

# **The Impressionist Depiction of Women**

**A study comparing the differences inherent in the female and male gaze in the portrayal of women in paintings done by female artists Morisot and Cassatt and male artists Renoir and Manet.**

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## **Abstract**

This study delves into the portrayal of women in Impressionist paintings, focusing on the nuanced perspectives and differences derived from the female and male gaze. Through a comparative study of works by Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt, Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Édouard Manet, this thesis elucidates the distinct artistic interpretations and societal influences shaping the representation of women. This is done by comparing how the female and male gaze influence the portrayals of women both in a domestic and public setting. By examining

themes of intimacy, motherhood and the portrayal of women in the public sphere, this study reveals how Morisot and Cassatt offer a more empathetic and autonomous depiction of women, reflective of their own experiences as female artists. In contrast, Manet and Renoir their depiction often reflect more traditional gender roles and ideals. Through an exploration and comparative study of artworks done by these artists, this study sheds light on the unique insights offered by female artists and contributes to a deeper understanding of gender dynamics in Impressionist paintings.

**Keywords** Impressionism, female gaze, male gaze, female subjects, art, Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt, Édouart Manet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir.

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## Introduction

In 1874 the first Impressionist exhibition opened in Paris and marked the beginning of a new artistic movement. This exhibition showcased a distinctive painting style capturing the daily lives of bourgeois Paris characterized by rapid, visible brush strokes, vibrant colors, and a focus on the interplay of natural light (Janson & Davies, 2006). Although many art historians agree that Impressionism first started in Normandy, 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris was the intellectual epicenter of the Impressionist movement (Finden, 2023). It was here in Paris where the Impressionist artists held their own exhibitions and caused so much controversy in the art world.

In contrast to previous art movements such as Classicism and Romanticism that favored large canvases and heroic, historical, or religious themes, the Impressionist style proved particularly suitable for female painters (Finden, 2023). The smaller canvasses facilitated ease of transportation and painting *en plein air* (outdoors) or at home. The informal subjects, featuring snapshots of everyday life such as family portraits, children, friends, and landscapes of gardens or the countryside, could easily be captured within their daily domain. Women during that time were adherend to a strict code of social rules, whereas upper class men had the liberty to move wherever they wanted (Janson & Davies, 2006).

Given the disparities in the lives led by men and women, I am intrigued to explore how these differences manifest themselves in artworks and additionally, to find out whether there exists a difference in how male and female artists depict those narratives. The aim of this thesis is thus to find out whether there are any differences in the way male and female Impressionist artists depict women in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris. The research question is as follows:

*How do Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt portray women as subjects in both an intimate as in a public setting, and what are the differences, if any, in their depictions compared to male Impressionist artists?*

This thesis is interested to find out whether these female artists provide us a different insight in the daily lives of women in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris, compared to their male peers. This research involves a comprehensive analysis of paintings depicting women done by both female and male artists, with a specific focus on comparing the perspectives inherent in the female and male gaze.

For this research I have narrowed it down to two female and two male artists in order to compare the perspectives inherent in the male and female gaze: Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt and Édouard Manet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir. Both Manet and Renoir are pivotal figures in the Impressionist movement, yet represent distinct approaches to the style. Even though Manet can be seen as a Realist, many scholars also view him as an Impressionist, mainly to distinguish his work from the rural realist works of Courbet and Millet (Janson & Davies, 2006). His work shares with Impressionism a sense of the modern and urbane while recording the changes in society. Manet is therefore frequently regarded as laying the groundwork for Impressionism, whereas Renoir fully embraced the fundamental principles of the artistic style and his works undoubtedly embody many of the core principles of the movement (Janson & Davies, 2006). Their substantial contributions and key roles within Impressionism make them interesting male subjects to analyze for the case studies. Morisot and Cassatt are two of the most well-known female artists of that time. They both belonged to the upper class and their works provide an insight into gentlewomen's experiences and views on 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris (Hyslop, 1954). Their works provide a valuable lens through which to examine gender dynamics and societal norms of that time. While a broader selection of both female and male artists could enrich

the analysis as a larger amount of data would give a more accurate representation and therefore stronger argument, the constraints of word limit necessitate a more focused approach. Despite the potential benefits of including additional perspectives, the inclusion of these four artists allows for a comprehensive exploration for this research.

The research question will be answered through conducting a comprehensive literature review. This method of analysis relies on the examination and analysis of both primary and secondary sources relevant to the research topic. The first chapter will explore the emergence of the Impressionist movement and highlight the artistic style its characteristics. In addition to this, the first chapter will delve into the personal and professional backgrounds of Morisot and Cassatt. Besides using literary sources, this thesis will conduct a case study analyzing different paintings to find the stylistic, thematic and socio-cultural differences. In constructing this comparative study, the male gaze serves as the control group, against which the depictions by female artists will be evaluated for differences. For the case study, different paintings have been chosen in two different settings: inside and outside the domestic domain, providing both a more intimate and a public perspective. This will happen in the second and third chapter. Both chapters will first provide some context and background information on either the domestic or public setting and the role women played in these before conducting the case studies. Although much research has been done on this art movement, a comparative study between these four artists has not been conducted yet and this thesis will therefore provide new insights.

In this thesis different sources have been consulted coming from different academic backgrounds. However, Impressionism is a European art movement and most sources writing about the art movement are from a Western focused perspective and provide Western interpretations of the art work. While efforts have been made to include sources from different backgrounds, such as Park (2018), it has become clear that the representation of alternative viewpoints remain limited. What is also important to keep in mind when analyzing the artworks is one's own perception of the art. Every person carries with them preconceived notions and prejudices that influence their perception of the world. The relationship between bias and perception is complex and multifaceted. These biases are shaped by a variety of factors such as gender, personal experiences and cultural background. As a

woman I am biased by my own gender and personal experiences which influence the way I perceive the art. Using academic sources helps in analysing and supporting these arguments, however it is important to keep in mind that even academic researchers are biased when examining a painting. Exploring different perspectives and actively questioning your own bias can help limit the impact of bias on the perception of an art work, which is essential when performing the case study.

