she enrolled at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia and soon began to study master works abroad in Paris and Italy.² Because of this classical training in the arts, Cassatt's career as an artist began in a traditional fashion with paintings that are characterized by highly technical drawing and smooth gradation of color. Cassatt never permanently returned to the United States again, instead moving to Paris in 1874.³ She initially found success exhibiting in the Salon, the official art exhibition of the French government. Cassatt soon questioned the rigidity of the Salon after meeting Impressionist Edgar Degas, however, and proceeded to develop her own style of painting that closely aligned with Impressionist theory.⁴ Her Impressionist paintings were largely characterized in technique by vibrant colors and expressive brushwork and in content by modern scenes of women and children in domestic settings. Cassatt went on to exhibit with the Impressionists at their fourth (1879), fifth (1880), sixth (1881), and eighth (1886) exhibitions, and it is for these Impressionist paintings that Cassatt gained wide recognition. Soon after the eighth exhibition, however, Cassatt discarded her Impressionist tendencies and began painting in a more composed, solid manner. In her later paintings, figures no longer disappear into the atmosphere under the veil of expressive brush strokes, but are fully three dimensional and hold their ground.

In conjunction with painting, Cassatt also experimented with various printmaking techniques, including etching, drypoint,⁵ soft ground etching, and aquatint.⁶ Soon after being

²Nancy Mowll Mathews. "Cassatt, Mary." *Grove Art Online*, 2003.

³Barbara Weinberg. "Mary Stevenson Cassatt (1844-1926)." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2004.

⁴Mathews. "Cassatt."

⁵Marc Rosen, Susan Pinsky, Warren Adelson, Jay Cantor, Barbara Shapiro. *Mary Cassatt: Prints and Drawings from the Artist's Studio*, 8. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

⁶Rosen, 14.

introduced to printmaking in Degas' studio, Cassatt moved to her own studio to explore the listed techniques in unusual ways. The most influential and widely popular of her prints is a set of ten that are inspired by the 1890 exhibition of Japanese art at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. It is clear that Cassatt was hugely inspired by this exhibition, writing to Berthe Morisot after her first visit "Seriously, you must not miss that. You who want to make color prints you couldn't dream of anything more beautiful ... P.S. You must see the Japanese - come as soon as you can."⁷ Cassatt visited the exhibition many times and soon began a series of prints "à la japonaise,"⁸ culminating in the set of ten that includes *The Letter* (fig. 10) and *The Bath*, among others.

Following her association with the Impressionists, Cassatt began experimenting with symbolist imagery that used allegory to communicate an underlying message not readily apparent in the objective rendering of form.⁹ Although admittedly not part of the Symbolist movement lead by artists such as Paul Gauguin and Gustav Klimt, Cassatt began exploring the use of symbols in her later paintings, especially those completed in the early 1900s following the death of her parents and friend Berthe Morisot. In fact, scholar Judith A. Barter argues that Cassatt's experiments with Symbolism began with the creation of Japanese inspired prints, in which the strict adherence to reality in Impressionism "became secondary to the evocation of mood and the suggestion of larger meanings."¹⁰ Furthermore, there is evidence of symbolism in Cassatt's paintings of the 1890s, including, for example, *Women Picking Fruit* (1891) (fig. 11) and *Baby Reaching For an Apple* (1893) (fig. 12), which both use fruit as a representation of passing down information from one generation to another.

⁷Judith A. Barter, Erica E. Hirshler, George T. M. Schackelford, Kevin Sharp, Harriet K. Stratis, Andrew J. Walker. *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman*, 82. New York: The Art Institute of Chicago in association with Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1998.

⁸Barter, 82.

⁹Julius Kaplan. "Symbolism." *Grove Art Online*, 2003.

¹⁰Barter, 85.

Modern Woman was commissioned for the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition by Berthe Honore Palmer to adorn the south wall of the Woman's Building, a large building devoted to the celebration of women's contributions to society.¹¹ Mrs. Potter Palmer, as she is more commonly known, acted as the president of the Board of Lady Managers for the Woman's Building and thus was in charge of commissioning decorations for the interior of the building. The mural itself represented the empowerment of women in the modern age, able to move about a modern space without the assistance of a man. Hanging opposite *Modern Woman* on the north wall of the Woman's Building was a mural entitled *Primitive Woman* (fig. 13), painted by Mary MacMonnies¹² and also commissioned by Mrs. Potter Palmer. It is presumed to have faced the same fate as Cassatt's mural, having been destroyed at some point following the close of the Columbian Exposition.¹³ *Modern Woman* is composed of three panels that depict women operating independently in an idyllic outdoor setting: from left to right, the panels are entitled *Young Girls Pursuing Fame*, *Young Women Plucking the Fruits of Knowledge or Science* (fig. 1), and *Arts, Music, Dancing*. The center panel is of primary importance as it depicts the inverted allegory of Adam and Eve: instead of shunning Eve for being tempted by the fruit of knowledge, Cassatt celebrates Eve's actions for educating herself by actively seeking knowledge.¹⁴

