

1-19-2016

Refracting the Male Gaze: Mary Cassatt's Ocularcentric Message of Female Agency

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Recommended Citation

Shields, Chloe N. (2014) "Refracting the Male Gaze: Mary Cassatt's Ocularcentric Message of Female Agency," *Quercus: Linfield Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 2, Article 4.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/quercus/vol2/iss1/4>

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As a middle-class woman born in the nineteenth century, Mary Cassatt faced restrictions on her independence and participation in public life. Though she rejected the respectable woman's path of a quiet private life by pursuing a career in art, she was never allowed the same access to the public sphere as her male colleagues. Even when granted entrance to a public space, the infantilizing expectations of European society were that she, like other middle-class women, be chaperoned at all times.¹ Defying this and other patriarchal limitations on her daily life, Cassatt sought self-reliance, championed the suffragette movement, and never married. In art, too, she responded to issues of gender, but was understood in simplified terms as little more than “un peintre des enfants et des mères”² until the burgeoning feminist scholarship of the 1970s claimed the artist for its own and popularized Cassatt as a feminist in both ideology and art.³ The discourse has emphasized the artist's later years to support this interpretation, pointing to her connection with the American suffrage movement in the 1910s.⁴ During this time she was frequently exposed to the movement through her close friend Louise Havemeyer, a campaigner for the National Women's Party, and even contributed works to a 1915 exhibition organized by Havemeyer to benefit women's suffrage.⁵

The content of Cassatt's work has also been used to highlight a feminist ideology. Art historian Griselda Pollock, for instance, has written a number of titles addressing feminist themes across the artist's oeuvre,⁶ and a single piece—Cassatt's *Modern Woman* mural for the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition—is cited as key evidence of radical gender-based messages.⁷ While invaluable to the feminist study of Cassatt's work, this discourse has thus far failed to consider the importance of the personal context of Cassatt's early career, when a crucial period of her professional establishment was interrupted by her parents and sister coming to live with her in Paris. As a result, the political virulence of early-career works has gone unexplained.

Painted within a year of that familial imposition, one piece in particular, *Reading Le Figaro*, provides as yet unexplored insight into Cassatt's mindset following her parents and sister's arrival in France. As a response to decreased independence under the watchful family eye, the painting employs ocularcentric (vision-privileged) messages to challenge established gender norms and support

¹ Mathews 1994, p. 128.

² Segard 1913.

³ Mathews 1994, pp. 330-3.

⁴ Mathews 1994, p. 302.

⁵ Pollock 1999, p. 202.

⁶ See Pollock 1980, 1988, 1999, and 2001.

⁷ For an entire book on the subject, see Webster 2008.

the construction of identity through female agency. Though some scholars have considered the importance of the newspaper icon in *Reading Le Figaro*, analysis of another symbol—the mirror—allows a deeper understanding of Cassatt’s message. In a subversion of the woman-and-mirror vanity trope, Cassatt portrays her subject’s desire for an internally-constructed identity rather than a necessarily external appearance-based identity. Thus, representing a direct response to the artist’s decreased autonomy following the 1877 consolidation of family living arrangements, *Reading Le Figaro* uses ocularcentric messages to counter the hegemonic gender processes with which Cassatt was so keenly acquainted.

I. Breaching Spaces of Femininity

On the 10th of July, 1871, Cassatt wrote to fellow artist and Philadelphian Emily Sartain: “I have given up my studio & torn up my father’s portrait, & have not touched a brush for weeks nor ever will again until I see some prospect of getting back to Europe.”⁸ Frustrated by a sluggish turn in her career, she came as close as she ever would to abandoning art. Enterprising in character, however, Cassatt was determined to locate employment elsewhere rather than succumb to a quiet domestic life. Continuing in her letter to Sartain, she explained: “I am very anxious to go out west next fall & get some employment, but I have not yet decided where.”⁹ An unmarried woman reliant upon her family for support, Cassatt craved both geographic and economic independence from her parents, the wealthy stockbroker Robert Cassatt and his wife Katherine.¹⁰ In kind, though her parents were morally supportive, they expected Cassatt to at least fund her professional endeavors through the sale of paintings. In a letter dated December 13, 1878, Robert wrote to his son Alexander:

Mame [Mary], is working away as diligently as ever, but she has not sold anything lately ... I have said that the studio must at least support itself. This makes Mame, very uneasy, as she must either make sale of the pictures she has on hand or else take to painting *pot boilers* as the artists say—a thing that she never yet has done & cannot bear the idea of being obliged to do.¹¹

Any trips to Europe would have to be funded by Cassatt herself. Because she was unwilling to compromise her art by creating pot-boilers (low-quality work produced only for financial gain), she instead travelled the United States to expose a wider audience to her existing, unsold pieces. In the autumn of 1871,

⁸ Mathews 1994, p. 74.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Mathews 1994, p. 75.

