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National College of Art and Design  
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## The Subject as Female

Representations of Women in the works  
of Edgar Degas and Mary Cassatt

By

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## *Introduction*

In 1860, when Mary Cassatt was only sixteen years old she attended the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, where she was surrounded by contemporaries such as the painter, Thomas Eakins; Howard Roberts, the sculptor; and the engraver, Emily Sartain. Cassatt was an assiduous worker and tirelessly worked on plaster casts of antique works, thus evolving an inherent sense of form. Ambitious to improve her art, she decided to pursue her education in France. Paris, at the time was perceived as the art capital of the world, and after the Civil War ended in America, many American art students emigrated to France to study. Although, at that time, the official École des Beaux-Arts did not permit women to study there, some of their premier teachers gave private lessons to women art students. Thus, Cassatt received training from Professor Jean-Léon Gérôme. She was trained also by Charles Chaplin, Anton Mauve and Evariste Luminais. Later in Villiers le Bel, she studied with genre painters, Edouard Frère, Paul Soyer and the painter Thomas Couture. From the outset Mary Cassatt developed and honed her craft in the museums and art galleries of Italy and France. She was a firm believer in the copyist method and through rigorous self-discipline absorbed painterly qualities and solved artistic difficulties through the representation of the old masters. As her art evolved, her palette became more subtle, her style and technique more fluid, but her line was unfalteringly employed, as it was learnt from the masters.

A decisive move in the development of Cassatt's art was her choice in 1873 to live in Paris permanently. The alterations wrought by modernity made Paris a catalyst for change. Constantly observing and searching for new and innovative influences in the development of her art, Cassatt became cognisant of the work of Edgar Degas,



How well I remember seeing for the first time Degas' pastels in the window of a picture dealer on the Boulevard Haussmann. I used to go and flatten my nose against that window and absorbed all I could of his art.<sup>1</sup>

Edgar Degas had entered the École des Beaux-Arts in 1855. He spent a considerable time in the private studio of Louis Lamothe who was one of Ingres' most notable pupils. Degas emulated the art of Ingres who on one occasion instructed him to "draw lines young man, many lines, from memory or from nature, it is this way that you will become a good artist."<sup>2</sup> Degas travelled to Italy to study classical art and on his return to France, his portfolio comprised of drawings after the Italian masters and portraits of his relatives who lived there. Precisely drawn with linear precision, the works such as Madonna and Child after a Milanese work of 1500, showed his debt to the tradition of Ingres. The family portrait of his relatives, The Bellelli Family (fig. 1) illustrated a departure from classical imitation and reveal an unconventional approach in the attitudes of his sitters that is not learnt, but observed from life. Degas became immersed in the hurly-burly of Parisian life which provided the thematic material of his realistic paintings between 1865 and 1890. The Industrial Revolution signalled a rush for progress and a general espousal of modernity. Consumerism and materialism displaced traditional values. The fast-changing world of commerce contributed to the marginalization of the poorer sections of society, who were forced to work long and arduous hours to produce goods for consumption. The Industrial Revolution heralded the rise of the middle classes whose needs were supplied by the badly paid workers. Degas sets before us, a parade of diverse people and situations, and treats them in a modern accessible idiom. He confronts modernity and its attendant ills and glamour in his paintings of bathers and ballet dancers. It is in his representation of women, however, that Degas encapsulates the flux of his time.

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<sup>1</sup> E. John Bullard, Mary Cassatt Oils and Pastels, 1973, p 13.

<sup>2</sup> John Rewald, The History of Impressionism, 1985, p 16.





Society called into question the status of women within it. Woman's increasing independency which challenged the male patriarchal order of the time was a point of issue. Through the breaking down of the social order, it was no longer possible to differentiate, for example, between the respectable woman and the prostitute. The uncertainties and anxieties caused by this lack of definition mirrored the alarm felt by people confused by the accelerated changes emanating from the industrial society of late nineteenth century France. Society's inability to come to terms with the new and incompatible symbols of modernity, materialized in the form of woman as signifier of their confusion. She stood as a metaphor for change – for doubtful and unpredictable change. The erosion of morals, and the implied threat of corruption to the institution of the family, tightened the already fast grip on the proscribed role of woman as protector of that unit of society. Rooted in the ideals of the third Republic, and bolstered by the teachings of the Catholic Church, was the belief that "it was women who were responsible for the preservation and generation of the race."<sup>3</sup> In order to embrace the beneficial innovations which the changing world presented, male dominance counter-balanced its fluctuations by imposing a solid base and tight regime in the home. The imposition of male order on the household was an assurance of the preservation of male authority, perceptible to change in the new ordering of things in society. Tamar Garb puts forward arguments based on the prevalent male discourse which made sense of the dutiful subservience elicited from women at the time,

While man's innovativeness was seen as crucial for progress, women's conservatism made her the custodian of the past, prudent, old fashioned and suspicious of change. And while modernity, which was man-made, was seen to be threatening the moral fibre of the nation, it was these very qualities which would make women, more than ever, the guardians of an endangered morality."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Tamar Garb, *Sisters of the Brush*, 1994, p 161