It may seem odd that Cassatt would take on such a large scale mural for an exposition in America after settling in France and primarily identifying with French painters. However, Cassatt justifies her choice to take the commission in a letter to the younger art collector Louisine Havemeyer: "Gradually I began to think it would be great fun to do something I had

¹¹ Webster, 46.

¹² Webster, 63.

¹³ Carolyn Kinder Carr and Sally Webster. "Mary Cassatt and Mary Fairchild MacMonnies: The Search for Their 1893 Murals." *American Art* 8, no. 1 (1994): 53.

¹⁴ John Hutton. "Picking Fruit: Mary Cassatt's 'Modern Woman' and the Woman's Building of 1893." *Feminist Studies* 20, no. 2 (1994): 338.

never done before.”¹⁵ Furthermore, it is probable that Cassatt took the commission to promote the collection of fine European art in America. Cassatt was notably frustrated by the lack of European fine art in America to study as an art student and therefore became a great advocate for the transfer of art from Europe to America. She also regularly advised American patrons on which European paintings they should invest in.¹⁶ It would make sense, therefore, that Cassatt would want to send the work of a renowned artist (herself) to America for the benefit of the public and future art students.

Modern Woman received seldom critical coverage when it was displayed, and what coverage it did receive was primarily negative. Criticism was centered around the ways in which the mural failed its role as a decorative element and clashed with the surrounding design of the Woman’s Building. Notable criticism included Ellen Henrotin’s description of the mural as “the note of discord in the harmony of color,”¹⁷ Temperance leader Frances Willard’s comment that the mural was “below the dignity of a great occasion,”¹⁸ and critic Henry Fuller’s attack that the mural’s “imprudent greens and brutal blues ... seem to indicate an aggressive personality with which compromise and cooperation would be impossible.”¹⁹ The criticism directed at Cassatt’s mural is remarkable because by and large, MacMonnies’ mural was received well. Her work was considered to be more decorative, to have better complimented the interior design of the Woman’s Building as a whole, and more clearly showed references to classic French painting. In contrast, critics seemed to miss both Cassatt’s more nuanced references to French master

¹⁵ Barter, 87.

¹⁶ Barter, 177-8.

¹⁷ Hutton, 334.

¹⁸ Hutton, 334.

¹⁹ Hutton, 335.

paintings through naturalism²⁰ and the way in which the vibrancy of the mural was meant to be a statement about the urgency with which women needed to seize their empowerment.

When taken as a whole, *Modern Woman* acts as a culmination of Cassatt's varying artistic interests, including Impressionism, Japanese inspired printmaking, and symbolism. The mural can be broken down into its constituent influences and read in various ways according to these influences. Given Cassatt's prominent position among the Impressionists from 1886, it is no surprise that Impressionism is a key influence in the mural, manifesting in the mural's striking modernity. In a letter to Mrs. Potter Palmer, the patron of the mural, Cassatt explains that she "took for the subject of the central and largest composition young women plucking the fruits of knowledge or science & - that enabled me to place my figures *out of doors* & allowed for *brilliancy of color*"²¹ (italics added). Both the placement of a figure out of doors and the brilliance of color are key components of Impressionist theory and reflect a modern approach to the rendering of figures in nature. Furthermore, the tendency to approach the woman's role in society with striking modernity has its roots in the firmly modern lens of Impressionism. The ways in which Cassatt breaks traditional gendered expectations of behavior reflect the ways in which the Impressionists broke the traditional standards of painting in France by dedicating their work to the capture of the present moment. Such dedication to capturing a fleeting present moment is clearly displayed in Cassatt's early Impressionist work, including *On a Balcony* (fig. 5) and *Young Girl at a Window* (fig. 6).