¹¹ Mathews 1994, p. 143.

just months after her depressive renouncement of art, she received a commission from Michael Domenec, the bishop of Pittsburgh, to copy two paintings by sixteenth-century Italian painter Antonio da Correggio. Using the profits of the employment, she escaped back to Europe that December.¹²

Cassatt's notion that Europe was the best place to foster her artistic career was cemented when, in Parma, she experienced sudden recognition as one of the best artists at work in the city. Bolstered, she began a peregrination through Italy, France, and Spain before choosing Paris as her permanent home in June of 1874. By that time five out of the six paintings she had sent to the Salon had been accepted, but she had not experienced financial success, a failing she blamed on herself and her dealer; her decision to stay in Paris was as much to oversee her dealer as to punish herself for her failure to produce salable paintings.¹³ Sartain, Cassatt's travelling companion, wrote in a letter to her own father: "[Mary] has always detested Paris so much, that I could scarcely believe it possible that she would consent to stay here,— but she says she sees it is necessary to be here to look after her own interests."¹⁴ For Cassatt, her advancement as an artist was prioritized over her personal objection to her surroundings.

Though Cassatt may not have been enamored with her Parisian environs, her peripatetic parents were drawn by the prospect of a European retirement. In 1877, both Cassatt elders joined the artist in a new Paris apartment, bringing with them their unmarried eldest daughter, Lydia. The move promised cheaper living conditions, an economical consolidation of living spaces, and the best possible medical care for Lydia, whose health was in a steady decline. Her condition, a chronic and eventually fatal disease of the kidneys, was likely another motivation for the family relocation; as an invalid, Lydia's occasional role as Cassatt's chaperone became increasingly difficult to fulfill. At the time it was even less socially acceptable for a woman to live alone in France than in the United States, and so with their move, Cassatt's parents would be able to serve as escort.¹⁵

Though Cassatt accepted her family's presence without documented complaint, their coming must have led to less mobility for the artist, who was suddenly not only obliged to accept a chaperone once more, but also reliant upon aging parents to fill the position. For Cassatt, the increased restriction must not have gone unnoticed. Her opportunity to travel was greatly reduced; in fact, she only returned to her home country of the United States after the deaths of both her

¹² Matthews 1987, p. 20.

¹³ Mathews 1994, p. 92.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Mathews 1994, p. 128.

parents and her sister, breaking an absence of more than two decades.¹⁶ The consolidation of family resources also meant abandoning Cassatt's studio/apartment in the artists' quarter in favor of a larger and less conveniently located apartment on the fashionable Rue Beaujon. Out of necessity, but also perhaps a need for autonomy, Cassatt arranged for a separate studio space for herself in her old neighborhood. Just a few months after settling in their new accommodations, however, the Cassatts moved again to a less fashionable area near to the artists' quarter. Though letters from this period omit discussion of the move, the new apartment's location just minutes away from Cassatt's studio suggests that she may have raised objection to her circumstances after all. Evidently, her needs as an artist were prioritized over the family image.¹⁷

Despite her reduced liberty, Cassatt induced her mother to sit for a portrait as a gesture of welcome and to spend time with a parent she had not seen in several years.¹⁸ Painted in 1878, that portrait became *Reading Le Figaro*. The work depicts Katherine engrossed in one of the premier Parisian newspapers, the French-language *Le Figaro*. She sits in a patterned chair, her gaze fixed as she peruses the text through a delicate pince-nez, staunchly ignoring the presence of the viewer. The hand closest to the surface of the space clutches the paper and wears a glinting wedding ring—a symbol of sexual unavailability. A large mirror cuts into the background of the composition, dividing off a third of the canvas and reflecting only the newspaper and the reader's hand clutching the pages. The limited palette of muted beige and yellow-white lends a serious cast to the quiet scene. The high key of the morning dress swells in intensity as the viewer's gaze moves upward, combining with the vibrant white of the back wall to create a glowing halo around the head. Thus the eye is drawn to the head of the figure; the home of the mind, the seat of vision, the center of Katherine's gaze directed and uninterrupted in the pursuit of knowledge.

