

The Modernization of Paris, Gendered Spaces, and the Sexual Politics of Looking

A Comparison of Mary Cassatt's *In The Loge* and Edgar
Degas' *Woman in a Cafe: Evening*

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The marked increase in population following Haussmannization of 19th century Paris fostered an existence passed among strangers in a world of competition, commodity exchange, consumption, and money, with heightened mental stimulation and a faster pace of life. The city, once a center of visible manufacturing and production, moved towards being a site of display and spectacle.ⁱ The increasing materialistic culture caused women to become the primary consumers; in displaying signs of their wealth on their person and in their homes, they became subject to visual consumption, especially by the exclusively masculine flaneur figure.ⁱⁱ This modernization and the newly established leisure class became the subject of fascination of many of the Impressionist painters, as they embraced the lifestyle of the flaneur figure and depicted in their paintings what they consumed through impassive observation, as well as exploring the act of visual perception itself. However, socially constructed sexual differences governed the access that the male versus female Impressionists had to the public and private spheres, respectively. The rise of the exclusively male flaneur figure promoted men as those who were entitled to the

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right to look and women as subjects to the male gaze, lacking this freedom to venture out into the public sphere and observe. The imposition by 19th century Parisian society of gender on the public and private spheres (masculine and feminine, respectively) dictated the subject matter with which Edgar Degas, as a male, and Mary Cassatt, as a female, could work. A comparison of Cassatt's *In the Loge* (1878) (Fig. 1) and Degas' *Woman in a Cafe* (1877) (Fig. 2) illustrates this division as well as the sexual politics of looking, with the exclusively male flaneur figure characterized as a consumer through sight, while females were positioned as the object of the male's gaze.

In depicting the central female figure as actively looking while blissfully unaware of a male figure's spectating gaze in her painting *In The Loge*, Mary Cassatt refuses to participate in the convention of the female as complicit to being the subject of the male gaze.ⁱⁱⁱ *In The Loge* depicts a woman dressed demurely in black at the opera, her gaze fixed intently through opera glasses on the spectacle before her. As the viewer tracks the woman's gaze across the painting toward the opera itself, he or she is abruptly interrupted by the presence of a man craning his neck, also looking through opera glasses, straining for a view of his spectacle, the woman herself.^{iv} Cassatt's juxtaposition of the woman's gaze, fixated on the opera, and the man's gaze, trained on the woman, with the emphasis on the woman's line of sight, can be interpreted as Cassatt's conscious rejection of the conventional idea of women as the spectacle rather than the spectators; the woman's act of active looking prevents her objectification and is Cassatt's subversion of the fact that women did not have the right to look in modern 19th century Paris.^v The man within the painting reflects the viewer outside the painting, and in the female's refusal to return the viewer's gaze, she therefore refuses both the viewer's and the male figure within

the painting's right to look and assess. Her dominant and resolute pose declares her consciousness and inscribes into the painting the female experience.^{vi} Thus, in painting *In The Loge*, Cassatt tackles the problem of women being vulnerable and subject to the policing male gaze in public, gendered spaces, powerfully and defiantly questioning the convention of women as the spectacles and men as the spectators.

In painting *Woman in a Cafe: Evening*, Degas is complicit in the brothel culture of the interstitial and classed gendered spaces through the exclusion of detail reducing the women to feminine symbols, and presenting them as objects of the male gaze subject to and purposed for visual consumption.^{vii} *Woman in a Cafe: Evening* is a pastel of women sitting inside a cafe, presented with Paris street life as the backdrop. The principle figure, framed by two pillars, makes a suggestive gesture by holding her thumb in her mouth, which, along with her gaudy dress, identifies her and the other women in the scene as prostitutes.^{viii} The male figure in the background, partially hidden by one of the pillars, is a motif that is repeated in Degas' other works, such as *Dancers Backstage*, which depicts the backstage of the opera as a place of sexual commerce in which the *abonne* figure, a male subscriber of the opera, was permitted to enter and proposition the ballerinas.^{ix} Degas' reduction of the male in both *Woman in a Cafe: Evening* and *Dancers Backstage* to a shadowed vertical black smudge serves to symbolize this figure as sinisterly anonymous and masculine, complicit in the culture of sexual commerce that characterized interstitial gendered spaces where the feminine and masculine spheres were allowed to interact.^x These in-between spaces were overlaid with a classed social order, being typically frequented by women of the lower class who had to resort to selling their bodies. Additionally, in viewing *Woman in a Cafe: Evening*, one notices the lack of shading or contour in the

women's flesh, and particularly the pale, almost ghostly quality of the central figure's skin. Messy and nondescript lines demarcate the women's figures and the surrounding cafe. Over the course of Degas' career, he trended away from truthful representation and towards ambiguity and inference, which we can observe in the lack of detail throughout *Woman in a Cafe*. By removing signs of their individuality, Degas turns the women into symbols of the female gender rather than distinct and conscious beings, illustrating another trend in his career away from the inclusion of signs of narrative and identity.^{xi} This painting is a classic example of Degas' monotype, which tends to depict settings which foster sexual trafficking and exploitation.^{xii} Along with other (male) Impressionists, Degas incorporated the rise of the modern spectacle in the subject matter of his paintings, and in doing so, embodied the male flaneur figure and examined the act of visual perception itself. Thus, in the act of observing and painting this scene, Degas encourages and promotes the idea of these women as spectacles for visual consumption.