The flatness of pictorial space and frankly Japanese influence in *Modern Woman* can be traced most directly to Cassatt's colored aquatint prints, first inspired by the Japanese Exhibition of 1890 at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. These prints share a common theme of shallow space with

²⁰ Webster, 123.

²¹ Barter, 88.

clearly defined figures that interact in elegant ways, characteristics that are drawn from traditional Japanese prints. *Gathering Fruit* (1893) (fig. 7), for example, depicts two women and a child that are confined between the picture plane and a wall covered with fruit vines. Furthermore, the organization of decorative elements can be traced back to the Japanese influence on Cassatt's printmaking: according to scholar Nancy Mathews, colors are "intensified by massing them into decorative areas of gardens and on the printed fabrics of clothing."²² The "massing" of color onto fabric is clear in her Japanese inspired print *The Letter* (1891), where the eye is immediately drawn to the woman's brilliant navy and yellow patterned clothing. The similarity between *Modern Woman* and its respective print illustrates the inspiration of printmaking on the rendering of the mural, despite their vastly different media.

The use of symbols is the final prominent artistic influence represented in the mural, influencing its content. The use of the allegory of Adam and Eve to communicate meaning beyond what is readily obvious, as described above, is a distinct departure from the objective detachment of Impressionism. Within the context of the allegory, women are arranged in groups of threes in the act of picking apples in the middle of an apple orchard. The eldest woman in each group reaches for an apple, passing it down to the youngest girl of the group. Cassatt has co-opted the meaning of the apple within the allegory of Eve, allowing her female subjects to not only educate themselves, but their younger generations in order to make meaningful contributions to society. The seemingly simplistic character of the mural was condemned by several critics, described by one as "garish and primitive,"²³ suggesting that the serene apple picking scene did not actually have any deeper meaning. As previously explained, however, there is precedence in Cassatt's work for the hiding of deeper meaning in seemingly simple

²² Mathews. *Mary Cassatt*, 125.

²³ Hutton, 334.

compositions - the print *Gathering Fruit* (1893) was created to complement the mural and expands on the symbolism of passing down the fruit of knowledge from one generation to the next. *Women Picking Fruits* (1891), too, uses the symbolism of an apple in a similar way. The similarity in composition and subject matter between these works and *Modern Woman* is not a coincidence, but proves the pervasive use of symbolism in Cassatt's works produced in the early 1890s.

In conclusion, *Modern Woman* is a work central to Cassatt's career because it affirms her status as a multifaceted artist. Cassatt's work remains genreless, refusing to adhere to one style and venturing into, among others, the genres of Impressionism, Japanese inspired printmaking, and Symbolism. Each of these ventures has an influence on the rendering of *Modern Woman*, allowing it to become a summary of Cassatt's career as a whole. Despite its status as a lost mural, it is incredibly important to understand the unique characteristics of *Modern Woman* in order to fully the complexity of Mary Cassatt as an artist.

MODERN WOMAN:

Before turning to the rest of the exhibition and the ways in which these pieces of art inform choices in *Modern Woman* (fig. 4), we must examine the mural itself in great detail. The mural as a whole is split into three paintings, each completed on canvas. The leftmost panel, entitled *Young Girls Pursuing Fame* depicts a group of three young girls running through a meadow, trailed by several ducks. The young girls chase fame, personified as a nude female flying through the air. According to author Sally Webster, the scene depicted in this panel represents the "idea that women had the potential to accomplish feats that would make them

immortal,” an idea that she describes as “breathtaking.”²⁴ Indeed, it is certainly breathtaking to assert that women are just as capable of performing acts that will situate them among the immortal names of men. Furthermore, this panel emphasizes the modernization of the status of women through dress and exercise reform. At the time of the mural’s painting, it was becoming fashionable for young women to wear loose clothing that permitted increased exercise.²⁵ The cultural acceptance for women to exercise arose out of the push for women’s independent movement about the world, separate from the domestic activities they were previously expected to dedicate their lives to. Indeed, Cassatt clothes the three young girls in loose fitting clothing, allowing them to rush across the field in pursuit of their ambitions. It is likely that Cassatt saw great meaning in the costumes she clothed her figures in, as scholar Nancy Mowll Mathews reports that later on, Cassatt painted adult style hats (another form of clothing) on young children with great symbolic weight, symbolizing the adults they would later become.²⁶

The middle panel, entitled *Young Women Plucking the Fruits of Knowledge or Science* (fig. 1) contains the activity of central importance in the mural, apple picking. Women and young girls are clustered in groups of three throughout the panel, engaged in different picking-related tasks. The act of apple picking portrayed in this panel acts as an allegory for the modernization of the status of women in society: the traditional allegory of Adam and Eve is flipped to depict women educating themselves at their own agency in order to suggest a new beginning in society in which women can actively make valuable contributions.²⁷ Once having obtained new education, it is passed down from generation to generation to proliferate through the population.