Reading Le Figaro keenly captures Katherine's sharp intelligence. Cassatt's lifelong friend Louisine Havemeyer attributed Cassatt's own intellectual capacity to her mother, writing that "Anyone who had the privilege of knowing Mary Cassatt's mother would know at once that it could be from her and from her alone that [Mary] ... inherited [her] ability ... I think Mrs. Cassatt had the most alert mind I ever met."¹⁹ Like her daughter, Katherine was certainly well-educated and well-read. An archetype of the post-revolutionary French bourgeoisie ideal of *la mère éducatrice*, she shared her intellectual virtues with her grandchildren. As

¹⁶ Barter and Hirshler 1998, p. 344.

¹⁷ Mathews 1994, p. 129.

¹⁸ Mathews 1994, p. 128.

¹⁹ Havemeyer 1993, p. 272.

in Cassatt's 1880 painting *Katherine Cassatt Reading to Her Grandchildren*, she often read to the children and taught them French, which she spoke fluently.²⁰ During the early stages of Cassatt's career, however, the artist had not yet begun her later-years focus on painting children; in *Reading Le Figaro* her mother sits alone. Embedded in the contrast is the message that Katherine's knowledge had occupation beyond the education of future generations.

This intellectual message in *Reading Le Figaro* develops obviously from the motif that commands both the title and the composition: the newspaper. For those viewing the painting in the years following its creation, the inclusion of the publication would have been a stark iconographic choice. According to Pollock, Cassatt's decision to paint a woman immersed in intellectual pursuits was a transgression against traditional narratives of women reading.²¹ In modernity, a woman reading was a paradigmatically negative image associated with frivolity.²² An association was drawn between mass culture and the feminine, reinforcing the belief that the artistic and aesthetic abilities of women were inferior to men's and that women were suitable only as providers of inspiration.²³ By relegating all works for and by women to the polluted realm of popular culture, masculinity asserted an intellectual high ground.²⁴ Cassatt's portrait forces a crack in femininity's confining shell; though the subject remains confined within the domestic (feminine) space, the home, psychologically she extends into the political (male) realm.

While Cassatt scholars may agree the newspaper was a bold iconographic choice, they have failed to reconcile such an apparently inflammatory move with the success received by the painting. Despite its rupturing of gender stereotypes, *Reading Le Figaro* earned an appreciative reception in the United States, where it was sent not long after its completion. In 1879, a review of the second New York exhibition of the Society of American Artists appeared in *The Art Journal*, proclaiming about the painting: "...we think nobody seeing this lady reading a newspaper through her shell 'nippers,'²⁵ and seated so composedly in her white morning-dress, could have failed to like this well-drawn, well-lighted, well-anatomised, and well-composed painting."²⁶ Thirteen years later, on December

²⁰ Pollock 2001, p. 240.

²¹ Pollock 2001, p. 235.

²² Huyssen (Suleiman) 1986, p. 50.

²³ Huyssen (Suleiman) 1986, p. 46.

²⁴ Pollock 2001, pp. 236-7.

²⁵ Another term for pince-nez.

²⁶ Carter 1879, p. 157.

15th, 1892, Bertha Palmer²⁷ wrote to Cassatt and confirmed the painting's success in a different exhibition: "I see from a notice sent [to] me from New York, that a picture of yours is in an exhibition now going on there, a lady in white reading the *Figaro*, which seems much admired."²⁸

I propose that Cassatt's careful manipulation of gendered spaces allowed her to cultivate popularity for her work while still challenging social norms. Managing the contradictory identity of an upper-middle-class woman and a radically-minded suffragette, Cassatt likely realized the importance of tempering her political statements to avoid outright rejection by the public. Accordingly, she carefully manipulated the different dimensions of space (e.g., locational and social) in which contrived gender restrictions exist in a work of art.²⁹ In terms of locational space, likely a reflection of her own confinement in the domestic sphere, Cassatt rarely painted her subjects outside of the home or private garden. Without access to masculine-dominated public spaces, she used the spaces in which she had a prerogative of control.