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p 161





Against the highly textured backdrop of chaos, the ambivalence born of it, and the tugging and pulling between tradition and modernism, the concept of a new art to express the changing face of society came into being. In 1874, what was later borne out as a watershed in French painting was realized and witnessed as an exhibition comprising one hundred and sixty-five works of thirty artists. Degas was the organiser of this first exhibition. The exhibitors referred to themselves as the "Société anonyme des artistes, peintres, sculpteurs, graveurs."<sup>5</sup> The critic Leroy, in the comic weekly *Charivari*, pejoratively termed the group the 'Impressionists', after the title of the painting *Impression – Sunrise* by Claude Monet. The name and essence of this comment was appropriated by the bourgeois public, the principal purveyors of art in the Salon who repeatedly demonstrated a discernible lack of knowledge and judgement in art. Where the bourgeois public scorned the independent artists, a sizeable following of artists supported the Indépendents' demand for 'no jury, no prizes'. Their protests, waged against the prevailing reign of Academism, won the support of Mary Cassatt. In 1877 Degas proposed that Cassatt should shun the Salon and join the 'Indépendants'. Accepting his offer to join the organization, Mary Cassatt rejoiced in the freedom this choice afforded her, "now I could work with absolute independence, without considering the opinion of the jury. I took leave of conventional art, I began to live."<sup>6</sup>

The École des Beaux Arts first admitted women as students in 1896. Prior to this date, the education of women as artists, centred around the private *ateliers* of master painters. The cost of tuition was so high, that it was exclusionary of all but the

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<sup>5</sup> E. J. Bullard, *Mary Cassatt Oils and Pastels*, 1973, p 13.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p 13.



very wealthy student. In answer to the needs of aspiring women artists, The Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs, was inaugurated by Mme. Léon Bertaux, to collectively organize the women artists in France. "At the moment of its formation in the Spring of 1881, however, it was the idea of creating a united front against the hostility of an exclusionary art world that propelled the Union forward."<sup>7</sup>

From its inception, the motives of the Union under the leadership of Mme. Bertaux unflinchingly serviced the needs of women artists. Many Sociétaires, however, were opposed to new modernists ideas in painting. Mme Bertaux, herself, sought to define a feminine art, uncorrupted by the influence of Modernism,

Let us fight, my friends ... this outburst of modern peculiarities ... Let us invent that which consoles the heart, charms the mind and appeals to the eye. That is certainly a truly feminine mission. Yes, let us, women, create, we must do it and we can do it, this new art which is already of us, l'Art féminin.<sup>8</sup>

It is not surprising that many of the images painted by the Sociétaires contained idealized scenes of women's domestic lives untouched by the influence of realism. Mme. Virginie Demont-Breton's painting L'Homme est en mer is a touching evocation of a mother's tenderness towards her child. However, like Mme. Cadilhon-Venat's, Une Béarnaise, a contemplative study of a young woman drying a kitchen vessel, captures the charm without entering into the realm of the real world.

Edgar Degas and Mary Cassatt addressed the veracity of women's lives in their works. A concerted effort to lay bare the inequalities, hypocrisies and the inner world of the female, lies at the core of Degas' and Cassatt's work. Living in an era which espoused change but which clung tenaciously to traditional beliefs, the two artists directed their energies into challenging the accepted social norms pertaining to the status of women within late nineteenth century French society.

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<sup>7</sup> Tamar Garb, Sisters of the Brush, 1994, p 4.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p 161.





Conversely the detractors of Degas have attempted to level charges of misogyny against him, especially in his 'Bathers Series', where overt expositions of crudely drawn female forms are apparent. Huysmans in 1889 described the images as,

an insult to the century's most constantly enshrined idol, woman, whom he (Degas) debases by showing her in a tub, in the humiliating positions of her intimate ablutions ... [He gives to her] a special accent of scorn and hate.<sup>9</sup>

The popular myths and assumptions of biographical certitudes fuelled the criticism of misogynistic tendencies in the work of Degas. P. Valery, whose most important piece of art criticism – *Degas Dance Dessin*, refutes the concept of the biography as a main tool where observation is to "imagine that which one expects to see"<sup>10</sup>. Carol Armstrong gives credence to Valery's assertion that "Degas' female nudes were intellectualized and thus set at a distance both the flesh and the form of the female body"<sup>11</sup>. Degas' position is that of "sublimation wherein bodily desire is replaced by bodiless will ... the libidinal drive is transformed into formulaic observation and the sensual into the intellectual and into resistance itself."<sup>12</sup> Degas suggests this himself, emphasizing the conflict between, rather than the identity of, eros and vision; "To make fire without sight, that must be love itself"<sup>13</sup>

Although, working within the framework of Impressionist avant gardism, Cassatt is often dismissed as solely a painter of mothers and children, whose appeal is both sentimental and real. Within the context of her time, Cassatt was revered for the spiritual height and human breadth of 'motherhood' inherent in her mother and child genre paintings. It is apparent that the separate paths followed by Mary Cassatt and Edgar Degas sometimes took oppositional or divergent courses in their perusal of an

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<sup>9</sup> Heather Dawkins in *Dealing with Degas*, 1991, p 135.

<sup>10</sup> Carol Armstrong, *Odd Man Out*, 1991, p 216

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p 223.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p 224.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p 224.



ideal. It is the purpose of this essay to establish their shared and common objective, of exposing the truth of womanhood by demolishing the ideological assumptions of woman imposed by nineteenth century society.

In *chapter 1* the exclusivity accorded women in the works of Edgar Degas and Mary Cassatt is examined. The strategies of including and excluding men are discussed to establish the omnipresence of women in their works. *Chapter 2* questions whether the constructed isolationism, employed by Degas and Cassatt to denote the marginalization of women in society, can be best served in the interior setting. Arguments are set out to test the feasibility of an alternative exterior location. Conversely, the works set in the exterior are examined to judge whether their emotional impact loses or gains meaning, if set in the interior space. An examination is undertaken to discover the underlying power of women. Arguments are put forward to situate women's potency in the autonomy of their actions. *Chapter 4* deals with the appropriation of the gaze, and Degas' and Cassatt's achievement in transcribing it onto the female subjects in Degas' At the Racetrack, Jockeys (fig.2), and Cassatt's At the Opera (fig.3), and In the Loge (fig.4).