²⁴ Webster, 85.

²⁵ Webster, 87-88.

²⁶ Mathews. *Mary Cassatt*, 135.

²⁷ Hutton, 338.

It is also important to note that there are no men in any part of the mural, implying the ability of women to educate themselves without the assistance of a man.

It is interesting to consider the flipping of the allegory of Adam and Eve in context of Cassatt's art education. She was classically trained as a painter in Italian and French Old Master works and insistent on the importance of copying such paintings.²⁸ With this education, Cassatt surely would have come across many paintings depicting the allegory of Adam and Eve because of its biblical origin. These works traditionally depict Eve as the antagonist, placing blame on her for yielding to the temptation of the forbidden fruit and for the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. One such painting, which Cassatt would have at least been familiar with, is Michelangelo's *The Temptation and Fall of Man* (fig. 3), painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. It is clear that Michelangelo places blame on Eve - not only is she the one who reaches for the forbidden fruit, but the snake that gives it to her is given a nude female torso. In true Impressionist style, Cassatt has modernized the classical approach to the allegory of Adam and Eve to empower Eve as an agent of her own education.

Even though the reproduction of *Modern Woman* included in this exhibition is in black and white, we are able to discern some information about the coloration of pieces of the mural. Lucy Monroe, a Chicago-based critic, provides one of the few contemporary critiques of the mural that addressed its coloration. Apparently, *Young Women Plucking the Fruits of Knowledge or Science* was primarily "bright grass green," paired with yellow and violet in the rightmost panel, *Arts, Music, Dancing*.²⁹ Furthermore, a sketch for one of the women in the central panel has survived to the present day (fig. 2). Using the sketch as a guide, we can further surmise that a

²⁸ Barter, 178.

²⁹ Webster, 91.

brilliant sky blue played a predominant role in the composition, allowing all objects set against the sky to visually pop.

The rightmost panel of the mural, *Arts, Music, Dancing*, is arguably its simplest. Cassatt depicts three women, each the personification of art, music, and dance set against an open field. The personification of dance stands, with her skirt lifted in the style of the newly popularized skirt dance.³⁰ Below the personification of dance is the personification of music, who sits playing a banjo. The personification of art sits next to her, looking on and observing the demonstrations of dance and music. Despite its simplicity, this panel plays an important role in the striking modernity of *Modern Woman* as a whole. *Arts, Music, Dancing* acts as the culmination of *Young Girls Pursuing Fame* - that is, in their pursuit of fame, the young girls have reached immortal renown as the personification of their respective art form.³¹ The mural taken as a whole, then, encourages women to pursue their ambitions and that in doing so, women are able to forever be recognized for their accomplishments even in the face of oppression. This is a terrific statement of modernity, aptly suited for the Woman's Building in which it was displayed.



Fig. 1: Mary Cassatt/*Young Women Plucking the Fruits of Knowledge or Science*/1893 - destroyed

³⁰ Webster, 92.

³¹ Webster, 91.



Fig. 2: Mary Cassatt/*Modern Woman (sketch of a woman picking fruit)*/1892-3 - University of California, San Diego



Fig. 3: Michelangelo/*The Temptation and Fall of Man*/1508-12 - Sistine Chapel



Fig. 4: Mary Cassatt/*Modern Woman*/ 1893 - destroyed

ON A BALCONY:

On a Balcony (fig. 5) is a relatively early piece in this exhibition, having been painted four to five years before *Modern Woman* was completed and in the year following Cassatt's decision to join the Impressionists at Degas' suggestion.³² It is representative of the kind of painting that Cassatt produced while associating with the Impressionist movement, which would come to influence the rendering of *Modern Woman*. In this painting specifically, the way in which Cassatt leaves physical references to her hand as the artist predicts the strikingly modern content and coloration of the mural.