Social space was therefore a more appropriate area for Cassatt, a bourgeois woman, to voice her defiance to male hegemony. For instance, in *Reading Le Figaro*, Cassatt uses the newspaper to transport the subject from the domestic (private) to the political (public) sphere. Eva Gamarnikow and June Purvis describe this private/public schism as "a metaphor for the social patterning of gender, [and] a description of sociological practice ... As a model it directs us to the structure of gender relations, as expressed in institutional, spatial, symbolic and controlling mechanisms."³⁰ That is, the private/public divide symbolizes society's gendered schemas of restriction and expected behavior. Pollock argues that, in nineteenth century France, the division not only regulated gender-respective behavior but also generated identity, depending on one's presence in either domain.³¹ Thus, according to Pollock, "the separation of the spheres problematized women's relation to the very activities and experiences we typically accept as defining modernity."³² In a society with such a strong hegemonic ideology of domesticity, straddling the schism by portraying a woman reading a newspaper—therefore breaking into the public sphere and taking part in a gender-restricted behavior—was a bold statement subtly applied. *Reading Le*

²⁷ Bertha Palmer (1849-1918) was a Chicago society leader and supporter of social reform. While in Paris she was advised by Cassatt on purchasing paintings by the French Impressionists and subsequently helped introduce the works to America.

²⁸ Mathews 1996, p. 189.

²⁹ Pollock 1988, p. 56.

³⁰ Gamarnikow and Purvis 1983, pp. 5-6.

³¹ Pollock 1988, pp. 69-70.

³² *Ibid.*

Figaro's success speaks to Cassatt's gift for subtly challenging gender norms and making the image of a female intellectual engaging in political life seem perfectly ordinary.

Bonnie Smith describes the masculine dominance of the public sphere as a result of industrialization.³³ Citing women who were free to manage financial affairs, run mercantile businesses, and travel in the pre-industrial era, Smith explains that the division of labor inherent to industrialization forced an ever-widening gap between men and women, who were assigned distinct roles within the new paradigm of production.³⁴ Industrialization created for French bourgeois society a divide between the private/public and a polarization of gender roles, which resulted in economic and social systems based on male privilege.³⁵ Feminine spaces became associated with the "residential, reproductive, and human," while masculine spaces were "industrial, productive, and mechanical."³⁶ Sharon Johnson asserts that Smith's argument explains some of the tension surrounding the nineteenth century French feminist ideal of the *femme nouvelle*, who was perceived as a national threat.³⁷ This "new woman" was dangerous for her desire to pursue education and a career, leaving the private domain for the public (as Cassatt did) and choosing self-determination over socially-imposed female identities.

Chief among these imposed identities was that of the mother. In the late 1800s, maternity was not just a biological duty, but more importantly a moral obligation and urgent national imperative. France's declining birthrate, combined with a momentous growth in Germany's population, cultivated a national discourse that emphasized the traditional family.³⁸ Apprehension over depopulation arose from the anticipation of Germany's quadrupled industrial capacity and military manpower, raising cries from politicians, doctors, and scholars who united in support of the traditional female role.³⁹ The resulting active campaign to promote the woman's procreative role saw the *femme nouvelle*, and any of her actions challenging female identity, as a threat to military strength and national security.⁴⁰ Considering that access to professional careers and higher education was becoming easier for some bourgeois French women,

³³ Smith 1981, p. 38.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Smith 1981, p. 47.

³⁷ Johnson 2000, p. 12.

³⁸ Silverman 1989, p. 67.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

dangerous female identities had to be neutralized by de-emphasizing non-reproductive roles.⁴¹

In counterpoint to these historical forces, the emblem of the childless mother in *Reading Le Figaro* has historically been the point of interest for close readings of the painting. Feminist art historian Linda Nochlin describes the work as “a mother *without* a child,”⁴² and a “portrait-homage not to the maternal body, but to the maternal *mind*.”⁴³ Similarly, Pollock interprets the picture as a mother released from the image of the child, a symbol that threatens to limit her identity to nothing more than a maternal “nature;” rather than take on the state of caretaker, the subject self-defines as intellectual.⁴⁴ Indeed, anticipating the campaign for the female procreative role, *Reading Le Figaro* depicts a post-reproductive identity and manipulates the subject’s gaze to add a layer of intellectuality. However, beyond depicting a woman reading, her sight directed in the pursuit of knowledge, Cassatt includes another icon of vision—the mirror—in the background of her composition. Thus far in the literature, the point when this painting’s iconographic analysis ends is in an explanation of the mirror’s presence as an emphasis of the cerebral message, if the mirror is mentioned at all. This basic reading is correct but incomplete. In order to understand the iconographical significance of Cassatt’s work, analysis must focus not only on what the mirror reflects but what it does not. Given the social environment of nineteenth century France, and the concomitant expectations of female behavior, Cassatt’s mirror is remarkable in that it is placed in a woman’s portrait, but rather than look at herself, the subject ignores the mirror’s presence. With one simple decision on the construction of her composition, the artist denies a longstanding vanitas trope.