*Absence and Presence*

A great portion of Degas' work is composed of images depicting women. The same can be noted of Mary Cassatt who, indeed, almost exclusively painted women. Whilst many of the Impressionists painted landscapes, Degas and Cassatt's subjects tended to live their lives in the confines of the interior space. In Degas' case, women are featured pursuing activities related to their theatrical role – in the ballet and working in the circus; while images of working-class women are prominent in the Milliners series, in the Ironers series and Laundresses series; alternatively, his Bathers series show woman immersed in the activity of cleansing herself. Many of Cassatt's pictures of women involved them in solitary occupations, sometimes reading, sewing or viewing an entertainment. It has been said that Cassatt "painted women with steady souls" and it is evident that beneath the surface of her work, lies a substructure rich in depth of meaning.<sup>14</sup> When her women are involved with other people, they are generally represented within familiar surroundings and in nurturing roles. Degas and Cassatt were both well aware of the proscribed role for women in the late nineteenth century. As dependence on the man as breadwinner was corroded by women's own growing independence in the work force, society looked with disfavour at women's ambitions to be autonomous. Indeed, one corollary of independence was that the signs of respectability, for example, which in fashion and coiffure had differentiated the lowly person from the bourgeoisie, were no longer reliable sureties of legibility. The shared awareness of women's creative potential is realized in

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<sup>14</sup> Nancy Mowll Mathews, Cassatt a Retrospective, 1996, p 296.



Degas' Laundress (fig.5) of 1873 and Cassatt's Lydia at a Tapestry Frame (fig.6).

Demonstrated in these two images of working women, is the shared quality of self-containment which controls the picture space. Spanning two class categories, the lowly worker of Degas and the comfortable bourgeois woman of Cassatt, together emphasize woman's energized preoccupation with her task which signifies serious and potent intent.

Degas' Laundress (fig.5) embodies the actual position of working class women of his time. Assiduously applying herself, the laundress is self-reliant and stands alone. She shuns the constraints of proper dress codes by dressing down to her unbuttoned chemise, for practical considerations of over-heating. According to Eunice Lipton, nineteenth century society had neatly encoded the laundress as "a brute, if sometimes coquettish, sexual animal".<sup>15</sup> Degas was no doubt aware of the potency of his image of the laundress, but strove to accentuate her visibility in a humanized form. The perception of Rivière, that "the laundress is an animal, a beast of work, not a human being" was a view shared by Georges Rouault and Gustave Geffroy, contemporaries of Degas.<sup>16</sup> The fear of the encroaching crowd, of the vulgar poor, is encapsulated in this imagery. Degas signalled bourgeois fears of the masses in this strong image of female emancipation. Personified in female form, the slave converts the act of slaving into a commercial proposition. She is the symbol of her age, a transgressionary agent, able and willing to deconstruct social barriers. If Degas was being politically challenging here, he was also exposing the vulnerable person behind the concept of progress. In the Laundress (fig.5), Degas documented the tenacity and self-absorbed aspect of the working woman. Bent over her work, the muscles taut in

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<sup>15</sup> Eunice Lipton, Looking into Degas, 1986, p 134.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, 1986, p 145.





her upper arms, she applies a slow but stolid pressure to the iron. The slow act of ironing stands as a metaphor for woman's slow rise in the commercial social sphere.

Cassatt's Lydia at a Tapestry Frame (fig.6) is presented as an evocation of the quiet industry of women indoors. This image of a middle class woman performing a repetitive pastime exemplifies the tightly bound and structured lives of many nineteenth century women. Lydia appears to be hemmed in between the supports of the tapestry frame, held or pinned to her position, close to the work. Her mood, tense and serious is mirrored by the agitated horizontal lines running like strands from her hair to the picture's edge behind her. The blaze of bright yellow light to the top right of Lydia's head, resembles a beacon of hope, an open bright space awaiting discovery and exploration. If the repetitive and enduring action of ironing in the Laundress (fig.5) is an open reminder of her slow social ascent, Cassatt spells out the boundaries that prevent Lydia's progress within the wider world, but subtly introduces the pictorial device of the ray of light to signify future hope and freedom from constraints, for middle class women.

While the subject of bathing was introduced by Mary Cassatt in her print Woman Bathing (fig.7), Degas produced an extensive series of bather images, among them was The Tub (fig.8), painted in 1886. Bathing in the nineteenth century was problematic and governed by social codes indicating correct behavioural conduct. Nineteenth century middle-class women bathed infrequently, indeed the washing of one's body was perceived as the converse to cleanliness. Eunice Lipton blatantly proclaims the woman in Degas' basin, "a prostitute",<sup>17</sup> as "prostitutes were required to bath between clients".<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Eunice Lipton, Looking into Degas, 1986, p 152.

<sup>18</sup> Griselda Pollock and Richard Kendall, Dealing with Degas, 1992, p 137.