One of the key elements that runs through Cassatt's Impressionist work is the use of an intentional reference to the artist's hand, rather than blending physical references to the artist away for the sake of the illusion of reality. While attempting to capture reality as it was, the Impressionists also strove to show that there is art in the physical manipulation of paint: that by manipulating paint with a brushstroke and layering unblended colors, one can create both surface level (physical) and illusion level (content) beauty that compliment each other. The mark of Cassatt's hand is clearly present in *On a Balcony* as she leaves explicit references to her identity as the artist: take, for example, the woman's collar where white highlights are generously applied using a quick stroke over a blue-gray base. This causes the collar to appear to glow, having been struck by light pouring into the composition from behind the woman. Cassatt's hand is even more so apparent in the brushstroke rendering the cascade of flowers behind the young woman's head, where dabs of paint are applied haphazardly with contrasting tones placed against each other to create the illusion of dimension.

³² "Mary Cassatt." In *Encyclopedia of World Biography Online*. Gale, 2004.

Although Cassatt had largely moved on from Impressionist technique following the last Impressionist exhibition in 1886, her urge to leave a reference to her hand as an artist is clear in *Modern Woman*. The mark of Cassatt as an artist can be seen in both the content of the mural as a whole and in the technical rendering of the image. The modernity of the mural largely reflects Cassatt as a modern woman herself: she subverted the gendered expectations of a respectable, well off woman to remain in the home and attend to domestic life, never marrying and instead making a career for herself as a highly successful painter. The panels on either side of the mural, *Young Girls Pursuing Fame* and *Arts, Music, Dancing*, serve as a sort of allegory for Cassatt's life as a painter.³³ She relentlessly pursued her goal as a painter from a young age and at the time of completion of the mural, had found international recognition for her work. The technical rendering of the image reflects a visible intervention by Cassatt as an artist as well, especially in the vibrancy of color that the mural was reported to have. Using vibrant coloration is a holdover from Cassatt's Impressionist practice (take the vibrancy of flowers in *On the Balcony*, for example, which pop against the green background with brilliant reds and yellows) and also makes a clear statement that *Modern Woman* is not just a pure replication of nature. By subverting the expectations of the orchard and field scenes of the mural to be muted greens and blues, Cassatt makes a clear statement that refuses to obscure her hand as an artist in favor of a harmonious image.³⁴

³³ Webster, 67.

³⁴ One of the major critiques of *Modern Woman* was that it did not have enough decorative appeal and clashed with the surrounding interior. Webster. *Eve's Daughter*, 123.

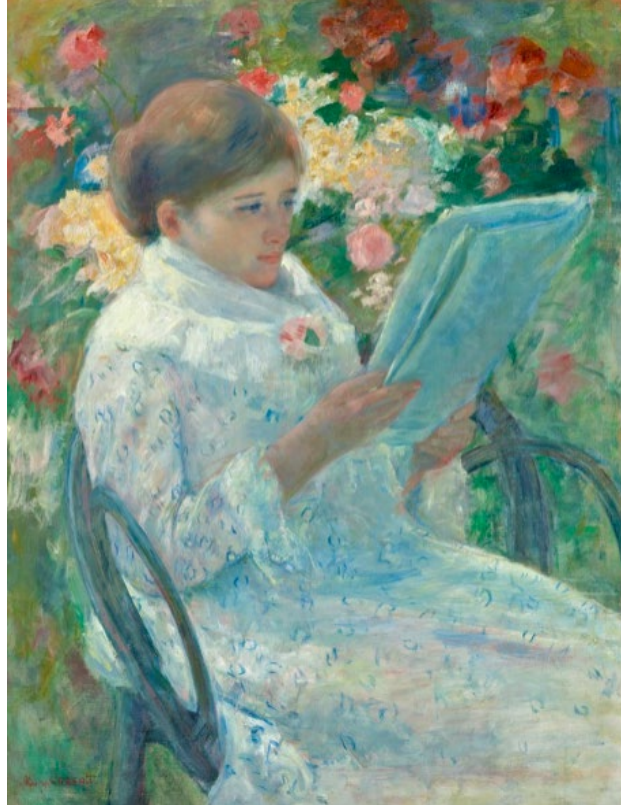


Fig. 5: Mary Cassatt/*On a Balcony*/1878-9 - The Art Institute of Chicago

YOUNG GIRL AT A WINDOW:

The modernity present in Cassatt's Impressionist paintings, such as *Young Girl at a Window* (fig. 6), is thoroughly present in *Modern Woman*. With the name aside, *Modern Woman* is a modern take on the status of women in the late 19th century. There are no men in the painting, indicating that women are able to achieve freedom of movement, ideas, and aspirations without the support of men in the public space. *Young Girls Pursuing Fame* exemplifies the freedom of movement without the supervision of a man to protect their morality, with young girls racing carefree across an open field in pursuit of their ambitions. *Arts, Music, Dancing* depicts the result of chasing those ambitions, the embodiment of the arts themselves. Most importantly, *Young Women Plucking the Fruits of Knowledge or Science* depicts women advocating for themselves, educating themselves in spite of man's resistance to their independence. The urge for young women to move independently about the world and advocate for themselves is reflected in *Young Girl at a Window*, a relatively early painting in this exhibition that embodies a certain somberness about the restrictive gendered expectations of movement about the world.