II. The Woman in the Mirror

The mirror is a recurring theme in Cassatt’s work. The icon makes frequent appearances in paintings from the few years following 1878, and then reappears in images from 1890 onwards. While the earlier images feature mirrors in a variety of contexts, including the home and the theater, the theme was later appropriated almost exclusively for boudoir and nursery settings. Such paintings emerged from Cassatt’s late-career fascination with the mother-child dyad, a dynamic that contrasted with her earlier depictions of childless, unattached women. At times, her motherhood paintings have received religious readings; *The Oval Mirror* (1899), in which a looking glass echoes a halo around a young boy’s head, prompted Edgar Degas to comment that the image was the infant Jesus with

⁴¹ Silverman 1989, p. 65.

⁴² Nochlin 1999, p. 191.

⁴³ Nochlin 1999, p. 192.

⁴⁴ Pollock 1999, pp. 231-3.

an English nurse.⁴⁵ Other late pieces, such as *Mother Wearing a Sunflower on Her Dress* (c. 1905), show children viewing their own images in handheld mirrors, intimating Jacques Lacan's mirror stage when the child first perceives the self.⁴⁶

Given the different contexts of Cassatt's mirrors it should be mentioned that the present work does not focus arbitrarily on *Reading Le Figaro*, one of the first Cassatt paintings to feature a mirror. The piece is certainly the first major work to do so,⁴⁷ and so represents the beginning of an iconographic trend that would continue for decades. Despite this and other appearances of the mirror in her early career, the artist's use of mirrors has largely been ignored in her pre-1890 work, with even less attention paid to the significance of its inaugural appearance in *Reading Le Figaro*. I argue that the sudden inclusion of mirrors, all but nonexistent even in earlier domestic scenes, is far from coincidental. The choice reflects a newfound interest in ocularcentric themes, and, with an in-depth reading, reveals a level of opposition to gender hegemony rarely reached in her later work.

In fact, the images produced after 1890 reflect in the middle-aged Cassatt a shift away from the vivacious social commentary of her younger days. Norma Broude identifies this change as part of a complex pattern resulting from Cassatt's modern ambitions and her conditioned identity as an upper-middle-class woman. An eventual disenchantment with her radical ideals may also have been to blame. Havemeyer quotes the young artist as saying, "Work for suffrage, for it is the women who will decide the question of life or death for a nation," but immediately follows by conceding, "Truth compels me to add that after a time she expressed grave doubts about our being able to control the destinies of a nation or in any way affect their future."⁴⁸ It is the earlier ocularcentric work, then, that provides substantive evidence for Cassatt's artistic response to issues of gender.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Pollock 1980, p. 116.

⁴⁶ Lacan 2006, p. 75.

⁴⁷ One piece, *Young Woman Buttoning Her White Glove* (1877), possibly precedes *Reading Le Figaro* in the representation of mirrors. Destroyed in a fire in 1968, the painting was fairly small at just 13 ¾ x 10 ¾ inches and had a rough, unfinished appearance. As work on *Reading Le Figaro* could have begun in 1877, the two pieces may have been created concurrently.

⁴⁸ Havemeyer 1993, p. 279.

⁴⁹ Though much of her post-1890s work abandoned the explicit social commentary of her early work, Cassatt completed one of her most politically charged pieces in 1893 for the Woman's Building at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Titled *Modern Woman*, the mural was an allegory for the many transformations in women's lives in the nineteenth century and suggested that Cassatt continued to consider the implications of gender roles throughout her life, though she may not have always chosen to depict them.

Like others working in the 1870s and 1880s, such as Degas and Édouard Manet, Cassatt made use of the mirror to expand pictorial space or to include the viewer by reflecting the area in which he or she resided.⁵⁰ These artists may have been inspired by the then-popular Japanese ukiyo-e prints, which frequently engaged mirrors, particularly in the boudoir setting with a woman contemplating her reflection.⁵¹ Certainly, an iconographic influence would have been the work of the old masters, for whom vanity was represented by the female nude gazing into a mirror.⁵² Having studied the old masters at length,⁵³ Cassatt would have had ample opportunity to view, and raise issue to, their portrayal of women in relation to mirrors.