As working class women increasingly posed a threat to the dominant patriarchal ideologies of the time, fears grew in the bourgeois mind of a confusion between the respectable bourgeois woman and the appearance of the new working woman. The latter “lived in unstable financial situations which frequently put them in the position of needing men to pay for their entertainment, clothing, housing and so on. Frequently, this was a matter of exchanging personal – usually sexual favours for occasional financial support”.<sup>19</sup> As occasional prostitution was not controlled by law or regulated like the official brothels in France, the lack of definition accorded to this “new prostitute” raised suspicions regarding women in general. Huysmans “regarded intimate bathing as a social leveller of women : regardless of (their) ..age, beauty or status, women must all at some time stoop ... to remove filth from their bodies”.<sup>20</sup>

Cassatt's Woman Bathing (fig.7) neutralizes fears inherent in the act of bathing. The woman is a complete entity, immersed in the act of cleansing herself. She exists for herself alone and defies sexual innuendo. Working within the conventions of what was allowable for women with a bourgeois background, Cassatt's gesture to modesty is visualized in the held-up skirt around the waistline of the model. In drawing attention to the half-naked body of the woman, involved in what appears like an everyday ritual, Cassatt radically breaks down conventional ideas about women and bathing. The woman's face is hidden. This woman could be any woman she suggests, and bathing is a normal procedure. Subtly employing the Japanese device of flatness in two dimensional space, the pictorial structure allows the observer an opportunity to objectively, and at a remove, consider the normality of the spectacle.

Degas' The Tub (fig.8) is a provocative invitation to the viewer to discriminate and examine his own prejudices. His handling of the naked female is not characterised

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<sup>19</sup> Eunice Lipton, Looking into Degas, 1986, p 152.

<sup>20</sup> Anthea Callen, The Spectacular Body, 1995, p 161.



by the delicate and flowing lines of Mary Cassatt's Woman Bathing (fig. 7) but Degas' woman sketched with heavy outlines, is corporeal and lacking in subtlety and grace. Placing before them a woman squatting in a tub he intentionally invited his viewers to confront a dilemma. By recognising the female model as a prostitute, bourgeois society was owning up to indiscretions transacted between the bourgeois client and the prostitute. The problem was further compounded by the suggestion that this could be any woman aping the conduct of the prostitute, and if so, the problem of containing women from breaking loose from the bonds of correct social codes had to be faced. The anxiety these women induced in the middle classes was accentuated by the upheaval caused by the industrialized world which had thrown a pall of disorder and confusion into traditional social structures. Degas' portrait of the bather, crouched in a bathtub and awkwardly trying to manoeuvre her body in order to cleanse it, is a vulnerable and sympathetic commentary on the routine standard requirements elicited from the prostitute in order to protect her client. Anthea Callen maintains that the fear of syphilis, and of congenital syphilis in particular, resided in the prostitute. Callen suggests that "the spread of this hereditary disease through prostitution into the heart of the bourgeois family was experienced as a direct attack by the lowest classes".<sup>21</sup>

The thrust of Degas' argument lies in the action of the washing itself. He angles the body into a tortuous pose so that it becomes distorted. The self-absorption in the act is highlighted by the way in which the woman has compromised her position in the tub in order to thoroughly cleanse her lower body. Spatially, the composition is tightly compacted leaving little room for movement. The woman is viewed from the dominant erect angle, which adds to her vulnerability. Degas has

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<sup>21</sup> Anthea Callen, The Spectacular Body, 1995, p 161.





made a suggestion of head and hair but has cropped the topmost part of her head. She is seen from behind, and so, she is anonymous. Degas presents the bourgeois audience with a picture of containment – a claustrophobic arrangement of their own image-making.

In her depictions of women, Cassatt, rarely includes male figures thereby quietly undermining the nineteenth century perception of woman as an accessory to man. Her works are generally of the female alone or accompanied by a child, the former being solid forms, inwardly contemplating life. This is evident in many of her portraits of women, including Reading Le Figaro, At the Theatre and the mother and child work Breakfast in Bed (fig.9). Reading Le Figaro and At the Theatre echo the quiet restraint of Lydia at a Tapestry Frame (fig.6). The earnestness and sense of purpose unite the three images and emphasize the increasing self-reliance of these nineteenth century bourgeois women. Richard Kendall asserts that Mary Cassatt was obsessional in her life-long relationship with the female image. Griselda Pollock pursues the possibility that Cassatt was not only obsessed with the depiction of women but “she was desiring, curious, pleased and made anxious by doing so”.<sup>22</sup> Mary Cassatt, aware of the impact engendered by the independently minded, unchaperoned women, was curious in her exploration of the essence of women, without the dynamic of the male as accessory. The introduction of a male subject would have signified subversion of her control over her space.

Breakfast in Bed (fig.9) shows the socially positive role of woman as mother and is readily recognizable as a maternal scene. In mood, it conveys a quiet moment before the will of one is subordinated by the other. The encircling arms of the protecting mother are couched in the enveloping whiteness and purity of the pillow and

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<sup>22</sup> Griselda Pollock and Richard Kendall, Dealing with Degas, 1992, p 108.





bed linen. Cassatt's success in depicting women, lay in her projection of them as they would see themselves. To this end, she eliminated the inclusion of men in the composition, thus Cassatt's women retain their integrity and their wholeness.

In Breakfast in Bed (fig.9) the element of woman's control is evident. Cassatt capitalizes on the power accruing to women through the role of motherhood. This is clearly circumscribed as a woman's domain where women, through their guardianship, are granted an elevated status and where men have only an implied presence.

Mary Cassatt signified women's presence by emphasizing men's absence in her work. Degas produced many images of women alone but a vast body of his work contain the corporeal presence of a man. There is visually a purposeful reason for the inclusion of the male in Degas' pictures of women, where woman appears as the dominant presence, and he, as a meaningful addition. In Admiration (fig.10) and Ballet Dancer in her Dressing Room (fig.11) the male client and the admirer occupy a marginal place in the bottom left-hand corner of the composition. The squatting positions of the supplicating men are crucial to understanding the status which bourgeois men accorded sexual women in the nineteenth century. The middle-class marriage was inextricably linked with the highest motives as heaven guided its course. When marriage was put on a pedestal, woman, as wife, became arbiter between God and Mammon in the lives of their menfolk. A woman's duty was to "be a companion who will raise the tone of his mind from "low anxieties and vulgar cares", one who would "lead his thoughts to expatiate or repose on those subjects which convey a feeling of identity with a higher state of existence beyond this present life".<sup>23</sup>

Marriage, seen in this way, as an esteemed fountainhead of unattainable proportions, was the cause of considerable anxieties in the minds of both men and

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<sup>23</sup> Walter Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1957, p 351.



women. Implicit in the act of sexual relations, was the anxiety of desecration and a fear of sacrilege against a holy state. Some historians, like J.A.Banks, attribute the increase of profligacy, and the sexual indulgences of men, to the threat posed by the disproportionate emphasis placed on the sanctity of marriage at the time.