Young Girl at a Window was painted in 1883, the year following the seventh Impressionist exhibition, which Cassatt did not participate in. It depicts a young girl sitting in a chair at a window with a dog in her lap. The window appears to be fairly high above the ground, as both the dog and the young girl look downwards out of the window, as if they are watching passersby on the road below. Beyond the young girl is a landscape composed of abstractly painted trees in the middle ground and hints of a blue painted town in the background. Much of the painting is rendered using a blue tint, also present in the background, giving the painting a somber tone: the interior wall of the window is blue, casting blue shadows across the left of the

young girl's dress and hat. Even her dog has streaks of blue running through its fur among the black and the brown, mimicking the shadows cast on the young girl's dress.

The somber tone of this painting gives it a striking modernity when the somberness is combined with the content of the painting. The young girl appears to mourn her enclosure in the home, envious of those who are able to walk freely on the ground below. The young girl appears to be dressed very well, indicating that she is probably of a higher class: she wears a fairly large hat complete with silk tie around her chin, and her dress is intricate with frills down the center. Furthermore, the young girl appears to be sitting on a fairly ornamented woven chair: the red decorative element at the right of the composition is particularly eye catching, although rendered in such a way that it is unclear what the object actually is. Because the girl is of a higher class, she would have been encouraged to remain in the home because it was morally dangerous for many bourgeois women to move independently about the city. As Griselda Pollock reports in her essay *Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity*, "it has been argued that to maintain one's respectability [in late 19th century Paris], closely identified with femininity, meant *not* exposing oneself in public. The public space was officially the realm of and for men."³⁵ Cassatt expresses the intrinsic modernity of Impressionism in this painting by critiquing the gendered division of space in Paris with a young girl envious of those with more independence than her. There is a clear throughline, therefore, that connects the modernism present in *Young Girl at a Window* and the urge for women's freedom of movement independent of men in the later *Modern Woman*.

³⁵Pollock, Griselda. "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity." In *Vision and Difference*, 69. London and New York: Routledge, 1988.



Fig. 6: Mary Cassatt/*Young Girl at a Window*/1883-4 - Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

GATHERING FRUIT:

A work of central importance that illustrates the influence of Japanese style printmaking on the creation of *Modern Woman* is the 1893 print entitled *Gathering Fruit* (fig 7), which was printed in conjunction with the mural. According to Scholar Nancy Mowll Mathews, the print was actually based on the mural,³⁶ presumably created in order to be distributed among a wider audience. *Gathering Fruit* was created in stages, with eleven versions in total³⁷ detailing various experiments in coloration, patterning in the women's dresses, and the creation of monotypes with unique hand painting. The version illustrated here depicts two women and a child in the process of gathering pears that have grown up the side of the wall. The woman on the left stands on a ladder that is propped vertically against the wall and hands a piece of fruit down to a young naked child, who is held in the arms of a young woman. The child reaches out his arm and cocks his head up to look at the woman above him, indicating his engagement in receiving the fruit. The print is heavily Japanese inspired and borrows many techniques from Cassatt's more famous set of ten prints created in direct response to a Japanese exhibition. The figures are constrained in a shallow pictorial space, with all three figures occupying the same horizontal plane. The shallowness of pictorial space is primarily taken from the *Ukiyo-e* Japanese print, meaning "floating world." *Ukiyo-e* depicts an idealized world that negates perspective, creating the illusion that figures are "floating" in an undefined plane (for example, see *The Hour of the Ox* by Kitagawa Utamaro, 1794 (fig. 8)). In a similar fashion, the figures of *Gathering Fruit* are placed in pictorial space without perspective and also appear to be floating with no anchor to the ground. A similar phenomenon can be observed in *Modern Woman*: even though the trees of the apple orchard recede into pictorial space, the prominent figures of the central panel (*Young*

³⁶ Mathews. *Mary Cassatt*, 125.