Beyond the old masters, the association of the female, vanity, and the mirror has roots in the Christian ideology of the Middle Ages. Dangerously, the mirror welcomed demonic or Satanic intrusion, its distorted surface seducing humankind away from God.⁵⁴ As an instigator of cupidity and desires of the flesh, the mirror became an allegory for sin, and because vision was a key root of sin, particularly pride and arrogance, the misused mirror served the purposes of wickedness.⁵⁵ Nowhere was the mirror's evil more powerful than in the hands of Eve, the original woman; naturally more susceptible to illusion, as evidenced by the story of the fall of man, her libidinous curiosity built a specular bond with the Devil and set a precedent for the representation of vanity.⁵⁶ Far from figurative, this Satanic relationship was often represented in paintings of Venus at her toilette, attended by the devil himself.⁵⁷

The nude element, along with voyeuristic undertones, did not appear until later and was an innovation of the old masters.⁵⁸ In the Middle Ages, nudity was associated with the shame of moral depravity and was rarely represented; in search of divine perfection, artists eliminated any markers of sexuality from their pictures.⁵⁹ However, with the birth of the Renaissance and a growing interest in anatomy, the woman-and-mirror paradigm became increasingly centered on the nude, and scenes of women bathing or holding a mirror were abundant.⁶⁰ What

⁵⁰ Pollock 1980, p. 17.

⁵¹ Pollock 1980, p. 18.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ In fact, it was out of impatience with her patronizing male teachers, who treated her interest in art as a social skill, that Cassatt set out to study the old masters on her own.

⁵⁴ Melchior-Bonnet 2001, p. 187.

⁵⁵ Melchior-Bonnet 2001, p. 193.

⁵⁶ Melchior-Bonnet 2001, p. 200.

⁵⁷ Gosilo 2010, p. 11.

⁵⁸ Melchior-Bonnet 2001, p. 212.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

began as a warning against sin and the punishment of eternal damnation eventually grew less venomous, though still cautionary. Paradoxically, the shameful act of the woman contemplating her own image—a reproving message of morality—was now accompanied by the forbidden gaze of the viewer. Writes John Berger in the seminal feminist text *Ways of Seeing*: “You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure.”⁶¹

Not just a reminder of the woman’s lustful self-interest, the real function of the mirror is to make the woman an accomplice in treating herself as, primarily, an object of sight.⁶² This objectification process forces women into perpetual self-observation; writes Berger: “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.”⁶³ The woman’s internal surveyor is male, and through his gaze she is made complicit in her own objecthood.⁶⁴ Once the male gaze is internalized, it rebounds outwardly toward other women, making the male gaze ubiquitous no matter the viewer’s gender. That is, the mirror converts into an instrument of the hyperspecularization, or extreme concentration on display value, of women through a process in which they are automatically complicit. However, the mirror is also primed for anti-patriarchal reclamation.

In a historical canon emphasizing stereotypical woman-and-mirror images, I argue Cassatt denies the vanity trope through pointed omission. In fact, she reinvents the longstanding European iconography. Her first modification to the paradigm is to remove the nude element⁶⁵ and reject voyeuristic engagement with the image.⁶⁶ Denying the nude simultaneously denies objectification from the spectator-owner (as Berger terms the viewer), because to become a nude, a naked body must first be made an object.⁶⁷ In *Reading Le Figaro*, Katherine rejects the viewer on multiple fronts. While her ring denotes marital commitment, a dress fastened carefully up to her neck intimates that she is uninterested in revealing herself to the viewer. Note, too, that there is no male presence in the painting with whom the spectator could either identify or fight for domination, there is only the rejection produced directly from Katherine. Finally, Katherine actively ignores

⁶¹ Berger 1972, p. 51.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Berger 1972, p. 47.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Of course, depicting any subject without clothing would have been more difficult for Cassatt given that she, like other women painters, was barred from studying nude models.

⁶⁶ She did later make exceptions for nudity when painting children, but in their case she may have been striving to depict in an unselfconscious, pre-sexual state of innocence.

⁶⁷ Berger 1972, pp. 54-56.

the male spectator, diminishing his presence through her own defiance. This choice in subject portrayal counters the traditional European female nude, who often gazes out of the picture at the one watching her, confirming that he is her true lover.⁶⁸

Just as important as clothing the subject, Cassatt takes the mirror from its location in front of the woman's face and places it on the back wall, where it becomes a background component of the domestic space. In kind, her subject circumvents the navel-gazing trap of vanity and finds occupation elsewhere, in the newspaper. Cassatt's decision to redirect Katherine's gaze empowers her with a sense of engagement in the outer world, rather than with herself, and represents a frontline battle to counter the internalized male gaze. No longer made to watch herself, and therefore not coerced into the self-objectification of an identity built on visual appeal, Katherine focuses on her subjective world.