The case study will compare works of Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt to Édouard Manet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir respectively. For the intimate setting the focus of the case study will be on Morisot, as her works often focused on the private sphere, offering a glimpse into the lives of women in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris society. Cassatt will be the main focus for the public setting, famous for her depiction of women in the theatre.

## Chapter I. Impressionism

### I.I. Defining the Impressionist movement

The name of the Impressionist movement originated from critics when reviewing the first exhibition of an artists' collective called Société Anonyme des Artists (Janson & Davies, 2006). The critics found the paintings too loosely painted, perceiving them more as impressions rather than finished works of art:

“Impressionism shares with the Realism of Manet and Degas a sketchy unfinished look, a feeling of the moment, and a desire to appear modern.” (Janson & Davies, p.871, 2006).

At the start of the movement, these artists were considered cultural outcasts because their style was very different from what the academies and critics considered the cultural norm (Finden, 2023). Up until 1874, the French art world was dominated by the Royal Academies which was managed by the French monarchy and organised exhibitions in the French Salon (Finden, 2023). The French Salon, steeped in traditional artistic principles, exclusively welcomed submissions from students and graduates of the Académie, reflecting its adherence to traditional values. Some artists however rejected these traditional norms:

“With the emergence of this avant-garde in the middle of the 19th century, a group who staunchly rejected the antiquated and stringent ideals to which the Salon held faithful, these progressive artists found other ways to showcase their modern-leaning art that was deemed unacceptable by the Salon. The first and most prominent of these Salon offshoots was the Salon des Refusés.” (Finden, p.10, 2023).

The Impressionist exhibitions would continue to happen every year and would give rise to new, additional salons. It is important to realize that the Impressionist exhibitions were not designed to promote a certain artistic style but to provide an alternative to the annual salons (Janson & Davies, 2006). The Impressionists were interested to capture the transformation of French society and they were especially inspired by the new leisure activities of the *nouveau riche*. The artists focused more on landscapes and cityscapes and the main subjects were scenes of everyday life, in which they captured

what they saw instead of what they knew, and tried to capture the essence of this new society (Janson & Davies, 2006)(Tate, n.d.). They did this by working *en plein air* which was made possible by the invention of smaller canvasses and paint in tubes (Janson & Davies, 2006). Although the exhibitions did not promote a particular style, most of the works can be described as painterly by their quick and loose brushwork. Through loose brushstrokes and bright use of color, the Impressionists discovered they could capture the fleeting and transient effects of sunlight by working quickly in the open air rather than in a studio (Tate, n.d.).

Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir and Camille Pissarro are some of the leading (male) figures in the Impressionist movement (Janson & Davies, 2006). Women were not permitted to attend the École des Beaux Arts, only men could study the arts at this institute (Janson & Davies, 2006). Inherently, female artists could not exhibit at the French Salons and it was thus made very difficult for them to compete with male artists. Mary Cassatt wondered whether it was wise to compete with male artists, as she wrote herself: “After all, woman’s vocation in life is to bear children.” (Hyslop, 1954, p.184). During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most women’s lives centered around the domestic and family sphere (Kessler, 1991). Despite it being very difficult for women to work as an artist, there are some women who succeeded greatly in this profession even though they are nearly not as famous as their male contemporaries (Nochlin, 2018). Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt were two key figures in the Impressionist circle (Janson & Davies, 2006)(Hyslop, 1954)(Finden, 2023). These two artists managed to move past the rigid restrictions which would hold them back in their pursuit of artistic success.

## **I.II. About Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt**

According to Linda Nochlin’s groundbreaking essay titled “Why Have There Been No Great Woman Artists?”, which is regarded as one of the leading feminist art historical theories, it was only possible for women to succeed in the art world if those women were lucky enough to have direct access to the core of the leading art industry, by being a family member of an artistic figure or having close personal connections with a significant male artist (Nochlin, 2018). This was the case for both Morisot and Cassatt. Born into a comfortable Paris family, Morisot’s family stimulated an artistic education and she and her sister Edma took up painting classes (Hyslop, 1954). They moved towards landscape paintings

in the early 1860s and met with Corot, who was impressed by their works and remained an important contact. Edma married in 1869 and stopped painting, while Berthe continued her artistic career becoming one of the leading figures of the Impressionist movement. Later on in her life, Berthe Morisot developed a close friendship with Édouard Manet and eventually married his brother.

Morisot generally painted women and children, as these models were according to Janson & Davies (2006) most readily available to her. During this time, a woman's relationship with close female friends, her mother and sister(s) was especially important (Moran, 2021). As Kessler observes, "... the friendship of a sister or another woman in the household provided one of the few viable means of social contact and emotional support." (Kessler, 1991, p.24). Both Morisot and Cassatt painted many works in which their sister or mother modelled. Most of Morisot's paintings present women engaged in women's activities, such as reading, sewing, child rearing and enjoying 19<sup>th</sup> century leisure activities (Janson & Davies, 2006). What is remarkable, is that while her figures are all fashionably dressed, they are not very pretty or idealized. The female subjects in Morisot's paintings are "meditative and thoughtful, sophisticated and in control of their image" (Janson & Davies, p. 879, 2006). Her figures are never presented as objects sexualized by men. Instead, critics and spectators sense that Morisot is defining a woman's world which is as meaningful and important as a man's (Finden, 2023).

Mary Cassatt was born in Pittsburgh in 1845 and after visiting Paris in 1851 she was eager to pursue an artistic career. Cassatt was trained at the Pennsylvania Academy of Art in Philadelphia, where her wealthy family moved to in support of her career, which was very unusual at that time (Hyslop, 1954). She left in 1868 for Europe. She also studied in Parma and Rome, but being of independent temperament she was almost entirely self-taught (Janson & Davies, 2006). In Paris, she befriended Edgar Degas who was impressed by her work and she was included in the fourth Impressionist exhibition in 1879. Cassatt approaches Impressionism from a woman's perspective and her realistic paintings mirror the social issues developing at that time. According to Janson & Davies (2006), scholars agree that Cassatt's subjects reflect the restrictions she faced as a woman, but more importantly her belief in the importance of women in society. Like Morisot, Cassatt mostly paints



women engaging in leisure activities or in the domestic setting. Her subjects are well-dressed and  
mannered and she presents them as sophisticated women.

