

Luke Westman and Papa Loum

### **Cassatt: A Vision of Self**

Mary Cassatt was an artist born in Pennsylvania in 1844. She belonged to the Impressionist movement, which focused on the representation of daily life. In 1866, she moved to Paris, considered at the time to be the epicenter of art. It was there that she formed a friendship with mentor and fellow artist Edgar Degas. The historical context of Cassatt's work is marked by the limitations imposed on women in private spaces and domestic roles. The majority of Cassatt's prints include as themes the relationships between mothers and children, tender moments of daily life, and intellectual pursuits. These themes appear in two works in the Colby Museum of Art: *Susan looking down at her hands* (ca. 1883) and *Before the fireplace (No. 2)* (ca. 1882).

The Impressionist engraving, *Susan looking down at her hands*, displays a servant in a moment of reflection after having accomplished her domestic tasks. In contrast, *Before the Fireplace (No. 2)*, represents a bourgeois woman seated in a well-decorated living room. The individuality of these female subjects, enhanced by their isolation in private spaces, is evident in the two engravings. Cassatt accomplishes this through the use of negative space in *Susan looking down at her hands*. The subjects of the engravings remain in a contemplative state. In this way, Cassatt shows spectators that the space reserved for women was sometimes a site for introspection and reflection. This atypical representation of female figures defied the misogynistic and stereotypical images of the time. From the artist's perspective, the domestic sphere did not inhibit the intellectual development of women, just the contrary occurred.

The choice of engraving, a difficult technique necessitating a number of drafts, illustrates Cassatt's passion for the type of art habitually reserved for her male contemporaries. Being a

woman did not prevent her from mastering this subtle technique that required hours of work. This artistic choice is proof of her professionalism and her taste for perfection. Cassatt's engravings resemble photographic images that capture stolen moments, ephemeral and furtive. By representing women of different social classes, sometimes occupied by intellectual work, Cassatt magnifies the potential for female intellectualism and independence.

Cassatt's work is extremely personal, and included members of her family, female models who greatly contributed to her character. She shows us a part of her life by representing her sister Lydia, her mother Mrs. Cassatt, and her servant Susan. Without directly putting herself on canvas, Cassatt projects her opinions, her ideas, and her social commentaries through the individuals that she paints. Ultimately, Cassatt's feminine ideals were already avant-garde in the nineteenth century, valuing independence and intellectual culture, and were reflections of her own life.