

Basic Detail Report



Title: A Caress

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Date: 1891

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3e06f

Medium: Pastel on paper

Description: In April 1891, with the opening of the "Exposition de tableaux, pastels et gravures par Mlle Mary Cassatt" at Galeries Durand-Ruel, Paris, Cassatt finally achieved individual recognition for her talents, displaying new pastels, paintings, and a set of color prints now lauded as a high point of nineteenth-century printmaking that confirmed her reputation as the "peintre des enfants et des mères", a title by which she is still known.(1) "A Caress" was among the works in this 1891 exhibition. Although she had created a handful of mother-and-child images during the 1880s, Cassatt only began treating the theme consistently about 1888, when she also started to devote more energy to printmaking. Her wholehearted adoption of the theme may have been prompted by a visit from her brother J. Gardner Cassatt; his wife, Jennie; and their one-year-old child, Gardner, in the winter of 1888.(2) Cassatt, living in Paris with her elderly, ailing parents, produced a drypoint sketch of her sister-in-law and nephew. This print, dated on one proof January 1888, may be the first in a line of extraordinary prints, pastels, and paintings created through April 1891.(3) Cassatt's achievement is magnified when we realize that she produced this large body of work, some of it requiring a good deal of physical exertion, despite two accidents. In 1889, while at her new summer home in Septeuil (a small town about thirty miles outside Paris), she broke her leg falling from a horse, and almost a year later she was thrown from a carriage.(4) Cassatt probably began "A Caress" after March 1890, when she contributed a series of twelve drypoints and a group of color prints to the second exhibition of the Peintres-Graveurs in Paris. She had participated in the group's first show, in 1889, and was preparing works for the third, to be held in 1891, when the Peintres-Graveurs chose to exclude all but French-born artists from their ranks. Cassatt and her friend Camille Pissarro (a Danish national born in the West Indies) were no longer welcome to participate in the group's activities. This temporary setback led to a long-term gain. Paul Durand-Ruel, whose gallery hosted the Peintres-Graveurs and who had recently signed Cassatt to an exclusive contract, offered equivalent space to the spurned artists. The opportunity to be seen apart from the Impressionists, in combination with her command of the mother-and-child subject, allowed for a more individualized appreciation of Cassatt's gifts. Although "L'Art moderne" mistakenly identified her as "Degas's only student" (they were colleagues, never teacher and student), she was recognized as a "master in her own right."(5) Even the "American Register", which had mocked her Impressionist pictures, suggesting that her figures appeared to suffer from jaundice and cholera,(6) recommended the exhibition.(7) Symbolist critic Félix Fénéon reviewed the show in "Le Chat noir": "We are not looking at a cute, quaint, or overly sentimental scene, the casual whim of a precarious tenderness; the figures remain normal, and a feeling of permanent maternity quietly emanates from the group."(8) Even though she was praised for representing mothers and children