By placing the mirror in the background, Cassatt removes external definition. Traditionally, the mirror in front of the subject emphasizes the importance of the exterior, of an identity constructed on being perceived by others; the mirror implies that the object reflected (woman) exists for the viewing, judgment, pleasure of others. The woman-and-mirror trope thus removes agency and the possibility for self-determination. In her denial of the motif, Cassatt permits her female subject to define herself for her society rather than be defined by it. This granting of choice is a response to a society that tries to control women by, as Susan Faludi writes, "pushing them to conform to comfortingly nostalgic norms."⁶⁹ The restrained woman, infantile and timid, is made unthreateningly manageable; like a child, she is powerless and restricted in her ability to act upon her own desires.⁷⁰ In *Reading Le Figaro*, Cassatt's subject accepts the chance for self-determination and expresses herself through a preferred activity. Such a theme is evident in other Cassatt paintings as well, where women may be absorbed in activities conventionally associated with the feminine, such as handicrafts, or not, such as perusing a newspaper.

The result of Cassatt's empowerment is not to disavow traditional "feminine" pastimes, but to allow the *choice* to engage with them. The problem is not the specific roles assigned to women, but the fact that those roles are so limited in their scope. In other words, there is nothing wrong with a woman who chooses to have children and become a housewife—simply, that should not be the only avenue available. As Cassatt was often reminded during the development of her career, male privilege assumed occupational identity and the opportunity to

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Faludi 1991, p. 70.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

choose an area in which to become an expert, while the female's identity was based on her appearance or her status as a domestic caretaker. Cassatt chose not to conform to these expectations, and the content of her work indicates she wanted the choice to be available for her subjects, as well.

Tellingly, Cassatt created the bulk of her ocularcentric pieces in the years immediately following the arrival of her parents in Paris. As one of the earliest, *Reading Le Figaro* can be read as a response to the artist's increased physical restriction, which was a result of relying on her sickly and often immobile parents to serve as chaperone (a position she may have considered unnecessary in the first place). As an unmarried and partly financially self-sufficient person for whom freedom was precious, the decreased mobility must have been frustrating.⁷¹ In this painting of her mother engaged in a freedom not always allowed to women, Cassatt's exploration of gender issues constitutes a psychological escape from the confines of her own position.

If we accept that Cassatt used ocularcentric messages to comment on gender limitations, a final question is why she privileged sight over other senses. The answer is found in an examination of the social context of the time. The culture of nineteenth century France was one of hyperspecularization of the female subject; in this society organized through gender disparity, the pleasure of looking was divided between the active/male and passive/female.⁷² Described by Naomi Scheman as a "specular economy," such a society expected that women serve as objects of spectacle when seen and, when seeing, the adoring audience for male activity.⁷³ Female subjugation arose in the control of vision, under a "phallocratic reality" where male desires took priority.⁷⁴

J. C. Flugel identifies this specularization as rising from the "Great Masculine Renunciation," a phenomenon of the eighteenth century in which men's clothing became increasingly subdued.⁷⁵ In response to displacing previous specularity, the male defensively converts lost specularity to scopophilia (the pleasure of looking), then transfers it onto the female surface.⁷⁶ Specularity is also associated with the male genitals, defined as "strikingly visible" in contrast to the "nothing-to-see" nature of the largely internal female genitals.⁷⁷ That is, being an external appendage, the phallus is uniquely visible; historically, it has been further

⁷¹ Mathews 1994, p. 130.

⁷² Mulvey (Wallis) 1984, p. 366.

