



1884

Oil on canvas

39 1/2 x 32 inches (100.3 x 81.3 cm)

MARY STEVENSON CASSATT
American

Purchased with the W. P. Wilstach Fund
and with funds contributed by Mrs.
William Coxe Wright, 1959, W1959-1-1

LET'S LOOK

Who are the people in this painting? What words would you use to describe them? Do they look like they are related? How?

Squint your eyes as you look at the picture. What do you notice?

Compare the brushstrokes in the faces and hands to the brushstrokes in the chair and the background. Find some that are different and some that are similar

Where are the dark colors in this painting? Where are the lighter ones?

PORTRAIT OF ALEXANDER J. CASSATT AND HIS SON, ROBERT KELSO CASSATT

Mary Cassatt painted this portrait of her brother Alexander and his son Robert in 1884, when they came to visit her in Paris. Alexander Cassatt was a prominent American businessman who became president of the Pennsylvania Railroad. In fact, during their lifetimes, he was probably more famous than his artist sister! His son Robert was one of Mary Cassatt's favorite nephews. "Aleck" was happy to spend long hours posing, but eleven-year-old "Rob" was impatient—his grandmother described him as "wriggling about like a flea."

Look how close together the father and son are sitting. Their heads are right next to each other; Rob's face overlaps his father's. This technique highlights how much they resemble each other. Their reddish hair and wide, oval-shaped faces and their eyes, noses, and mouths are almost identical. Have you noticed that father and son face the same direction and that Rob has his left arm around his father's shoulder? Their dark clothes merge together to form one large shape. Father and son were so comfortable with each other that Cassatt painted them almost as if they were one person with two heads!

Another technique that Cassatt used was cropping, a term familiar to us today from photography. She placed the figures so close to us that Rob's feet and Aleck's feet and legs are cropped—we can't see them because they are beyond the edges of the painting.

Cassatt used contrasts to emphasize that the father and son are the main focus of the painting: their clothes are painted in dark colors—black and brown—while everything around them is painted in lighter colors—tan, gray, and yellow, with accents of red and white. Cassatt was very organized about the colors she used in her paintings. In a letter to an artist friend she wrote, "One thing I have learned,

the absolute necessity for system in painting. Prepare your palette.” She arranged her paints on her palette, or wooden tray, so that she could find them easily when she was working.

Now let’s compare brushstrokes. Precise brushstrokes define the curving, solid forms of the heads, faces, and hands, making them look in-focus and quite real. But look how different the brushstrokes on the chair are—large and scribbly. Another contrast! Cassatt painted them this way to create an impression of the nicely furnished living room Aleck and Rob sit in.

Although the father-and-son subject of this painting is unusual for Mary Cassatt—she more often painted pictures of mothers and children—in this double portrait she deftly combines her fondness for her brother and nephew with her passion for depicting the human figure naturally and accurately.

ABOUT THIS ARTIST

Mary Cassatt was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1844. Her family moved to a country home near Philadelphia when she was five years old. A few years later, they moved to Europe, where Mary and her siblings learned French and German and became accustomed to European culture.

The Cassatts returned to the Philadelphia area in 1855. A few years later, Mary announced that she wanted to be an artist. Her father’s first reaction was that he would rather see her dead! Girls from respectable, well-to-do families were expected to marry and settle down, to have hobbies but not professions! But Mary persevered and was allowed to attend the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, not far from home. After several years there, she went to Paris to study painting on her own.

Mary’s independent life in Europe lasted only four years. When her father retired, her parents joined her in Paris, bringing along her sister Lydia. Mary was delighted to be reunited with her family and she painted them often. During the next eighteen years, however, much of her time and energy was also spent caring for them. And while her father appreciated her success as a painter, he always considered her headstrong and difficult.

When Edgar Degas, a member of the French Impressionist artists group, recognized the quality of Mary Cassatt’s paintings, he invited her to participate in the Impressionists’ exhibitions. This was highly unusual since Cassatt was a woman and an American!

Mary Cassatt went on to persuade some of her wealthy American friends to buy Impressionist paintings by Degas and others. Today, Impressionism is the most popular type of art in the United

States and, thanks to Mary Cassatt, there is more Impressionist art here than in France. After her parents died, Mary spent most of her time living in a country home near Paris where she painted and entertained friends and family. She died there in 1926.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Women were not allowed to vote during most of Mary Cassatt's lifetime. Her best friend, Louise Havermeier, was active in the American "woman's suffrage" (voting rights) movement. To raise money for the cause, Louise organized an exhibition of paintings by Cassatt, Degas, and famous painters from earlier eras. Although Mary Cassatt was not as public about her feelings, she strongly supported women's rights to vote and to pursue educations and careers outside the home. In 1893 Cassatt painted a large mural titled *Modern Women* for an international art fair in Chicago.

LET'S LOOK AGAIN

What parts of Rob and Aleck's bodies were most important to Mary Cassatt in this painting?
How can you tell?

Working together in small groups, discuss whether or not the fabric in the curtains could be the same as on the chair. And, if so, why are they painted differently? Write down three reasons for your answers to each question and compare your results with the other groups

Do any of the background colors match the colors in the faces? What overall effect does this create?

WRITING ACTIVITIES

Write definitions for the italicized words in the text. Using five of these words, write a description of two people you know who have a close relationship.

Mary Cassatt was good at persuading her friends to buy Impressionist paintings. Pretend that you want a wealthy businessperson in your community to buy Cassatt's portrait of Aleck and Rob. Write a letter to the person explaining why this would be a good painting to buy.

Write a poem about one of the important colors in this painting. Use the *cinquain* (pronounced "sing-KANE") form, a five-line poem with two syllables in the first line, four in the second, six in the third, eight in the fourth, and two in the fifth. Arrange your words on the page as carefully as Mary Cassatt arranged her colors on her palette!

HANDS-ON ACTIVITY

As Mary Cassatt once told her nephew Rob, it is good to start with the eyes when you are making a portrait of someone. Look at the eye color of the person sitting next to you. The colored part is called the iris. The black part inside the iris is the pupil; it controls how much light comes into the eye. Notice that the shape between the upper and lower eyelids is like an almond or a football. The eyelids cover and protect most of the eyeball, which is round. Look for the tear ducts located at the corner of each eye, near the nose. Notice how there are lashes on both the top and bottom eyelids. Now you are ready to draw a pair of eyes. Start with the outside shapes, then add the irises, pupils, lids, and brows.

This painting is included in The Figure in the Impressionist Era, a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and made possible by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.