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in a realistic vein, without the sugary sweetness often associated with the theme, this ability was credited to her sex rather than to skill and artistic innovation. The critic for "L'Art moderne" stated: "Beyond the marvelous style of these honest works, which can bring to mind Ghirlandaio himself, there is the exquisite, unexpected grace of childish gestures that only a woman's soul could so subtly observe and express."⁽⁹⁾ While the gestures in "A Caress" appear spontaneous and natural, they also lend the picture the feeling of "permanent maternity" sensed by Fénéon. The child reaches up to touch his mother's face as she presses her lips into his palm and cradles his foot with her hand. This unbreakable circle is emphasized by the solidity of the triangular composition, its central axis reinforced by the vertical line of the child's left arm and leg. The gestures of hand-meeting-face and hand-supporting-foot align at the top and bottom of this axis. Cassatt's skill in capturing the nuances of physical contact between mother and child stems from her command of the artistic gesture. Her confident technique in *A Caress* belies the difficulties inherent in the pastel medium. Cassatt varied her pastel stroke to suggest different types of surfaces. The faces of mother and child are smoothly rendered and highly finished, while the mother's dress is described with slashes and scribbles that form a flat abstract pattern. The use of blue pastel for both fabric and flesh links the two distinct textures. "The First Caress", a drawing in the collection of the New York Public Library, may have been done in preparation for the *New Britain* pastel. While the drawing and the pastel are similar in many ways, adjustments to the pastel amplify the composition's monumentality and the work's sense of "permanent maternity." The mother's body has been widened and her skirt extended to more fully encompass the child's body. His left shin, which bends diagonally toward his body in the drawing, has been straightened to help create the vertical axis that organizes the composition and emphasizes the gestures. His right leg, too, has been pulled in, so that his body rests more securely on the mother's lap. (Pentimenti on the pastel indicate that Cassatt continued to manipulate the composition as she worked.) These changes also allow for a glimpse of the child's genitals, one of the few instances in Cassatt's work in which this occurs. "A Caress" also relates to one of the ten color prints shown in 1891, *Mother's Kiss*, which shows the same mother bent over her child, this time holding him close in an embrace. Cassatt was inspired by an exhibition of Japanese prints on view at the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* in Paris in 1890. "A Caress and Mother's Kiss" share with the Japanese prints a tendency toward flat surfaces and the type of subject matter: a mother delighting in the physical presence of her naked child. Compositionally, however, the pastel draws upon traditional Western schemes, especially those for representing the Madonna and child.⁽¹⁰⁾ *A Caress* was included in Cassatt's first retrospective, a show of thirty-one oils and pastels at *Galerie Durand-Ruel*, Paris, in 1893. The pastel was sold to the New York branch of the gallery in March 1895, and it was purchased by Cassatt's dear friend *Louisine Havemeyer*, just before the opening of the artist's first major exhibition in the United States, held at *Durand-Ruel*, New York, in April 1895.

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PAI Bibliography: Adelyn Dohme Breeskin, "Mary Cassatt: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Oils, Pastels, Watercolors, and Drawings" (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1970); Adelyn Dohme Breeskin, "Mary Cassatt: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Graphic Work", rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979); Griselda Pollock, "Mary Cassatt" (New York: Harper and Row, 1980); Nancy Mowell Mathews, "Mary Cassatt: A Life" (New York: Villard Books, 1994); Nancy Mowll Mathews, ed., "Cassatt, A Retrospective" (New York: H. L. Levin Associates, 1996). Notes: 1. The first biography of Cassatt, written by Achille Segard, is entitled *Mary Cassatt: "un peintre des enfants et des mères"* (Paris: Paul Ollendorff, 1913). 2. Mathews, "Cassatt: A Retrospective", p. 23. 3. The dated proof is in the collection of the New York Public Library. On Cassatt as a printmaker, see Nancy Mowll Mathews and Barbara Stern Shapiro, "Mary Cassatt: The Color Prints" (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989). 4. See Mathews, "Mary Cassatt", pp. 188-197. 5. G. L., "Expositions à Paris, Pastellistes Français, Peintres-Graveurs, Camille Pissarro, Mary Cassatt," *L'Art moderne* 11 (April 26, 1891), p. 137. 6. "The Exhibition of Independent Artists," *American Register*, May 17, 1879, p. 4. 7. "Exhibition of the Society of French Painters-Etchers," *American Register*, April 11, 1891, p. 6. 8. Felix Fénéon, "Cassatt, Pissarro," *Le Chat noir* 10 (April 11, 1891), p. 1728. 9. G. L., "Expositions à Paris," p. 137. 10. See Mathews and Shapiro, "Mary Cassatt", pp. 136-140, for a discussion of this print, the drawing "First Caress", and "A Caress". It has previously been believed that the drawing, "First Caress", served as a preparatory sketch for "Mother's Kiss". However, "Tendresse Maternelle", an unlocated drawing recently discovered in a Hotel Drouot sale catalogue (February 24, 1922, no. 26) is likely to be the preparatory drawing for the print. Dimensions: 29 1/4 x 23 3/4 in. (74.3 x 60.3 cm)