Anthea Callen argues that bourgeois woman sold herself to the materialism of her age. In Zola's words, she describes the female customers in his vision of the department store as "objects without connection amongst the fragmented display - objects which recover a semblance of unity not in relation to a whole human body, but only as part of the colourful commodity images which seize the customer".<sup>24</sup>

If bourgeois woman was ensnared by commerciality, Callen argues, "bourgeois man's desire was also reduced to a commodity in a financial exchange".<sup>25</sup>

The dominance of commerce over feeling corroded and reduced middle-class men and women's relationship, and the consequent dehumanising aspect is visualized in fragmented form in Degas' Ballet Dancer in her Dressing Room (fig.11) and Admiration (fig.10). The face of the male admirer in Ballet Dancer in her Dressing Room (fig.11) dissolves, barely discernible, into the froth of garments hung abandoned in the upper left of the picture. A shaft of light striking his cheek, is all that draws attention to his fractional but crucial presence".<sup>26</sup> Counterbalancing the sexual nuances inherent in Ballet Dancer in her Dressing Room (fig.11) and Admiration (fig.10), Degas' The Bellelli Family (fig.1) is at first legible as a family portrait. The work is described by Pollock & Kendall as "a painting about the contradictions riddling the general idea of the high bourgeois family in the middle of the nineteenth century as it is a family portrait *tout court*".<sup>27</sup> The Bellelli Family (fig.1) is a severe

<sup>24</sup> Anthea Callen, The Spectacular Body, 1995, p 65.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, 1995, p 66.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, 1995, p 66.

<sup>27</sup> Griselda Pollock and Richard Kendall, Dealing with Degas, 1992, p 44.





documentation of familial relationships. Again the woman holds a dominant position, indicating the moral high ground. Her husband is seated to the right hand side of the picture, his face half-turned towards his young daughter. Madame Bellelli is positioned on a diagonal with her husband, but looks over his head. Although she stands and assumes an air of quiet detachment, Degas' sensitivity has highlighted her distress in the constrained sadness of her countenance. There is a defensiveness in the posture of Monsieur Bellelli and a separateness attached to how his chair is angled in relation to the family group. Degas emphasizes the disjunction in the family and renders it as a party of individuals. It is possible that Degas did not concur with the conventional notion of the bourgeois family as "the chief pillar of the state" whose prime motivations of "honesty, loyalty and self-sacrifice" would benefit the nation "through the instrumentality of its female members above all".<sup>28</sup> In choosing a troubled family group, Degas focused on the fissures inherent in the ideology of the family advocated by the state, and in so doing exposed the wasteland below the surface. The pressures of family life are apparent on the stoical face of Madame Bellelli, whilst her husband shadows her grief.

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<sup>28</sup> Griselda Pollock and Richard Kendall, *Dealing with Degas*, 1992, p 44.



*Interiors and Exteriors*

With few exceptions woman occupies the interior space in the art of Degas. In the late nineteenth century woman, as we have seen, was circumscribed within the family. By the 1860s in Paris, new service industries like ironing and laundering attracted the employment of women. The independence of earning power enabled many women to seek a lifestyle hitherto unattainable. With the increase of industrialization, the fashion industry became more productive and the availability of “off the peg” clothes, made the lower class earner sometimes indistinguishable from her bourgeois sister. The blurring of lines between the classes, and the monetary independence of women threatened the stability of the patriarchal order – “since masculine ‘order’ was defined by opposition to female chaos, containment of the female was deemed essential to the survival of that order”.<sup>29</sup>

Degas picture, The Bellelli Family (fig.1) enfolds a domestic drama. This psychologically charged work, painted between 1858-67, reflects the anxieties of the time concerning the family, linking the cause to materialism and consumerism. It could be conjectured that the overesteemed status that pertained to marriage in the late nineteenth century, might have posed fears in the minds of men and women alike. This repressive social climate favoured the growth in the number of prostitutes available. For an age which prided itself on its business acumen, the commercial methods of supply and demand were equally utilized in this area – “the marriage

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<sup>29</sup> Anthea Callen, The Spectacular Body, 1995, p 140.



system was a factor in the increase of prostitution, and therefore in the counter movement to exalt the importance of love. Not only did marriage without love increase the great social evil, so did the long engagement of the time.”<sup>30</sup>

In The Bellelli Family (fig. 1) Degas positions the group in a conventional bourgeois setting. The dynamic generated by centring the family indoors would be negated, had Degas chosen to locate them out of doors, in the park or in the street. Out of doors is suggestive of freedom, movement and expression, qualities which are suppressed in this *oeuvre*. Paralysis, withheld emotion and morbidity of remorse, are the overpowering messages of this work. A mirror in the room signals the possibility of the reflection of another life, but it only mirrors other mirrors in the room. The room is self-reflective, leaving very little space for expression beyond it. The space afforded by an outdoor location would impinge on Degas’ intention to render a feeling of claustrophobia to the composition. The distractions of outdoor life would mask the very emotions on the faces of the Bellellis, that Degas tries so hard to convey. In the nineteenth century, interiority signified female materiality and the inner world of emotions. Man’s position in that world lay outside this province which designated “women as mysterious,” a force to be overcome and controlled.<sup>31</sup> Degas places Madame Bellelli in her familiar family environment, and in an ironical twist, makes her look ill at ease with her surroundings. Registered on her face, is an aloof detachment, concealing a thinly disguised solemnity. She stands in sharp contrast to Huysman’s sentiments that “woman is the most constantly enshrined idol,” in fact she bears a closer resemblance to a martyr, than a domestication of angelic vision.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1957, p 384.