The gender asymmetry that characterized modern Paris deeply influenced the subject matter of male and female Impressionists, with little of typical Impressionist iconography reappearing in works by females of the group.^{xiii} I will argue that socially fabricated sexual differences in the lives of male and female Impressionists dictated the spaces which they could occupy, and thus the subject matter to which they had access.^{xiv} Modern Paris was divided into gendered spheres: the public sphere, which encompassed work, government, education, money, and public service, was gendered as masculine, while the private sphere, characterized by domesticity, homemaking, childcare, and servantry, was gendered as feminine.^{xv} While men could move freely between the two spheres, entering the public

sphere in going to work every day and returning to the private sphere to serve in their equally taxing role of husband, father, and provider, women, on the other hand, were relegated and confined to the private sphere, with the separation of the two spheres evidenced by the fact of expanding suburbs creating a physical segregation.^{xvi} Male Impressionists took advantage of having free reign over both the public and private spheres, using their unregulated access to inspire their subject matter, and thus were able to occupy and depict bars, brothels, cafes, and backstage scenes, all of which are typical scenes of Degas' work, as seen in *Woman in a Cafe: Evening*. However, the lack of access to the public sphere and freedom of visual consumption limited the subject matter of female Impressionist artists.^{xvii} The works of Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot typically depict spaces within the private feminine sphere. Quintessential to their oeuvre are paintings of mothers and their children and other domestic scenes of the home. Their paintings within the public sphere show spaces of display, the social rituals of polite society, and areas of bourgeois recreation such as theatergoing (as in *In The Loge*).^{xviii} Even their *en plein air* works take place in public parks or gardens, confined outside spaces in which the wild landscape is tamed and groomed, similarly to how women were expected to present themselves. Thus, the range of places, and thus subjects, open and accessible to male Impressionists such as Degas, who was free to occupy urban spaces characterized by the overlap of the male and female spheres, and the lower class and bourgeois spheres, spaces of sexual commerce that positioned women as subject to a male's pleasure and objectification, were not accessible to the female Impressionists such as Cassatt.

The sexual politics of looking shaped the spaces of masculinity and femininity, and thus determined both the

subject matter of male versus female Impressionists and the way in which they depicted their subjects. Charles Baudelaire published an essay called “The Painter of Modern Life,” in which he establishes the flaneur figure as the ideal modern artist.^{xix} The flaneur was an impassive stroller who had the freedom to roam the public sphere consuming the spectacle of the city through observation but refraining from interaction or participation. This figure was characterized as exclusively masculine, as males retained the right to visual consumption, while females lacked this privilege and were instead positioned as the objects of the male gaze, subject to such visual consumption.^{xx} To become an established artist, Mary Cassatt was required to maintain her respectability and be an active participant in Parisian society. To enter into the spaces in which the masculine and feminine spheres interfaced, common throughout the male Impressionist’s monotype, was to expose oneself to the possibility of visual interaction and thus knowledge of such spaces tainted with the immorality of the commodification of women’s bodies.^{xxi} In this awareness existed an innate threat to a woman’s respectability and therefore prevented Mary Cassatt from entering and depicting such spaces.^{xxii} However, as already established, many of the male Impressionists adopted and embraced the flaneur lifestyle, using it to their advantage by delving into works that explored the act of visual perception itself. Thus, popular motifs central to this exploration emerged: opera glasses (as seen in *In the Loge*, emphasizing the act of looking), reflective surfaces (such as the window behind the women in *Woman in a Cafe: Evening*), mirrors, shimmering fabrics, and lighting devices.^{xxiii} Albeit, the way in which male and female artists depicted these symbols of seeing vastly differed. Cassatt’s loge pictures are not unique to her in that male Impressionists such as Renoir, Manet, and Degas also painted

women in theater boxes, but in a manner in which they appear as if they are on display.^{xxiv} In Renoir's *The Theater Box*, for example, the young female subject of the painting confronts the (presumed male) viewer's gaze directly.^{xxv} In purposefully painting the woman's direct eye contact for the pleasure of the viewer, Renoir asserts her consent to the male viewer exerting control over her, positioning her as the object to be looked at. In male Impressionists' monotype of the theater, this setting becomes one of overt sexual commerce and thus possible compromise to a lady's reputation.^{xxvi} However, the theater takes on an entirely different meaning in Cassatt's works, as does the opera glass motif. In *In The Loge*, the female makes eye contact with neither the viewer nor the watchful male inscribed into the background, either unaware of or unresponsive to both of our gazes.^{xxvii} Instead, Cassatt's picturing her in an assertive stance actively engaged in the spectacle before her subverts the innate sexually complicit connotations of the opera glasses and asserts the woman's independence.^{xxviii} In many of Cassatt's paintings, such as *In The Box*, *At The Theater*, *The Loge*, and *Woman with a Pearl Necklace in a Loge*, the women again avert their eyes in a conscious decision on the part of the artist to maintain their respectability.^{xxix}

