Cassatt balked at being thought a woman painter. Cf. what she wrote to her French dealer, Paul Durand-Ruel in January 1898.

She insisted on significant distinctions:
- between professional and amateur;
- between being a woman taking her place in the international art world and being a "lady" painter showing in provincial American exhibitions.

Time eventually proved her right: in 1983, Reading the Figaro (a portrait of her mother) reached the million-dollar price tag.

Segard (a Symbolist writer) was the first to appreciate Cassatt because, as a Symbolist, he was seeking deeper meaning, beyond the surface of the everyday. And so he approached her as a painter of "emotional lyricism".

In contrast to those contemporaries to whom beautiful appearance, or the fashionable surface of woman coupled with some enigmatic sexual danger, was the substance of a mythic femininity, Cassatt selected models of all classes who did not attract an eroticizing gaze: the figures are represented in her pictures to convey a psychological interiority – a combination of thoughts and feelings that intimate an "inner life".

Her images of children with mothers or nurses are not emblems of some ideology about Nature, Tradition or Home. Her compositions show the tension in and, at the same time, the pleasure of interactions between children and adults who are emotionally bonded. And, more especially after her mother's death (1895), Cassatt spent 2 decades exploring the artistic challenge and intellectual possibilities of this subject. Her works bring into visibility an awareness of psychological processes that take place in the relations between adults and children.

When Cassatt died (1926), a less subtle reading of her work started to appear: in her work, the stress was first placed on "mothers and children", suggesting a link between her gender and her treatment of her subject matter. It means that most critics were dangerously sliding from what they could see on the canvas, a pictorial analysis of human relations, to a sensibility ascribed to the artist because she was a woman.

Segard had a much clearer insight: in the great traditions of art based on drawing, style is the complete achievement of an integrated understanding of art making, combining conceptual and technical realization. Style was, in art theory, coded as masculine and virile. Segard affirmed Cassatt's style in the painting, once owned by Degas, and even attributed to him by his executors, Girl arranging her hair, 1886.

It has style. Firstly, because all useless details have been eliminated, and all essential details graduated with discernment to an impression of the whole that is clean and vigorous; secondly, because of the tone of deep sincerity and life that animates the entire work, then because of the felicitous combination of lines that converge precisely and harmoniously, demonstrating the truth the painter wishes to demonstrate, and finally because of the happy balancing of masses and areas of colour, which, in perfect proportion, are also subordinated to the impression of the whole, so that one could change nothing in it, nor add, nor subtract, without diminishing its order, stability, tranquillity, and so to speak the mathematics of the
work. These are the qualities that make its style. It in no way depends upon the subject nor its so-called nobility.

Segard

Cassatt was modern because the tension we can see in her works between the what and how, which makes us work with the alternation between seeing a painting as a painting and seeing a painting as a representation of what we think a moment in the world.

1) An American in Europe
Many American artists paid a visit to Europe during their training years. For quite a long time, Italy (and more precisely Rome) had been the place to be, but the early 1860s were the turning point for American artists in Europe. Paris was the centre for the art of the moment, so that over 1800 American artists studied in there in the later 19th century. In the 1880s, Henry James declared of art from his country: When we look for 'American art' we find it mainly in Paris. When we find it out of Paris, we at least find a great deal of Paris in it.

Examples : Thomas Eakins, who became one of Gérôme’s most dedicated students (1866 – 1869)
With The Mandolin Player, Mary Cassatt exhibited for the first time at the Salon of 1868 under the name of Mary Stevenson.

The Mandolin Player:
The figure is seen with light falling from one side, which casts most of the face into shadow.

The plain and uncluttered directness of the presentation draws the eye towards the paint itself:
- the bright paint of the white shirt as the light falls upon it
- the very carefully modulated reds of the sash that provides the only 'local colour'
- the shaded face from which expressive eyes emerge to finally catch the viewer’s attention and appraisal.

Cassatt’s references appear to be:
- Millet and his Goat girl of Auvergne (1868)
- Rembrandt and his chiaroscuro; cf. his late self-portrait in the Louvre (1660)
- Manet and his Spanish Singer (1860)

The motif of a woman playing the mandolin is not an original subject matter: it often occurs in 17th-century Dutch and 18th-century French art.
So few pieces by Cassatt remain from these early years that it is quite difficult to know for sure what her aesthetic ideas were.

Belonging to that period, The Young Bride:
It shows a young woman knitting; the signature "Mary Stevenson" dates the work to the period between 1867 and 1873. The woman in The Young Bride seems detached and preoccupied by her sewing; the large area of the satin dress forms a contrast with the deep shadowed background. Cassatt also managed to modulate various tonalities in the shadowed face and the highlights on her character’s forehead and chest.
In December 1869, Cassatt’s mother arrived in Europe, and together they travelled to Rome. In 1870, Cassatt went back home and tried to make her living with her painting. Her ambitions to return to Europe were fulfilled when the Catholic archbishop of Pittsburgh commissioned her to make copies of frescoes un Parma (frescoes by the most admired master in the 19th century: Correggio).