<sup>31</sup> Anthea Callen, The Spectacular Body, 1995, p 140.

<sup>32</sup> Griselda Pollock and Richard Kendall, Dealing with Degas, 1992, p 135.





The genteel life of nineteenth century women is revealed in 5'0 Clock Tea (fig.12). Here Cassatt zooms in on a daily ritual in the lives of women. Cassatt has cropped the picture, so that the figures are brought close to us. We represent the third wall in theatre parlance, and join in the tea ceremony without feeling intrusive. The glistering tea service is like a monument to domesticity, a living memorial of all that has been, and will be in the future. The pensive quality of the sitter nearest to the picture frame, staring ahead at a ginger vessel over the mantelpiece, introduces a timeless quality to the work. There is an innate sense of boredom here, a feeling, that even the second subject who sips the tea, is waiting for something, some indefinable event to occur. Aware that the world around them was changing, that "society was becoming more and more 'scientific' in method, rationalistic in spirit and utilitarian in purpose,"<sup>33</sup> .. that women of other classes were working outside the home, these women present an ineffectual picture of the modern bourgeois woman. The tea set and hearth are symbols of woman's duty and fulfilment in the interior life of the home where "her intellect is not for invention or creation but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision."<sup>34</sup> Cassatt's critical analysis of the underused potential of the middle-class woman is astutely rendered in this *oeuvre*. Its restricted spatial format echoes the claustrophobic lifestyle lived by the young women. Griselda Pollock supports the notion that Cassatt's subjects, drawn in the domestic sphere;

are a radical critique of dominant ideologies – and her depictions of women living enclosed lives in society exposes 'femininity' as a social process, not as the essence of womanliness, ideologically imputed to women as their nature, but a result of their introduction into place in the social order.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Walter E Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1957, p 267.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, 1957, p 350.

<sup>35</sup> Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, Old Mistresses, 1981, p 41.



It is difficult to visualize 5'0 Clock Tea (fig. 12) in an exterior location.

In posing the proposition, it is plain that quite a lot is at stake. The dynamism of the work lies in its close and tightly cropped composition. Exchanging the room for a private garden, for example, would allow other factors to take command of the mood of the painting. A sense of three dimensionality and an expanded perspective behind the sitters would provide an openness which the artist sought to repress in favour of the suffocating, boxed-in feeling of the back wall. Fresh air on the face, and light playing off the surface of the silver tea service would have no function here. The darkness and sombre setting is conducive to the mood of the subject in the foreground, who has fallen into a brooding reverie. Illumination from natural daylight would impose too lively a response from the woman in the work; shadows and movements of vegetation would excite too much interest. Whilst the pattern of lines in the wallpaper continue their straight and inevitable course to the floor, so too the predictability of the women's lives follow an inevitably narrow course. Carefully plotting this interior scene, Cassatt eschews even the device of a window in its composition. The public world is only barely suggested by the opening in the fireplace whose only vent is a dark, tortuous, labyrinthine tunnel to the sky. The women are enclosed. The boredom which emanates from the bourgeois recreation "those social rituals which constituted polite society" are highlighted here as controlling devices, prearranged and regulated by the dominant social order of the time.<sup>36</sup> Mary Cassatt's location of female figures in familiar surroundings poses questions about their relationship with their sitings. Some of the subjects are not fully integrated in the domestic milieu. In 5'0 Clock Tea (fig. 12) there is an uncomfortable malaise present. Home was deemed the natural environment for women, yet the discomposure conveyed in the static image of the two

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<sup>36</sup> Griselda Pollock, Vision and Difference, 1988, p 56.





women in 5'0 Clock (fig. 12) is not supportive of the ideological premise that home symbolized a safe haven, away from the cares of the world – “a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods”.<sup>37</sup> Mary Cassatt, working within the social framework of nineteenth century society apparently herself visibly obeyed the conventions of behaviour. Painting out of doors, a timely and lonely exercise, was impractical for the nineteenth century woman and demanded the presence of a chaperone; in contrast with their male counterparts, “the painters of this cultural group were positioned differently with regard to social mobility”.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the interior was an area exploited by Cassatt to subvert the supposed proper place for middle-class women.

The public space which was regarded as the natural environment for men is exemplified in Degas' painting Place de la Concorde (fig. 13). The expanse of the public place is given its full value, as it spreads out from behind the principle subjects, to merge with the ornate buildings and the wide area of greenery in the far background. The main subjects, namely Vicomte Lepic, his two daughters and a dog, monopolize a good portion of the foreground of the picture, whilst in the margin of the left-hand side of the work, half of a man's body is visible, his hat cut off by the top part of the picture frame. There is no doubt that the dominant presences in this painting are those of the two men. They are tall, erect and strike a pose. The Vicomte is smoking and holds an umbrella casually but snugly at an angle under his arm. His bodily gestures indicate a body in repose, in the urban setting. The man in the margins paradoxically defies marginalization. We see what is important about him. His bearing is aristocratic, his hat, obviously a tall one, is symbolic of a high rank in society and his neckerchief is fashionable and somewhat exotic. His walking stick commands the attention of the

<sup>37</sup> Walter E Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1957, p 343.