## **Chapter II. Works depicting women in an intimate, domestic setting**

### **II.I. Women in the domestic setting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.**

The role of women in a domestic setting was generally defined by traditional gender norms and societal expectations which existed during that time. Women managed the household, took care of the children and supported their husbands' career (Smith, 1981). Even though Impressionist works are mostly known for their depiction of outdoor and public settings, more interest has been coming up for the more intimate, domestic settings (McLean, 2008). In 2008, Janet McLean curated the exhibition called *Impressionist Interiors* in the National Gallery of Ireland, which highlighted this neglected aspect – the interior. But what is intimacy as conceived by Impressionists? Intimacy goes beyond the depiction of scenes from private life. According to Moran (2021), with intimate works there is an emphasis on the spectator's observation of a private scene and its inclusion in this moment. Intimacy is therefore about sharing.

This chapter will analyze Morisot's and Cassatt's paintings depicting intimate scenes. Most of the works done by these artists are set in a domestic setting (Finden, 2023). Firstly, this is because as respectable women Morisot and Cassatt could not visit the same places as their male counterparts, let alone unaccompanied (Janson & Davies, 2006). Where men had the whole world to roam, the place for women was considered to be at home. Cassatt soon discovered that this was the sphere where she had the most control and this gave her an understanding of that domestic sphere that was her domain (Annus, 2008). Female artists worked from home on small canvases which were easy to work with. Morisot worked in the living room and stored her art supplies in a closet that was fitted in one of the living room walls (Moran, 2021). Secondly, these intimate portrayals often resulted in artworks intended for personal enjoyment and not destined for public display but to be shared within close circles reflecting the personal relationship with the art works (Janson & Davies, 2006)(Moran, 2021). Scholars and art historians convincingly agree that it is through these works that we can peek into the intimate lives of these female artists (Finden, 2023). Each of Morisot and Cassatt their works features a very personal interpretation capturing everyday subjects of female life.

“Though themes of uncertainty regarding socially acceptable plans such as marrying, bear children and her [Morisot] desire to succeed in a male dominated industry, in a male dominated world, lie unassuming varnish of her paintings.” (Finden, 2023, p.16).

In *Portrait of Madame Pontillon* (1871) we see Morisot's sister Edma as a newlywed, pregnant woman looking right at the viewer. This work is remarkable because of its unusual large size and its contrasts. There are multiple dualities and contraries in the work visible: for example the black dress against the light background and the emptiness of the left corner against the fabrics used in the right corners (Moran, 2021). Rey (2018) claims that a further duality appears the face itself, which he sees ‘as if the right-hand side was a true likeness of the model while the left consisted of a self-portrait’ (Rey, p.94, 2018). Moran (2021) agrees with this statement and mentions that this comment echoes other critics who see other portraits of Morisot as indirect self-portraits, creating an unexpected kind of intimacy. When discussing intimacy, Higonnet (1992) claims that the self-portrait is the most intimate kind of genre, providing a personal look into an artists' life. Whether this work actually resembles a self-portrait or not, I would argue that it is these types of works that provide us an insight into not only Morisot her own life, but also what life for most women of that time looked like.



Figure 1. Berthe Morisot. (1871). *Portrait of Madame Pontillon*. [Oil on canvas]. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Education for women was limited, especially in higher levels and professional fields. However, there were some improvements in female education during this period, with the emergence of girls' schools and institutions offering education in subjects beyond traditional domestic skills. In 1878 the International Congress of Women's Rights was organized in Paris, discussing the need for better education for women (Janson & Davies, 2006). This new law would not only allow women to become professionals, but also to better manage their domestic roles. In the 1870s, sociologists pointed out the importance of taking good care of children and the role the mother played in that. The path to a better society began, according to them:

“The path to a better society began in the home and was in the hands of the mother who nurtured her own children, both physically and emotionally, including attending to hygiene.” (Janson & Davies, p.879).

Unlike many male artists, Morisot and Cassatt never objectified, idealized or sexualized the women they painted (Meier, 2020)(Annus, 2008). Instead, their paintings reflect the growing attention to the role the mother played in the upbringing of children (Janson & Davies, 2006). In her most iconic painting *Le Berceau* (1872), Morisot leads us through her sister’s progression from young woman to mother. Meier (2020) and Kessler (1991) convincingly argue that the female self is the prevailing theme in this work. In *Le Berceau* (1872) we see Morisot’s sister Edma who’s expression is full of love, but also of fatigue. The diagonal between the mother, her gaze and the child, which is accentuated by the curtain, links the mother to the child, portraying not only the close bond between mother and child but also the reality of motherhood (Moran, 2021).