³⁷Rosen, 101.

Women Plucking the Fruits of Knowledge or Science) occupy a single plane, creating the illusion of extremely shallow pictorial depth. The same can be said about *Young Girls Pursuing Fame and Arts, Music, and Dancing*, where the shallow pictorial space is even more pronounced than in the center panel. It is clear that shallow pictorial space is a running theme throughout Cassatt's prints (illustrated in *The Bath* (1891) and *The Fitting* (1891) as well), indicating that her practice in printmaking had an obvious influence on the organization of figures across the picture plane in *Modern Woman*. It is even more revealing that Cassatt chose to create such a Japanese inspired print as a complement to her mural: the implicit tie between the mural and the print indicates the presence of Japanese influence while Cassatt painted the mural.



Fig. 7: Mary Cassatt/*Gathering Fruit*/1893 - Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection



Fig. 8: Kitagawa Utamaro/*Hour of the Ox*/1794 - The Metropolitan Museum of Art

THE LETTER:

The Letter (fig. 10) belongs to the set of ten prints created in reaction to the 1890 exhibition of Japanese art at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts,³⁸ and further illustrates the influence of Cassatt's printmaking on *Modern Woman*. The print included in this exhibition is the fourth and final version of *The Letter*, part of an edition of twenty five to be circulated.³⁹ The print depicts a young woman sitting at her writing desk with an envelope raised to her lips. The viewer catches her in the act of moistening the glue on the envelope in order to seal it, most likely, after inserting the paper laying on her desk. The subject of this print is dressed rather eccentrically, with a matching navy jacket and skirt set adorned with a bold yellow print, somewhat mirroring the print of flowers on the wallpaper behind her. Even though the coloration of the print was designed to approximate that of traditional Japanese woodblock prints, it was applied using drypoint and aquatint.⁴⁰ The solid blocks of color were not out of necessity as in a woodblock, but out of stylistic imitation of *Ukiyo-e*.

As is typical for Cassatt's Japanese inspired prints, the woman is situated in an extremely shallow space between her writing desk and the wall. The depth of this space is undefined with an unclear perspective: although the woman sits at an angle to the viewer, the bulk of her writing desk is parallel to the viewer. The surface on which she writes recedes into space in an odd way, seemingly defying the traditional rules of perspective.

It is the woman's eccentric dress that is of primary concern in its relation to *Modern Woman*. Contrast of the rich blue with the pale yellow draws the viewer's eye, creating an intensification of color that defines the print. According to Mathews, this is a technique

³⁸Rosen, 8.

³⁹Rosen, 84.

⁴⁰Rosen, 82.

borrowed from Japanese printmaking and furthermore, a technique present in *Modern Woman*. In her essay *Modernite* in the catalogue *Mary Cassatt: An American Impressionist in Paris*, Mathews writes in reference to the mural “colors are intensified by massing them into decorative areas of the gardens and on the printed fabric of clothing, in the Japanese manner.”⁴¹ Here we can see a clear link between Cassatt’s earlier prints (*The Letter* was printed in 1891, while *Modern Woman* was painted in 1893) and her later mural. In the same way that color and pattern are concentrated into clothing in *The Letter*, it is clear from a color reproduction of the central group of women in *Young Women Plucking the Fruits of Knowledge or Science*⁴² (fig. 9) that the same was done in the mural. The woman holding a basket of apples with her head turned to the right is dressed in an exceptionally vibrant dress adorned with a pattern of yellow flowers. When comparing this woman to the subject of *The Letter*, it is striking how similar the dress patterns are.



Fig. 9: Mary Cassatt/Reproduction of *Modern Woman*/1893 - in *The Art and Architecture of the World’s Columbian Exposition*



Fig. 10: Mary Cassatt/*The Letter*/1891 - Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

⁴¹ Mathews. *Mary Cassatt*, 125.

⁴² This reproduction appears in *The Art and Architecture of the World’s Columbian Exposition*, vol. 1, 1893

WOMEN PICKING FRUIT and BABY REACHING FOR AN APPLE:

Women Picking Fruit (fig. 11) and *Baby Reaching for an Apple* (fig. 12) were painted within two years of each other (1891 and 1893, respectively) and embody a movement away from the strict realism and expressive brushstroke of Cassatt's Impressionist years. Instead of being characterized by a bold brushstroke and figures that seemingly dissolve into the atmosphere, the figures in these paintings are monumental and sturdy. Both paintings employ parts of the allegory portrayed in *Young Women Plucking the Fruits of Knowledge or Science*, representing a shift in Cassatt's artistic interests from strict observation to hidden deeper meanings. Because the paintings function in similar ways, they will be considered together.