<sup>38</sup> Griselda Pollock, Vision and Difference, 1988, p 81.



family dog opposite him. He looks with recognition at the Vicomte who has turned away - perhaps these men know one another from frequenting the various urban amusements. Hence, the Vicomte turns his back as a discretionary tactic to shield his daughters from any untoward hint of gossip. The two young girls are diminutive in size but their relevance is significant in relation to the presence of their father. Staring away from him at some distant object, the girls' interest lie beyond him. Spatially, they are separated from him, but we know by his air of supremacy that the two girls and the dog are his property. Degas emphasizes the dehumanizing aspect of urban life in the nineteenth century where the separate spheres of home and city life did not coalesce. Griselda Pollock suggests that "This is a daringly decentred composition inscribing in visual terms the fragmentation and haphazardness of experience characteristic of the modern city, but with the added poignancy that the point is made with parent and children".<sup>39</sup>

The Boating Party (fig. 14) painted by Mary Cassatt between 1893 and '94 reveals three characters – an oarsman, a woman and a child seated on her lap. Cassatt emphasizes the man's dominance by using the pictorial device of placing him to the foreground-right of the picture plane. His place in the boat reflects his power on land. His gaze is directed to-wards the woman. It is on the woman's face that we register our understanding of the situation. The mouth is tense, her expression fixed, an air of unease pervades the body. The child's dependency on the woman's grasp to keep it safe, mirrors the need of the woman to reach land. She is dependent on the oarsman, and her enclosure in the prow of the boat barely contains her apprehension. Control is in the hands of the oarsman. In the external world, the woman is powerless.

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<sup>39</sup> Griselda Pollock & Richard Kendall, Dealing with Degas, 1992, p 48.





Place de la Concorde (fig.13) and The Boating Party (fig.14) question the female role in society and man's role in their existence. Degas' use of small female children in Place de la Concorde (fig.13) is a device to exaggerate the status of the male in the public space. The ironical satire on the dysfunction of family life is spatially recorded between its members here. His choice of female children is premeditated. Degas has selected them because this exterior space is not their natural environment. They exist in this work because they accompany their father. He sanctions their presence. They signify his importance. In The Boating Party (fig.14) where the male is operational the woman's passivity is activated by her silence. She is the adult equivalent of the two girls in Place de la Concorde (fig.13). Her position out-of-doors is as untenable as theirs is vulnerable. They are both dependent on the male to ferry them to a safe port. These two works expose the aberrant and dismissive nature of late nineteenth century mores to-wards the female gender. Degas' techniques of draughtsmanship, and unconventionality of execution, are unique and bring the force of realism to Place de la Concorde (fig.13). However, the female figure in The Boating Party (fig.14) possesses the potent ingredient of the real, that recognizable countenance which is not artifice but truthful art.





**Empowerment**

Paul Gauguin, in comparing Cassatt's work with that of Berthe Morisot, stated that "she had as much charm, but she has more power".<sup>40</sup> This insight is crucial to understanding and grasping the full meaning of Mary Cassatt's works. Cassatt is singularly subtle in her use of power. Renowned for her work depicting women and children, she used the genre to inform and create an understanding of women and their special relationship with their children. In so doing, Cassatt was instructing society as to the power which motherhood conferred on women. In these works, Cassatt argues above all for a more universal visualization of woman and her role as mother in society. In Family Group Reading (fig.15) the female child occupies a pivotal position in the painting, surrounded on both sides by two seemingly absorbed and benign women. At face value, this painting exhibits a certain candour, a reflection on childhood and family pastimes. Cassatt repeatedly painted women reading. Katherine Cassatt Reading to her Grandchildren and Women Reading in a Garden both painted in 1880, show the act of reading as a normal and consuming leisure activity for middle-class women. Painted in 1901, twenty one years later, Family Group Reading (fig.15) is a symbolic passing of the book of knowledge from one generation of women to the next generation of young girls. Reading provided an escape from the tedium of domestic and social duties imposed on middle-class women in the late nineteenth century. Women quietly expanded their education at home, reading the contemporary novels of their time. The nineteenth century saw a flowering of prolific female writers.

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<sup>40</sup> J. J. Wilson & Karen Petersen, Women Artists, 1978, p 1.



The Brönte sisters and George Eliot, to mention but a few, channelled their creative energy into the art of writing, at a time when other pursuits for women were curtailed or discouraged. In 1901, the women in the painting would have been acquainted with the works of such writers. In their faces, the respect for the written word is visibly etched. The child is the inheritor of the gift of reading. Centred between the two maternal figures, the girl is the focal point of the work. Her talent for reading is cherished and encouraged by those who mind her. One of the women supports the book whilst the child's hands rest on hers comfortably. Naturally, the flow of enthusiasm passes from one to the other and a life-long interest in reading begins. Empowered with its legacy, the child's future development depends on its sustenance to surmount the new challenges facing women in the twentieth century.