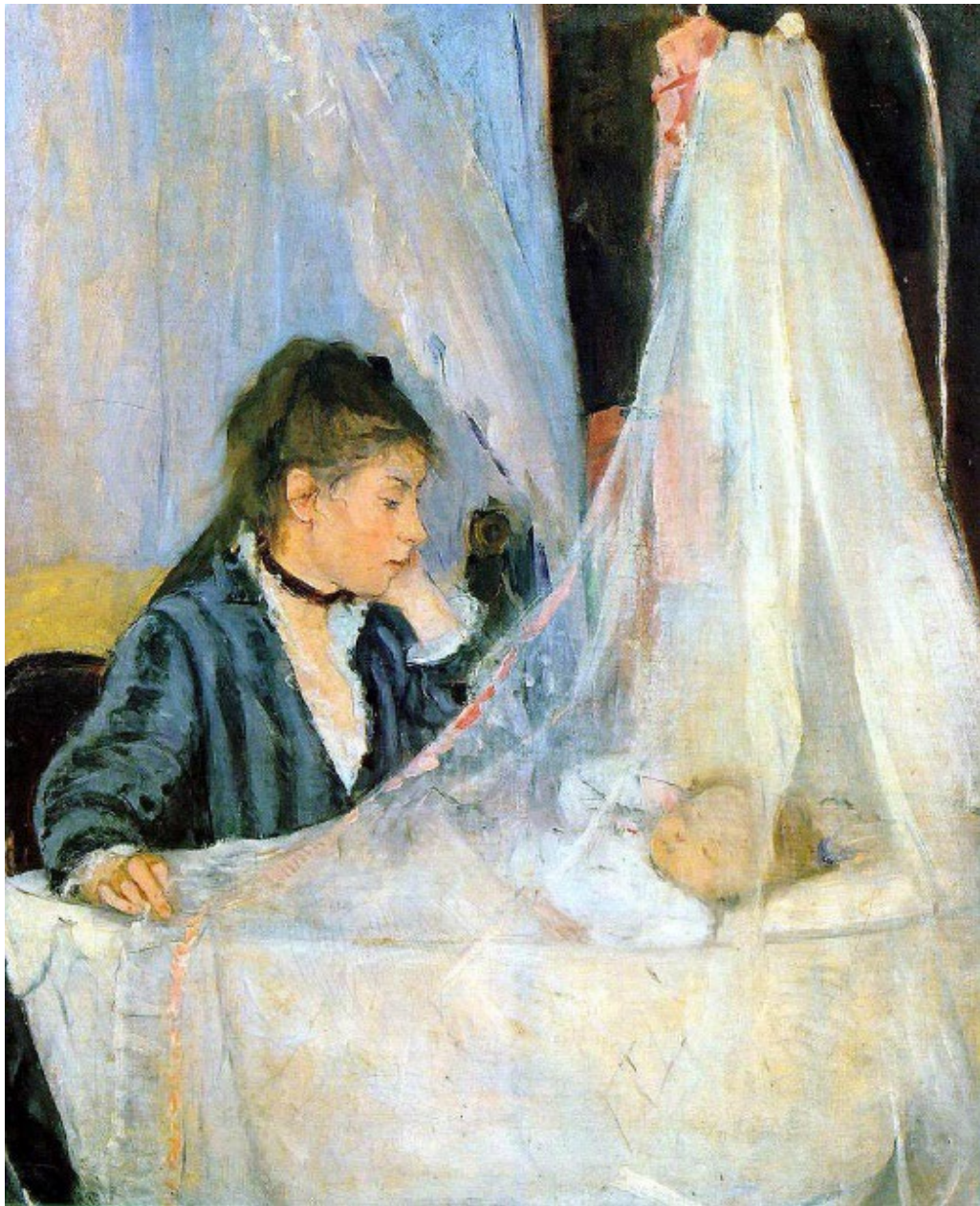


Figure 2. Berthe Morisot. (1872). *Le Berceau*. [Oil on canvas]. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Similar aspects can be seen in *Breakfast in Bed* (1879) by Mary Cassatt. The same linear connection between mother and child and the tiredness visible in the eyes of the mother can be recognized. Both *Le Berceau* (1872), *Portrait of Madame Pontillon* (1871) and *Breakfast in Bed* (1879) are centered around the theme of the gaze. In many works the gaze is used as an instrument to portray the link between two individuals (Janson & Davies, 2006). The argument that the gaze is used in these works to portray the bond between mother and child seems credible. In the next chapter I will delve deeper into a comparative analysis of the female and male gaze within such paintings.





Figure 3. Mary Cassatt. (1897). *Breakfast in Bed*. [Oil on canvas]. The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino.

## **II.II. Case studies**

Now we have seen numerous paintings of female artists, this chapter will also examine paintings done by male artists. In this chapter this thesis will perform two case studies comparing works set in a domestic setting, both done by a male and female Impressionist artist. Through this comparison this thesis will find out whether there is a difference between how female artists depict women in a domestic setting opposed to male artists.

### **II.II.I. Women at home**

The first comparison will be between Morisot and Manet. When comparing these two artists, it is important to keep in mind the close knit relationship the two had on a professional as well as on a personal level. Morisot stood model many times for Manet and he painted eleven portraits in total of her, more than of any other woman that modeled for him (Kessler, 1999). Because of social norms, it would never have been appropriate if it were the other way around: if a married man like Manet stood model for a *bourgeoise* Morisot (Finden, 2023). Kessler's (1999) essay dives into the relationship between Manet and Morisot, elucidating Manet's fascination for her. Kessler comes from an academic background, making it a relevant and unbiased source useful for this research. Even though the paper is a reliable source, it is important to keep in mind that Kessler is a female researcher which might influence the way she perceives paintings.

In short, she claims that Manet held a certain fascination for Morisot which becomes visible through the many times he paints her and how in each painting she takes on a different semblance through fashion, veils and masks, making Morisot more a representation of herself than her true self. After first seeing *The Balcony* (1868), the image of herself did not correspond with what Morisot knew of herself (Kessler, 1999).





Figure 4. Édouard Manet. (1868). *The Balcony*. [Oil on canvas]. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

The figures who stood model for *The Balcony* (1868) were all friends or family from Manet. According to Kessler (1999), Morisot was in doubt whether she would model in the first place as modelling was closely related to sexual discourse during that time. Interestingly, Morisot, the figure sitting on the left and staring at the distance, is the figure that is best developed with the strongest (facial) features. This coincides with Manet's obsession and fascination with Morisot. The two women in the painting are linked through the color of their clothing, the way they both hold their arms in the

same position and the diagonal that connects their arms and the attributes they are holding. Morisot is looking down at the street, gazing at people passing by and at the same time being on display for those people to gaze at. The look on her face and her posture give an autonomous and independent appearance.