Both paintings depict two figures in the process of picking fruit: in *Women Picking Fruit*, two women are placed in a pear orchard. One sits on a chair and looks up at the other who is slightly younger and engaged in the process of picking a pear from the top of the composition. The orchard is painted very plainly, with flower bushes in the background that are rendered using irregular splotches of yellow, red, and white. The younger woman looks with concentration at the apple she is picking, while the seated woman looks up in admiration. In *Baby Reaching for an Apple*, a mother and her young, nude child stand in an apple orchard with a lighter range of colors than *Women Picking Fruit*. The mother holds her child, bringing a branch within reach so the child can reach out and pick the apple hanging from it. Both mother and child look intently at the apple of interest, with the child especially intrigued by the fruit just out of its reach.

Each of these paintings has a symbolic underpinning, with the act of reaching out to pick a piece of fruit acting as an allegory for the attainment of knowledge. Even though Cassatt depicts an orchard of pears in *Women Picking Fruit*, the allegory operates in the same way as it

does for the apple in *Baby Reaching for an Apple*. As in *Modern Woman*, the allegory of Adam and Eve is inverted so that the act of reaching for an apple is celebrated, symbolizing the self advocated attainment of knowledge for women. With this allegory in mind, each painting can be read slightly differently. In *Women Picking Fruit*, the standing woman represents the education of the current generation of women. She is slightly younger than the sitting woman next to her, still in the prime of life to make use of new education. She is dressed in a flowing, nonobstructive dress that allows for great mobility that contrasts with the sitting woman's more formal, tightly bound clothing. With her arm raised mimicking the Statue of Liberty,⁴³ the young woman becomes a symbol for the increased education of all women. In *Baby Reaching for an Apple*, the interaction between the mother and child acts as a symbol for the empowerment of the next generation. The mother uses what power she has to aid her child, the younger generation, in gaining education and the ability to move about freely.

The symbolism in *Young Women Plucking the Fruits of Knowledge or Science* can be explained by each of these precedents. Cassatt depicts both the education of the current generation of women and the passing on of education to the next generation through the interactions of various clusters of women and girls. On the far right of the composition, a young woman reaches up to pick an apple for herself in the style of *Women Picking Fruit*, while in the middle of the composition a young woman on a ladder hands an apple to a girl in the style of *Baby Reaching for an Apple*. With these understandings, *Young Women Plucking the Fruits of Knowledge or Science* becomes an overall plea for the education of women, both for the current generation and for the future, using truths that can only be found in the use of symbolic images.

⁴³ Mathews, *Mary Cassatt*. 125



Fig. 11: Mary Cassatt/*Women Picking Fruit*/ 1891 - Carnegie Museum of Art



Fig. 12: Mary Cassatt/*Baby Reaching for an Apple*/1893 - Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

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Catalogue of Images:

Fig. 1: Mary Cassatt/*Young Women Plucking the Fruits of Knowledge or Science*/1893 - destroyed

Fig. 2: Mary Cassatt/*Modern Woman (sketch of a woman picking fruit)*/1892-3 - University of California, San Diego

Fig. 3: Michelangelo/*The Temptation and Fall of Man*/1508-12 - Sistine Chapel

Fig. 4: Mary Cassatt/*Modern Woman*/ 1893 - destroyed

Fig. 5: Mary Cassatt/*On a Balcony*/1878-9 - The Art Institute of Chicago

Fig. 6: Mary Cassatt/*Young Girl at a Window*/1883-4 - Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Fig. 7: Mary Cassatt/*Gathering Fruit*/1893 - Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection

Fig. 8: Kitagawa Utamaro/*Hour of the Ox*/1794 - The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Fig. 9: Mary Cassatt/*Reproduction of Modern Woman*/1893 - in *The Art and Architecture of the World's Columbian Exposition*

Fig. 10: Mary Cassatt/*The Letter*/1891 - Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Fig. 11: Mary Cassatt/*Women Picking Fruit*/1891 - Carnegie Museum of Art

Fig. 12: Mary Cassatt/*Baby Reaching for an Apple*/1893 - Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Fig. 13: Mary MacMonnies/*Primitive Woman*/1893 - destroyed (see below)