Correggio’s paintings were a mine of compositional possibilities. One painting particularly impressed Cassatt, Il Giorno.
Study of Il Giorno: the painter placed the heads of Mary, Child and Mary Magdalene in close proximity. The ensemble was made affecting by staggering the height of each head, which produced an impression of recession and of depth of field. Moreover, different emotional states were evoked through the gestures that link(ed) the figures: the Madonna's hand holds the baby gently under his arm; his hand rests on the saint's head in some sort of a benediction and Magdalene's head is bent in mystical adoration towards his body, while her hand (shortened by the perspective) cups the baby's heel.

This painting gives 2 keys to explain many compositions of child and adult by Cassatt:
- the expressive or contemplative head
- the signifying potential of the linking gesture

February 1872: Cassatt began a painting (to be proposed for the Paris Salon), Two Women throwing flowers during the carnival

The painter selected an unusual angle: the viewer is placed inside the space of the balcony, exceptionally close to the figures. This arrangement allows Cassatt the opportunity to orchestrate figures in a confined space.

- The 2 heads inclining in different directions echoes a compositional device used by Courbet in an early scene, Lovers in the countryside, 1844, exhibited in 55 and 67.
- This painting also has echoes of Manet's The Balcony, exhibited at the Salon of 69.

The painting shows Cassatt learning from Correggio, “master” of composition and it also explores the lessons of the most daring contemporary artist, Manet.

In May 1872, Cassatt left Parma for Seville, but she kept on working on the “balcony” theme. In December, she wrote to her friend Emily: My present effort is on a canvas and is three figures life size half way to the knee. All the three heads are foreshortened and difficult to pose, so much so that my model asked me if the people who pose for me live long. I have one man's figure the first time I have introduced a man's head into any of my pictures.

This painting is more conventional that the previous one, but it is also a reminiscence of Manet’s own source, Goya’s Majas on a balcony. There is also another possible source in Murillo’s Two Women at a window.

The balcony theme encapsulates a number of critical issues around gender, sexuality and the social division of space which were to be further explored in Cassatt’s work in the 80s. In Muslim Spanish architecture, the segregated quarters of women were enclosed but had balconies with carved wooden grilles that protected the women from being seen while they watched the world outside. The
open balcony from which to see while also being seen forms a more dangerous space, a borderline between respectably hidden interiors and the unregulated space of the public street. In the 19th century, femininity was calibrated across this spatial division: the idealized and respectable lady was located inside, and her labouring opposite was outside. The balcony, in this context, was a visual sign of ambivalence and provocative exchange. The “women on the balcony” theme often was prostitutional, with women leaning on balconies in fluid and thus sexually attractive poses that were interpreted as sexual invitation.

When it was exhibited at the Cincinnati Industrial Exhibition in 73, the work was explicitly titled: The Flirtation, A Balcony in Seville. The sexual theme is openly acknowledged in the exchange between the heavily shadowed but perfectly characterized male figure inclining towards his flirtatious partner and the luminous figure in the foreground - she looks like Olympia: she has the flower in her hair and is dressed in the shawl that Manet’s naked prostitute had discarded in his famous painting.

After Seville, Cassatt travelled to Antwerp and Rome. She went back to France in 1874, where she appeared at the Salon for the first time under the name "Mary Cassatt". It was at this Salon that Degas apparently saw Cassatt’s painting Ida, and declared: Voilà quelqu’un qui sent comme moi.

Why did Cassatt decide to sign her paintings under her real name?
She was beginning to understand what kind of modernization in art Manet was leading; his work had undertaken a radical shift. At the 1874 Salon, he exhibited the luminous Gare Saint Lazare, in 1875, Argenteuil and in 76, Boating. These 3 paintings show a renewed use of colours (more vivid than before) and a simplicity in composition, which indicated a focus on urban life and suburban recreation.

Cassatt saw Manet grappling with the immediate situations of contemporary life, and she decided she wanted to do the same.

In 1877, she met Degas and he invited her to join the Independent group of artists which had been formed 3 years before.

In 1877, I submitted again [to the Salon]. They rejected it. That was when Degas made me promise never to submit anything to the Salon again, and to exhibit with his friends in the group of the Impressionists. I agreed gladly. At last I could work absolutely independently, without worrying about the possible opinion of a jury! I had already acknowledged who my true masters were. I admired Manet, Courbet, and Degas. I hated conventional art. I was beginning to live... Cassatt to Achille Segard, 1913.

2) Modern Women and modern spaces (1877 – 1891)
Woman was the continual subject of most of what can be considered modern painting.

Example : John Singer Sargent’s Lady Agnew, 1892-93
Sargent was a hugely successful portrait painter serving both the American colony in Europe and the British market. His painting is a fashionable society portrait. What is more interesting is the fact that its real subject is the femininity idealized by the class and the age the painter belonged to. That subject matter is conveyed through the contrast between the dark-eyed sitter and the pallid setting (which was probably chosen to create an almost theatrical effect). Here lies the mystery of modern woman, in her enigmatic elegance and passive beauty.