When we compare this work to *The Artists' Sister at the Window* (1869) by Morisot herself, the subject, Morisot's sister Edma, is fully engaged with herself and unaware of anything going on outside. This painting was made during the time Edma got married to Adolphe Pontillon and gave up painting (Moran, 2021). According to Finden (2023), Morisot became known for creating this visual bridge between the inside and outside world.



Figure 5. Berthe Morisot. (1869). *The Artist's Sister at a Window*. [Oil on canvas]. National Gallery of Art, Washington.

In both works we feel the presence of the outdoor world while still being confined to the domestic setting. Another similarity, is that in both works the artist knows the women that are depicted very well. Morisot painted her sister, while Manet painted two close female friends of his. The paintings are made within the same year, so the context of both paintings are the same.

According to Moran (2021), many scholars and critics see *The Artists' Sister at the Window* (1869) as a response to Manet's *The Balcony* (1868). The same attributes such as the fan, the ribbon and the white dress, an emblem of the domestic fashion, are to be seen in both works. But where the women at

Manet's *The Balcony* all gaze at the outside world, Edma, even though she sits close to the open window, is focused inward with her gaze downcast and far from the outside world. The contrast between the wallpaper and the window highlights the cage-like environment a newly-wed woman finds herself trapped within. This tension between the inner absorption of the figure and the outside world sets Morisot's work apart from Manet's balcony scene. Scholars argue that Morisot's scene stages "a fascinating quarrel between the brightly-hued world of the street, on the one hand, and the threshold woman's access to it but simultaneous disregard to it, on the other hand." (Moran, p. 142, 2021).

One might wonder whether these arguments are very reliable as the paintings are quite different, but I would argue that they are. Despite the variations in composition and tone, both works convey a sense of autonomy in their depiction of the female subjects. However, Morisot's balcony scene conveys a more palpable sense of confinement, achieved through the contradiction between the figures inward focus and the vibrant world beyond the window. I would argue that this tension between internal contemplation and external allure highlights the complexities of women's experiences in domestic spheres.





Figure 6. Édouard Manet. (1871). *Le Repos*. [Oil on canvas]. Rhode Island School of Design Museum.

By painting Morisot so many times, Manet was able to construct a public image of her. Furthermore, by using her as a model many times, Manet kept Morisot away from her own work (Kessler, 1999). In *Le Repos* (1871), we see Morisot with attributes like a lace handkerchief and a fan, all objects associated with femininity and eroticizing undertones placing Morisot within a certain gendered role (Moran, 2021). Manet presents Morisot sitting inactive on the sofa not engaged in any work. In this way, Kessler argues, he presents her as inactive producer of art and unidentifiable as an artist. By subtly eroticizing Morisot, Manet brings the attention to Morisot her body rather than the body of works she produces. The reason behind this is, According to Kessler (1999), the sense of artistic competition felt by Manet. It is well known that Manet frequently received negative criticism for his

works and by presenting Morisot more as a objectified woman rather than a successful artist, he tried to reclaim his position.

If we compare *Le Repos* (1871) to one of Morisot's intimate self-portraits, we see that Morisot construes a very different picture of herself. In *Self Portrait* (1885) we see Morisot in the act of painting. She presents herself confidently and actively engaged in her work. Kessler (1999) argues in her essay that Morisot's way of presenting herself is to correct Manet's version of herself. Many scholars argue that male Impressionist artist often sexualize women so Kessler's argument and interpretation of Morisot's self-portraits are convincing. Where Manet presents Morisot in other portraits covered up by a veil or fan or more sexualized, Morisot removes all the excess and presents her own version of herself.

However, there is a large difference in the nature of the two works - one being a portrait and the other one a self-portrait. Portraying a model is for obvious reasons much easier than portraying oneself. Even though the previously called arguments are well-founded, I would posit they are questionable in the sense that the nature and subject of the painting are very different. However, the argument that Manet idealized Morisot for particular reasons seems very convincing.





Figure 7. Berthe Morisot. (1885). *Self Portrait*. [Oil on canvas]. Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris, France

### III.II.II. Mother and child



Figure 8. Mary Cassatt (1880). *Mother and Child (The Goodnight Hug)*. [Pastel on paper]. Private collection.

In the second case study this paper will compare two works done by Mary Cassatt and Auguste Renoir. Having discussed the growing attention to motherhood, this case study will analyze two paintings in which the relationship between mother and child is the central theme. In *Mother and Child (The Goodnight Hug)* (1880) we see a mother kissing her child on the cheek. Their faces are not visible so it is through the way they hold on to each other that Cassatt portrays the deep maternal connection. In this work Cassatt looks for the maternal bond between mother and child (Gurney, 2023). The result is a very intimate work capturing the love between mother and child that only mothers understand. Gopnik's (1999) article published in *The New Yorker* claims that *Mother and Child (The Goodnight Hug)* (1880) is as revolutionary as any Courbet. He argues that this painting is the first painting to portray this intense baby love. The boy not just embraces his mother, he almost consumes her with such passionate hug that their features merge together. Where I previously pointed out how the gaze of



a female researcher might influence the perception of an artwork, it is important to also include the perspectives of male researchers, such as Gopnik.

If we compare Cassatt's work to *Washerwoman and Child* (1886) by Renoir which is in composition comparable to Cassatt's work, I would argue that Renoir fails to grasp this same intimacy. In this work Renoir depicts his wife with the oldest of their three sons. The woman in the painting is holding her child while the child is embracing her. In this work their faces are in fact visible, but rather artificial without any strong emotions. The setting of this work compared to Cassatt's *Mother and Child (The Goodnight Hug)* (1880) is different: in the background we see two figures hanging their washed clothes. I would argue that Cassatt's work is therefore more intimate in the sense that you feel almost as you are intruding that most intimate scene – a mother and child inside the house just by themselves before the child goes to bed. However, Cassatt's depicting is set in a different setting than Renoir's mother and child who are accompanied by other figures in the back in what seems to be a garden. The comparison therefore becomes somewhat compromised, as Cassatt's intimate portrayal captures a private moment between mother and child, whereas Renoir's depiction presents a scene with additional figures in the background, weakening the focus on the maternal relationship and potentially affecting the intimacy of the artwork.