⁷³ Scheman 2014, p. 152.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Flugel 1966, pp. 115-19.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Silverman 1988, p. 26.

accentuated through artificial means, such as with the codpiece, a symbol of power.⁷⁸ Being endowed with “presence,” the phallus implies a “lack” in female genitalia and a symbolic castration.⁷⁹ Thus arises from castration anxiety the defensive process of scopophilia, enacted with the goal of regaining phallic wholeness.⁸⁰

The male pleasure of looking is further emphasized by the flâneur, a concept described by Charles Baudelaire in 1863 as a modern artist, a man whose “passion and profession are to become one flesh with the crowd... To be away from home and yet feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world and to be the centre of the world and yet remain hidden from the world...”⁸¹ Thus, the crowd is the public home of the flâneur, a place to look without being watched and to escape the constraint of the private home; freely, he moves across the private/public divide.⁸² The female is not and never could be, in this view, a flâneur; women could not move through crowds without being seen, and were only ever positioned as the object of the flâneur’s gaze. Baudelaire even writes, “Woman is for the artist in general ... She is an idol, stupid perhaps but dazzling and bewitching.”⁸³

Conscious or not, Cassatt’s choice to privilege sight over other senses allows the strongest response to the forces behind feminine subjugation by using the same vehicle (vision). By manipulating the sense most associated with masculine power, *Reading Le Figaro* denies scopophilic engagement with the subject and gives her the power to choose an identity of political intellectuality. The message is further enhanced by the nature of vision as the sense most associated with mental activity.⁸⁴ Thus, on multiple fronts, *Reading Le Figaro* reclaims the power of sight from patriarchal European society, giving its subject freedom from scopophilic desire, an active gaze used in the pursuit of knowledge, and the ability to self-define as female mind over female body.

⁷⁸ Steinberg, 1996, p. 85.

⁷⁹ Mulvey (Wallis) 1984, p. 368.

⁸⁰ Silverman 1988, p. 26.

⁸¹ Baudelaire 1964, p. 9.

⁸² Pollock 1988, p. 70.

⁸³ Baudelaire 1964, p. 30.

⁸⁴ Nochlin 1999, p. 193.

III. In Conclusion

Cassatt's *Reading Le Figaro* is a piece that exemplifies the artist's challenge to ocularcentric modes of female subjugation. Created the year following the arrival of Cassatt's parents in France, the work reflects a social commentary read here as a reaction to the restrictions of a shared family living space and the watchful eye of parents who could serve as chaperone once more. *Reading Le Figaro* selectively manipulates the spaces of femininity through a visual action, the reading of a newspaper, to demonstrate female intellectual agency and reinvent the woman-and-mirror trope. The painting is an example of Cassatt's frequent use of mirrors throughout her work, where instead of depicting traditional vanity scenes where women gaze at their own reflections, the mirror emphasizes the subjective experience of Cassatt's subjects (as opposed to the exterior, appearance-based definition provided through the act of looking at the woman as an object). By removing outward definition, Cassatt allows her subjects the choice to define themselves through their own pursuits, whether they be more stereotypical of women (such as handicrafts) or of men (such as engagement in the political sphere).

By embedding her commentary in work to be consumed by a scopophilic society, Cassatt subversively allows her women to self-define and to move freely between public or private spaces—that is, to be given the same liberties as men. She denies tropes of representation and replaces them with opinionated observations on the hegemony of vision in modernity. The result, seen in *Reading Le Figaro*, challenges preexisting notions of gender and offers an alternative of self-determination, freedom to choose one's spaces (private, public, or otherwise), and access to active sight irrespective of gender.

Figures



Figure 1. Mary Cassatt,
Reading Le Figaro, 1878
(private collection).



Figure 2. Mary Cassatt,
Modern Woman (detail),
1892-93 (unlocated).



Figure 3. Mary Cassatt,
*Katherine Cassatt
Reading to Her
Grandchildren*, 1880
(private collection).



Figure 4. Mary Cassatt, *The Oval Mirror*, 1899 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).



Figure 5. Mary Cassatt, *Mother Wearing a Sunflower on Her Dress*, c. 1905 (National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.).



Figure 6. Mary Cassatt, *Young Woman Buttoning Her White Glove*, 1877 (destroyed).

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Figure References

Cassatt, Mary 1877, *Young Woman Buttoning Her White Glove*, destroyed. Image retrieved from *The Smithsonian Learning Lab*, Smithsonian Institution, photographer Peter A. Juley. <https://learninglab.si.edu/resources/view/144774>

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——— 1880, *Katherine Cassatt Reading to Her Grandchildren*, private collection. Image retrieved from *Mary Cassatt: A New Catalogue Raisonné*, Adelson Galleries. <http://www.marycassatt.com/entry.php?CatalogNumber=77>

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——— c. 1905, *Mother Wearing a Sunflower on Her Dress*, Chester Dale Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. Image retrieved from *NGA Images*, National Gallery of Art. <http://www.images.nga.gov>