

ART ACTIVITY

Modern Womanhood in Art

Background

In 1874, a group of artists organized an exhibition in Paris that launched the Impressionist movement. Rejecting classical and established styles and embracing new techniques, Impressionists were regarded by many as revolutionary. The Impressionist style was defined by short brushstrokes, pure unblended colors, and an emphasis on the effects and changes of light. These artists depicted scenes of modern, everyday life and often painted en plein air. When American artist Mary Cassatt traveled to Paris, she met Edgar Degas, a founding member of the Impressionists. The group invited her to exhibit with them, and she became the only American member of the Impressionists. In her paintings, Cassatt focused specifically on the private and social lives of middle- and upper-class women.

Task

Students will analyze the paintings of Mary Cassat and discuss her subject matter and the Impressionist technique. Then, they will consider how our ideas of identity, gender, and “womanhood” have changed since the 19th century. Students will use these conversations to inspire their own Impressionist portrait of what modern womanhood means to them in the 21st century.

Materials

- acrylic paint
- acrylic paper (Strathmore or Canson)

- paintbrushes
- Plastic cups for water
- Paper towels

Art Vocabulary

- brushstroke: A mark made by a paintbrush drawn across a surface.
- composition: The way in which different elements of an artwork are combined.
- complementary colors: Colors on opposite sides of the color wheel which, when mixed together, neutralize each other and create a grayscale color.
- en plein air: A French term meaning “outdoors” that refers to the practice of painting entire finished pictures out of doors.
- Impressionism: A style of painting originating in France in the late 19th century, characterized by a concern with depicting the visual impression of the moment. Impressionist techniques are defined by short brushstrokes, pure unblended colors, and an emphasis on the effects and changes of light.

Steps

- Invite students to think about the ways modern life is depicted in the 21st century.
 - How do you capture your day-to-day life, your friends, your favorite activities, and the places where you spend your time?
 - Why do we record our lives in a visual medium? What are we communicating to the world about ourselves and the people around us by capturing and sharing these moments?
 - How did artists of the past capture everyday life before smartphones?

What was the value of making everyday people and places the subjects of their paintings?

- Why might painting scenes of modern life have been considered revolutionary in the late 1800s?
- Next, introduce students to the work of Mary Cassatt, a painter and printmaker who expatriated to Europe and became the only American member of the Impressionists. Have them view three of her works together: *Self Portrait*, *The Boating Party*, and *The Caress*. Lead an inquiry of the paintings using the line of questioning below.
 - What do you notice about these paintings? What is similar about them?
 - Who are the subjects of these paintings?
 - What are they doing?
 - What can we learn about these women and young girls from their clothing, activities, and the setting of these paintings?
 - Do you think this is what daily life looked like for women of all classes and races of this time period? Why or why not?
 - Mary Cassatt's work is known for depicting "modern" women, specifically in the upper- and middle-class, in their private and social lives. What do you think of when you hear the word "modern"?
 - "Modern" relates to the current or present time, but for women at the end of the 19th century it meant even more. Urbanization and industrialization opened up new possibilities and freedoms for certain women, so to them "modern" also meant a departure from traditional ways of doing things.
 - How do you see this idea of a "modern" woman reflected in Mary Cassatt's paintings?
- Now have students reflect further on the concept of "womanhood." Our ideas of identity, gender, and womanhood are much different than those of the people living in the 19th century. Ask students to think about what modern womanhood means to them today. How have women of the 21st century broken with

traditions of the past? What factors in American society have contributed to these changes? How are women of the 21st century different from the modern woman of the late 19th century?

- Students will now create a painting of someone they see as representative of a 21st century woman using Impressionist techniques. Since the impressionists painted from life, students would ideally paint someone they know (a family member, classmate, friend, etc.) but if this isn't possible students can use a photo as a reference. The scene they depict in their painting should also capture the visual impression of a moment in this person's everyday life.
- Once students have chosen their subject, pass out painting materials. Share the definition of Impressionism with students, and remind them that today they'll practice painting in the style of Mary Cassatt and the Impressionists. Have them refer back to Cassatt's paintings again and discuss the following.
 - What stands out to you about Cassatt's style of painting?
 - What do you notice about the brushstrokes and colors she uses?
 - How does her technique capture the essence of the scene?
- First have students practice the brushstrokes and mark-making that are indicative of the Impressionist style. Give them a scrap piece of paper and have them create a quick painting of a simple object in the classroom.
- As students are practicing, make sure they are focusing on incorporating the following elements into their paintings:
 - Pure, rich colors that are not blended on the paper, but instead applied next to one another to create contrast.
 - Short, quick, relatively thick brushstrokes.
 - Emphasis on the way light hits the object.
 - Shadows and darker tones created by mixed colors rather than using pure black paint. Darker tones can be achieved by mixing complementary colors, or equal parts red, yellow, and blue paint.
- Once students have finished practicing, they can begin their final paintings. Have

them block out their composition first by using paint that is diluted with water.

Once they are happy with their composition, they can begin layering in color with short, quick brushstrokes to create the impression of their scene.

- Once students are finished with their paintings, have them reflect on the process and their final product.
 - What was it like painting in this style?
 - Why did you choose the subject and scene of your painting?
 - How does your painting depict womanhood in the 21st century?
 - How does it compare to Mary Cassatt's paintings?