Figure 9. Pierre-Auguste Renoir. (1886). *Washermother and Child*. [Oil on canvas]. Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia

## **Chapter III. Works depicting women in a public setting**

### **III.I.I. Women in public in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.**

As discussed before, Impressionists were known for painting outdoors and the public setting was therefore the stage for many artists. Impressionists were inspired to capture this new modern world reflecting the impermanence of a constantly changing world (Janson & Davies, 2006). Interestingly, Janson & Davies (2006) claim that the most notable distinction between Realism and Impressionism, is that artists moved the focus from the figure to the land- and cityscape of Paris and rather than working in the studio, they worked outdoors where they captured the conditions and people. Besides the fact that the public setting and leisure activities became more important in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris, artists were also present in that particular moment to capture the essence of that scene. That makes the public setting for this research an important setting to analyze, as the works portray the true nature of the figures in that scene.

The domain of the public space was predominantly a male setting, and women were permitted to the public domain only to fulfill female duties such as running errands or take their children to the park (Finden, 2023). Most importantly, women had to be accompanied by a male chaperone during all outdoor excursions. Even though Morisot and Cassatt were the core members of the Impressionist movement, because of their gender they could not visit the public spaces such as cafés and salons where their fellow male artists exchanged thoughts and ideas (Moran, 2021). As respectable women, the two artists could not go unattended to the same places as their male contemporaries (Janson, 2006). They were both an insider and outsider, at the core of the Impressionist movement but at the same time belonging to a marginalized group. Convincingly, that is the reason according to many scholars that there are more paintings done by male artists depicting a public setting than female artists during that time.

When searching for paintings depicting a woman in a public setting done by either Cassatt or Morisot, the different types of public settings you find in their works are limited. The paintings depicting women in a public scene are either set in a park or in a theatre. Strolling through parks was a popular

leisure activity in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris and is used as a background scene in many paintings, as Impressionists loved to show consumption and leisure culture of urban people (Park, 2018).



Figure 10. Berthe Morisot. (1879). *Jour d'Ete*. [Oil on canvas]. National Gallery, London

Morisot's *Jour d'Ete* (1879) depicts two women sitting in a boat at the Bois de Boulogne in Paris. This painting exemplifies the typical imagery associated with Impressionism, portraying middle-class leisure against a backdrop of domesticated nature. Morisot infuses her work with a boldness and vitality through her unique brushstrokes that energize the work and captures the interplay of the light on the water.

Leisure activities in the park included promenading through the park, boat rides, picnicks and riding the carriage (Janson & Davies, 2006). In work *A woman and Girl Driving* (1881) a woman is depicted driving a carriage through the Bois de Boulogne. The woman that is holding the reins is Cassatt's sister Lydia, alongside Edgar Degas' niece Odile Fèvre and in the back a servant to the family is seated (Sokol, 2007). Emphasizing Lydia's position of command, this work emphasizes the theme of female autonomy in a male dominated world (Broude, 2000)(Yeh, 1976).





Figure 11. Mary Cassatt. (1881). *A Woman and Girl Driving*. [Oil on canvas]. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia

Contradictory, where the intimate scenes in a domestic setting were the forte of most female artists, Mary Cassatt is actually most famous for her loge paintings at the theatre. Between the 1870s and 1880s most of Cassatt's paintings were around the theme of the loge painting, and from the 1880s she changed to domestic paintings (Janson & Davis, 2006). Many scholars analyzed her loge paintings, providing plenty of reliable sources.

The theatre was one of the most prominent sites of the new bourgeois entertainment (Annus, 2008). The theatre was round or oval shaped, with multi-level seating for the audience and centered around the stage. It was a setting to watch but also to be watched. As Annus (2008) aptly describes this phenomenon:

“In the world of theatre, especially in the West, by the second half of the 19th century the dynamics of seeing, and of being seen there, had changed dramatically: the theatre had evolved into a dominant form of leisured activity for the new bourgeois society – with a power

to seemingly assist in its constitution – and had transformed into an institution that reflected in its operation the modern system of visibility.” (Annus, p. 151, 2008).

The theatre evolved into a space where spectators embraced their dual role as both observers and observed ones, with their social and financial status on continual display through their clothing, taste and manners. The spectator’s role changed from being a mere spectator to being a part of the artwork itself (Clark, 2015). *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* (1879) is one of Cassatt’s most famous paintings depicting a woman in such setting. In this work we see Cassatt’s sister Lydia captured with excitement, joy and elegance that symbolizes the modern city life. She looks wealthy and self-confident, located in the center of the composition completely at ease. In this painting Cassatt plays with the medium of a mirror, through which we see the back of Lydia. The use of devices such as binoculars and mirrors emphasizes the theme of the gaze (Yeh, 1976)(Annus, 2008).



Figure 12. Mary Cassatt (1879). *The Woman with a Pearl Necklace*. [Oil on Canvas]. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

### III.I.II. The gaze

The theme of the gaze and spectatorship has frequently arisen throughout this thesis. The topic of gazing has become a key component in the gendered landscape according to Annus (2008). She claims that the gaze is more than just a stare or glance:

“It is a means of constituting the identity of the gazer by distinguishing her or him from that which is gazed at. At the same time, the gaze makes us aware that we may be looked at, so that this awareness becomes a part of identity in itself.” (Annus, p. 150, 2008).



The duality of the gaze, being on one hand the permanent possibility of being on display and on the other hand the power of looking at others themselves, is a theme that comes back in multiple works of Cassatt in the public sphere, such as *The Loge* (1882) and *Woman with a Pearl Necklace in a Loge* (1879). In both these paintings Cassatt plays with the aspect of the gaze and how women responded to the fact that they were constantly being on display. In *The Loge* (1882) one woman hides from the gazes behind a fan while the other displays her bare shoulders, capturing traditional womanhood as subject of the male gaze (Annus, 2008).