In *In The Loge*, the female subject's refusal to return the gaze of the male inscribed into the painting or that of the presumably male viewer is Cassatt's conscious rejection of women as the spectacle subject to the male's gaze. On the other hand, Degas' depiction of prostitutes in *Woman in a Cafe: Evening* is complicit in the commercialization of sex and the commodification of women's bodies. A participant in the flaneur lifestyle, Degas, in observing and painting this scene, presents these desperate and vulnerable women as objects for (his own and his viewer's, again presumably male) visual consumption and enjoyment. The division of modern Paris into the public and

private spheres, and the characterization of these spheres as exclusively feminine and masculine, respectively, created a gendered asymmetry in Impressionist works by dictating the subject matter to which male and female Impressionists had access. Baudelaire's assertion of the exclusively masculine flaneur figure as the ideal modern artist promoted the freedom of observation as an exclusively male right, while women were expected to acquiesce to their own objectification by the male gaze. Many art historians agree that the direct eye contact of the female subject of a painting has connotations of sexual consent for the pleasure of the male viewing her. By picturing the female in *In The Loge* actively engaged with the spectacle of the theater before her, refusing to return the watchful eye of the male figure or the viewer, Cassatt subverts this presumed consent and promotes the female subject's respectability and independence. Despite both being a part of the Impressionist movement and maintaining both a strong friendship and mentor-mentee relationship, the subject matter of Mary Cassatt and Edgar Degas' works could not be more different, along with their approach to the representation of the gendered and classed spheres of modern Paris. It is important to remember the effects that the gendered spaces of modernity still have in the 21st century, as females are subject to catcalling on the streets, harassment in the workplace, and must avoid dark, unpopulated places at night for fear of sexual assault.^{xxx} To examine the differences in the works of male and female Impressionists dictated by a socially constructed gender difference in a modernizing Paris has profound implications in how such a difference shapes our world today.

ⁱ Pollock, Griselda, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), 66.

ⁱⁱ Barter, Judith, "Mary Cassatt: Themes, Sources, and the Modern Woman." In *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman*, organized by Judith A. Barter, 45-68 (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998), 45.

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- iii Pollock, Griselda, "Mary Cassatt: Painter of Women and Children." In *Reading American Art*, edited by Marianne Doezema and Elizabeth Milroy, 280-301 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 285-286.
- iv Ibid.; Pollock, *Vision & Difference*, 75.
- v Pollock, *Vision & Difference*, 75-76.
- vi Barter, "Mary Cassatt: Themes, Sources, and the Modern Woman," 50.
- vii Kendall, Richard, "Signs and Non-Signs: Degas' Changing Strategies of Representation." In *Dealing with Degas: Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision*, edited by Richard Kendall and Griselda Pollock, 186-201 (New York: Universe, 1992), 190, 192.
- viii Sutton, Denys, *Edgar Degas: Life and Work* (New York: Rizzoli, 1986), 211.
- ix Kendall, "Signs and Non-Signs," 192.
- x Ibid.
- xi Ibid., 190.
- xii Ibid., 192.
- xiii Pollock, *Vision & Difference*, 56.
- xiv Ibid., 55.
- xv Ibid., 67.
- xvi Ibid.
- xvii Ibid., 62.
- xviii Ibid., 56.
- xix Ibid., 70.
- xx Ibid., 71.
- xxi Ibid., 78.
- xxii Ibid., 69, 78.
- xxiii Barter, "Mary Cassatt: Themes, Sources, and the Modern Woman," 46, 49.
- xxiv Ibid., 46-47.

xxv Ibid., 49.

xxvi Ibid., 49-50; Pollock, Griselda, *Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 1998), 144.

xxvii Barter, "Mary Cassatt: Themes, Sources, and the Modern Woman," 49.

xxviii Ibid., 49-50; Pollock, *Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women*, 141.

xxix Barter, "Mary Cassatt: Themes, Sources, and the Modern Woman," 49-50; Pollock, "Mary Cassatt: Painter of Women and Children," 285.

xxx Pollock, *Vision & Difference*, 127.

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Fig.1, Cassatt, Mary, *In the Loge*, Oil, 1878, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, <https://www.mfa.org/collections/object/in-the-loge-31365>.



Fig. 2, Degas, Edgar, *Woman in a Cafe: Evening*, Pastel, 1877, Musee d'Orsay, Paris, France, <http://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/detail.php?ID=4937>.