In Five o’clock Tea (1880) Cassatt chose to show a scene of bourgeois sociability. Two women are sitting on a floral sofa before a tea table. The viewer is located just across the table, close enough to observe the details of the hand which holds the cup with an elevated little finger. But he (the viewer) cannot master the scene, because the women are apparently addressing an unseen interlocutor. Because the viewer is excluded from this conversation, he becomes observer of details: the wallpaper, the fireplace, the mirror, the tea set, and the differences between the two women.

Cassatt shows us 3 spaces:

- the spaces of femininity, the place and activity that are being painted;
space in painting (the choice of shallow space against deep space which produces the effect of immediate proximity);
- the space from which the painting was being made: Cassatt’s artistic space (as a self-conscious artist) made the viewer’s position feminine. And because the viewer recognizes the position from which Cassatt produced her painting(s), he can also understand it (them) historically.

1879: Cassatt made a radically new debut and entered her second career. In that period, she focused on several themes which fascinated her: maidens, women reading, women and theatre.

a. Maidens
   Little Girl in a blue armchair, 1878, was modelled by the daughter of friends of Degas. Cassatt used her close-range viewpoint and compressed the pictorial space. This painting is one of the most radical images of childhood painted at that period. It has almost nothing of the prettiness of Renoir’s Mademoiselle Legrand but shows a very daring boldness in posture (which would later influence Pissarro when he painted young peasant women.). There is nothing cute in this portrait of a young girl as she sprawls in an armchair too large for her short legs. Her expression is neither smooth nor romantic: it is slightly sour and her grin reveals a touch of discontent. The room is viewed from an oblique angle, low down in front of the girl and it shows how a young girl can experience space, more in a psychological perception than in a rational and geometrical approach.

b. Women reading
   Example 1: Reading the Figaro, 1878. It shows the artist’s mother reading a newspaper (a sign of modernity, according to Baudelaire). She is sitting in the same armchair as the girl in Little girl in a blue armchair, against a light ivory wall.
   Where does Cassatt’s originality lie?
   - she has introduced a mirror in which the newspaper is partially reflected;
   - within her painting, she manages to concentrate contradictory images of femininity, maternity and intellectuality; a woman is represented, but she is a mother, middle-aged and working with her mind. She is still fashionable (see her lace jabot) but not young or available any more (for we can see a weeding ring on her finger).
   Cassatt creates the image of the “intellectual mother”.

   From Fragonard to Van Gogh, women appear as readers of novels in paintings of modern life. Yet it was an apparent transgression to show a bourgeoise, or indeed a woman, engaged in an intellectual activity. For instance, when Whistler painted his mother in 1871, the black-clad widow is shown in monumental stillness, and when Caillebotte painted his mother (portrait exhibited at the 1877 Impressionist Exhibition, he showed her sewing. The way Cassatt showed her mother somehow reflects the support she could expect from her (as an intellectual woman) and the continuity between her mother’s identity and her own. To be compared with Cézanne’s view of his father in a painting of 1866. His father is represented informally, with a cap, a smoking jacket and slippers, reading a newspaper. The image not only shows his father but is aggressively addressed to him, who opposed his son’s vocation. One of Cézanne’s still-lives hangs above his father’s head, and the same technique (use of the palette knife) is used by the painter to refashion his father.

   One of the most important works of his early years is the portrait of his formidable father. The Artist’s Father (1866, 199 x 119 cm (78 x 47 in)) is one of Cézanne’s “palette-knife pictures”, painted in short sessions between 1865 and 1866. Their
realistic content and solid style reveal Cézanne’s admiration for Gustave Courbet. Here we see a craggy, unyielding man of business, a solid mass of manhood, bodily succint from the top of his black beret to the tips of his heavy shoes. The uncompromising verticals of the massive chair are echoed by the door, and the edges of the small still life by Cézanne on the wall just behind: everything corresponds to the absolute verticals of the edges of the canvas itself, further accentuating the air of certainty about the portrait. Thick hands hold a newspaper—though Cézanne has replaced his father’s conservative newspaper with the liberal L’Evènement, which published articles by his childhood friend, Emile Zola. His father devours the paper, sitting tensely upright in the elongated armchair. Yet it is a curiously tender portrait too. Cézanne seems to see his father as somehow unfulfilled: for all his size he does not fully occupy the chair, and neither does he see the still life on the wall behind him, which we recognize as being one of his son’s. We do not see his eyes—only the ironical mouth and his great frame, partly hidden behind the paper.

This subject matter developed first by Cassatt was also to be used by the great painter of the time, Manet, but in a way which reflected his gender. In 1879, he painted a fashionable young woman reading an illustrated magazine in the garden of a Parisian café. He also used the device of the mirror in one of his most famous paintings, A bar at the Folies-Bergères (exhibited at the 1882 Salon). At the 1881 Independent exhibition, Cassatt showed a painting of her mother as a grandmother, reading to Alexander’s children, whose faces circle her like angels in a Renaissance fresco.