Figure 13. Mary Cassatt (1882). *The Loge*. [Oil on Canvas]. The National Gallery of Art, London.



In Manet's *Un bar aux Folies Bergère* we see a fashionable crowd being entertained by music and circus acts reflected in the mirror behind the barmaid. Much is going on in this painting and one can spend much time analyzing this captivating artwork. The barmaid looks at the viewer with an uncomfortable expression as she appears to be interacting with a male customer. The perspective in this work is a bit misaligned and this play of reflections emphasizes the disorienting atmosphere of the bar (Courtauld Gallery, 2024). In this work Manet plays with the perspective and the mirror to accentuate the theme of the gaze and spectatorship. Furthermore, I believe that this work is a good example of portraying the disparity between men and women. The Folies Bergère was a well-known cabaret and music hall known for its extravagant performances (Courtauld Gallery, 2024). Because of societal norms respectable, bourgeois women such as Morisot and Cassatt could not visit a bar like Folies Bergère and would therefore never produce a painting depicting such scene (Janson & Davies, 2006). Scholars argue that the man in the painting is actually making the woman an inappropriate proposal given that barmaids were often involved in prostitution on the side (Iskin, 1995). Given the context and her uncomfortable expression I believe this to be a reliable argument. Neither Cassatt nor Morisot could ever produce a painting hinting at such a scandalous proposition.



Figure 14. Édouard Manet. (1882). *Un bar aux Folies Bergère*. [Oil on canvas]. Courtauld Gallery, London.

### III.II. Case studies

#### III.II.I. The theatre paintings

For the first case study Mary Cassatt and Pierre-Auguste Renoir are analyzed. The images used in the first case study are both depicting women, sometimes accompanied by men in the theatre.



Figure 15. Pierre-Auguste Renoir. (1874). *La Loge*. [Oil on canvas]. Courtauld Gallery, London.

Renoir's *La Loge* (1874) depicts a couple at a theatre or opera. This work is considered one of the defining works of the Impressionist period, combining fluid brushwork with a subject taken from contemporary life (The Courtauld Gallery, 2024). Renoir was a painter who relied on current morals and depicted its subjects in a real-life-manner (Monneret, 2005).

We see a man and a woman in a box at the opera, referring back to the title of the painting. Renoir created a painting about looking, without providing a clear narrative for what we see (The Courtauld Gallery, 2024). There's a large contrast between the way the woman is looking at the viewer of the painting and the man gazing through his binoculars at another spectacle – most probably, other spectators. His binoculars are pointed upward at other boxes and not downward at the stage. The painting asks the viewer to be intrigued by the couple and to ask ourselves who they are and what the relationship between them is. Though Renoir leaves the social status of the couple in question, the heavy use of make-up and dashing clothes with a deep décolletage suggest that the woman is a *demi-mondaine* according to Monneret (2005). This term refers to women on the fringes of the respectable society, more specifically to courtesans supported by their wealthy lovers (Praed, 1884).

There is a stark contrast between the black and white vertically striped dress of the woman and the simple, yet elegant clothes of the man. Aileen Ribeiro, a professor specialized in Impressionist fashion, makes some credible claims about the woman in question:

“Nothing could be more à la mode than the dress worn by Edmond's companion, Renoir's model Nini Lopez, for striped outfits were all the rage in the early and mid-1870s, as fashion journalism indicated.” (Ribeiro, p. 47, 2008).

However, the combination of the full sleeves, deep décolletage and excessive jewelry make the dress rather unfit for the opera. Ribeiro claims that during this time it was mostly the *demi-mondaine* women who promoted extravagant styles of dressing. The gentleman on the other hand wears a typical outfit for men during that time, pointing that he did belong to the *bourgeois* elite of Paris.

The questionable status and relationship of the couple baffled contemporary reviews and critics when the work was put on display at the first Impressionist group exhibition in 1874 (Serres & Louis Vuitton Foundation (Red.), 2019).

“The then unconventional subject-matter and the way Renoir deliberately blurred social boundaries, particularly through the inherently unstable and fluid lens of fashion, frustrated attempts at a straightforward reading of the scene.” (Serres & Louis Vuitton Foundation (Red.), p. 168, 2019).

The nature of the relationship between the woman and man is unclear and ambiguous at best. This ambiguity is heightened by the way the man is staring at other spectators – most probably other women – and does not pay attention to the woman sitting right next to him. The woman appears to have been posed to passively receive gazes of the audience and the viewer. I would argue that it is a rather objectifying approach from Renoir, one that female artists of that time would likely not have taken.





Figure 16. Mary Cassatt (1878). *In the Loge*. [Oil on canvas]. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Cassatt presents a different composition. In Cassatt's painting we see a woman, for how far we know unaccompanied by a man, dressed in black sitting at a box watching the performance through her opera glasses, engaged in the production. In the background we see other spectators all gazing at the stage. An exciting aspect of this work is the man sitting at a different box in the left corner. The man is looking with his binoculars directly at the subject of the painting.

Annus (2008) regards *In the Loge* (1878) as a comment on the contemporary social positioning and culture. The fact that we do not see the stage where the performance took place but only a part of the audience, implies that the real performance is taking place within the audience and not on stage. Given the context that argument seems very plausible. The female subject is gazing at the performance and simultaneously being gazed at by the man in black. This man seems to be belonging to the same economical rank as the woman – by the way of their dressing and position in the box – but because of his gender obviously of a higher social rank (Ribeiro, 2008). According to Annus (2008), this is suggested by the fact that he does not seem to be bothered to gaze at the subject while being in the companionship of another woman – just like in Renoir's *La Loge* (1874) painting. His almost intrusive gaze is directed not only at the subject but also at us, the viewers, in such way that we feel like we are in the realm of his gaze and therefore under his power. As a female watching this work, you sense the dominance and authority of the man. I would argue that that could be Cassatt's intention: to evoke in the viewer the same sense of vulnerability and subservience that women of that era – and still in present times – often experienced.

Susan Fillin Yeh's (1976) article on Cassatt's images of women makes an interesting addition to these arguments. She claims that the subject's dressing, a dark business-like afternoon or street dress, suggests that she is not attending an evening performance but an afternoon *matinée*. This is an important distinction, because "the afternoon *matinée* owed its existence to the increasing financial autonomy of women with interests like Cassatt's opera-goer" (Yeh, p.360, 1976). This approach depicts a new type, a more autonomous woman who participates in these social and cultural events. This gives more depth to Cassatt's subject and the painting.

Both Renoir's and Cassatt's paintings depict scenes at the theatre featuring women being observed by men and subjected to their gaze. I would argue that Cassatt's portrayal suggests a commentary on gender roles and societal power statuses, resonating with contemporary themes of growing female autonomy. Concluding, I would posit that Cassatt's *In the Loge* (1878) depicts women as spectators rather than spectacles. While both works explore the dynamics of the gaze, observation and power, their approaches offer different insights into the societal norms and cultural shifts of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris.

### III.II.II. The park



Figure 17. Berthe Morisot. (1873). *Reading*. [Oil on fabric]. Cleveland Museum of Art.

For the second case study I will look into paintings depicting women in a park. In the first work done by Morisot a woman is depicted sitting in a park reading a book. Once again it was Morisot's sister Edma that modelled for this painting. The typical feminine Impressionist attributes - the fan, lace and veil - are seen in this work as well. The woman looks completely caught up in the book unaware of the carriage in the back and the rest of her surroundings. Manet's *Young Woman in the Garden* (1880) resembles Morisot's depiction, but in this work the colors are more vibrant and the capturing of the natural lighting highlight the figure. While in Manet's work the figure blends in with the surrounding colors of the garden, Morisot's depiction of the woman in the white dress stands out against the green surroundings.





Figure 18. Édouard Manet. (1880). *Young Woman in a Garden*. [Oil on canvas]. Private collection.

In both works the women wear traditional clothing with feminine touches, like the fringes, veil and hat. The biggest difference is that Morisot's model is wearing a loosely fitted white dress, whereas Manet's figure is wearing a dark blue, corseted dress. According to the Met Museum, simple white dresses brought an air of informality and authenticity to depictions of contemporary life. Black dresses on the other hand, conveyed sophisticated elegance and sensuality (*Galleries Three And Four—The White Dress And The Black Dress*, 2018). Park (2018) agrees with this argument and adds to this that



black dresses worn by women enhanced their sensual appearances. There is no record of why Morisot chose to dress her figure in white and Manet chose for black. But if we are to compare these two images, I would argue that that is one of the biggest differences between how Manet and Morisot depict the reading woman.

However, this does not mean that for park paintings Morisot never dressed her figures in black dresses. In *In a Park* (1874) we see a woman dressed in black with her two children in a park. The black dress is a slim fit and gives the woman a sophisticated appearance and one might argue even a sensual elegance. To claim that it was only male artists that depicted woman dressed in black in a sensual manner would therefore not be a valid claim.



Figure 19. Berthe Morisot. (1874). *In a Park*. [Pastel]. Petit Palais, Paris.

## **Conclusion**

It can be said that the artists who were part of the Impressionist movement revolutionized the art scene in Paris. Their works give us an insight in what life looked like in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris. Impressionist artists depicted scenes of everyday life capturing the transient effects of light and atmosphere. The city was a bustling hub of cultural, social and artistic activity.

The aim of this thesis was to investigate whether there are any differences in the way female and male Impressionist artists depict women in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris, and if yes, whether those differences give us a different insight in the daily lives of women. First of all, it is important to understand that the role of women in late 19<sup>th</sup> century was heavily influenced by traditional gender norms and societal expectations. Despite these constraints, I would argue that Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt managed to provide profound insights into aspects of women's lives during this period. By performing the case studies, this thesis found that these female artists shed light on the everyday experiences of women, capturing moments of domesticity, motherhood and even growing autonomy through their artworks. Through conducting these case studies of both male and female artists, this thesis has contributed to this area of study as no other source has undertaken such comparative analysis.

Morisot and Cassatt utilized the domestic sphere as a canvas for their creativity. Their works were characterized by their empathy and intimacy. By comparing their works to Manet and Renoir distinct differences were revealed in how women and men depict domestic scenes. While male artists often portrayed women in a more idealized manner, Morisot and Cassatt presented a more nuanced and authentic presentation of female experiences and relatable moments of affection and vulnerability. I believe one could say that Morisot and Cassatt presented women and motherhood with a sensitivity only a female artist could. They gave the world a glimpse into the true nature of the bond between mother and child.

Being unable to navigate the public sphere like their male contemporaries also influenced the subjects Morisot and Cassatt depicted. This restriction resulted in fewer paintings portraying public scenes than male artists. Most of Morisot and Cassatt's paintings portraying a public scene are either set in a park

or a theatre. Cassatt, renowned for her loge paintings, captured the vivid dynamics of the theatre while highlighting the complexities of the gaze, spectatorship and the power structures inherent in these public spaces. The theme of the gaze underscores the role of observation and visibility which shaped the social dynamics of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris. In comparing the male and female gaze in works set at the theatre, I would argue that there are notable differences. Both male and female artists explored themes of observation and spectatorship, but Cassatt's work in particular challenged traditional notions of femininity and power dynamics. Her work offers commentary on gender roles and societal norms present at that time.

In conclusion, I would argue that Impressionist paintings depicting women reveal distinct perspectives inherent in the female and male gaze. Morisot and Cassatt portray women in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris with a depth and authenticity that differs from their male Impressionist contemporaries. Where male artists often depicted women in a more idealized way, Morisot and Cassatt presented a more nuanced and relatable view of female experiences, capturing moments of domesticity and motherhood embedded in empathy, intimacy and growing autonomy. Their paintings provide us an insight into the everyday lives of (gentle)women of that era. I would argue that Morisot and Cassatt's contributions to the Impressionist movement revolutionized the portrayal of women in a way their male contemporaries never could.

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