Degas takes us behind the scene in The Dancing Class (fig. 16) to witness the instruction of the ballet students by their master Jules Perrot. His presence there denotes a certain privilege, a power to be where "the bourgeois audience ... did not have access but which they yearned to possess".<sup>41</sup> The ballet master is positioned in the middle of the rehearsal space surrounded on three sides by his dancing students. Although master and pupils constitute an ensemble, Degas purposefully sets out to delineate a difference between them. Jules Perrot is masterful; he stands centre stage, his feet well planted, at equal distance, one from the other. His stance is supported by a big stick perpendicular to his body which he grips in a downward motion to steady his balance. Degas has taken trouble to show the ballet dancers as individuals. While the girl opposite the master is a study in acquiescence, all of the remainder are involved in movements of their own. There is no feeling of haste nor of nervous activity present, but rather, a very natural rendering of the relaxation one experiences

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<sup>41</sup> Eunice Lipton, Looking into Degas, 1986, p 99.





when it is not one's turn to perform. One figure to the right of the master adjusts her bodice whilst to the far left another scratches her back. Power in The Dancing Class (fig. 16) operates on three levels. In showing the spectator a view of the rehearsal room, Degas draws attention to his own prestige as a well-connected artist who has a special licence to enter the rehearsal space. The figure of the dancing master represents the role which male dominance played in the lives of women in the late nineteenth century. This position is exaggerated by the master's sole presence in an exclusively female environment, and the powerful symbol of his potency is represented in the device of the stick as phallus. The individuality which Degas assigns to the dancers and which is apparent in their gestures and attitudes, denotes an independence of spirit in the ballerinas. This manifestation of self-reliance indicates the presence of an underused resource of power, concealed in the dancers' personas.

In Family Group Reading (fig. 15), Cassatt undermined the encoded visual language of women. There is an other-worldliness about the groups of figures, an almost detectable religious fervour which unites the trinity in the act of reading. Their absorption parallels the traditional devotion in the religious works of the great masters. In her youth, as we have seen, Cassatt developed and honed her craft in the museums and art galleries of Paris and Rome. She would have been familiar with old masters like Botticelli whose work, Madonna of the Magnificat, enshrines the sacred qualities inherent in Cassatt's Family Group Reading (fig. 15). Again the book is the main carrier of meaning in the picture. The child's hand rests on the mother's for reassurance as she bends to give her attention to writing the renowned lines of the *magnificat*. Cassatt was aware that traditional art had an all-embracing appeal. The underlying theme of Madonna and child embodies a universal point of reference.



In 1873, Berthe Morisot painted The Cradle. This work shows a woman's intense preoccupation with her young baby. Her gaze is singularly angled at the little sleeping child. This sensitive painting, imbued with a spiritual essence, echoes the esteemed values of maternal love associated with the Madonna and child image. Morisot chose this timeless narrative to add to the deep pride and absorption which the mother feels towards her new-born child. Cassatt's treatment of the mother and child genre in Family Group Reading (fig. 15) is more radical than that of Morisot. In Family Group Reading (fig. 15), Cassatt moved beyond the point of maternal solicitude inherent in The Cradle. She converted the worldly anxieties and uncertainties common to the conventional Madonna and child genre, to a promotion of the ideal of learning as a way forward, in the march of progress for women.

The state of motherhood in the early twentieth century contrived to continue to command the respect which it had in the nineteenth century, so that the parallel between Madonna and child, and mother and child, was conceptually consistent. Family Group Reading (fig. 15) is a noble and idealized work, where the unifying cultural power of women is portrayed in the quiet act of reading. The progress of middle-class women in the twentieth century depended on cohesion and unity of purpose, the cause of suffrage, for example, was supported by Mary Cassatt who sanctioned an exhibition of her work in support of this cause during the war in 1915. Cassatt's interest centred around the gaining of the vote for women, to prevent future world catastrophes "you know how I feel about the, to me, question of the day, and if such an exhibition is to take place, I wish it to be for the cause of woman suffrage", she said.<sup>42</sup> Family Group Reading (fig. 15) signifies a cohesive group, united in purpose, and functions, thus, as a quiet affirmation of women's visibility.

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<sup>42</sup> Nancy Mowll Mathews, Cassatt a Retrospective, 1996, p 185.





In Family Group Reading (fig. 15), the element of power becomes evident once we establish 'the sacred' personified in the child. The subject of childhood was one which caught the imagination of the late nineteenth century public; through its idealization in literature William Wordsworth shared the romantic vision of the child as the cherished, unblemished, natural inheritor of the world;

Our birth,  
is but a sleep and a forgetting....  
Not in entire forgetfulness  
And not in utter nakedness  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God who is our home  
Heaven hangs about us in our infancy.<sup>43</sup>

Much of the sentiment pertaining to the child and the need to protect its God-like qualities from the world can be sourced in Rousseau's ideologies of "faith in the goodness of human nature and the spontaneous flowering of the moral sentiments, so long as they were uncorrupted by the 'evil' influences of civilization".<sup>44</sup> This over-idealization compensated for the fast moving state of the era; a clinging onto the innocent time, quickly receding, in a society "having no hope and without God in the world".<sup>45</sup>

Degas' painting of The Dancing Class (fig. 16) is a public exposé of a private event. It is not mannered or rigid but fluid and open in composition. It appears to be naturalistic, and like Mary Cassatt's Family Group Reading (fig. 15), gives the appearance of legibility. The Dancing Class (fig. 16) represents the ballet dancers as hardworking, human beings. Degas appears to make the intentions of the work accessible by dazzling his audience with nets and tulles. His use of spatial constructs

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<sup>43</sup> John Hayward ed., The Penguin book of English Verse, 1956, p 264.

<sup>44</sup> Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1957, p 343.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, 1957, p 265.





and the idiosyncratic gestures of the dancers, lead the audience beyond the picture plane to a better understanding of the artist's purpose.

Degas positions the master centre stage where he plays a pivotal role, all other extensions are controlled by his siting. There is nothing ambiguous about the master's power, he is correctly placed according to his physical and psychological significance. The ceiling is high, there is an open door and the inviting perspective of the window, seen through a door. The diagonal lines of the floorboards, add to the length of the room, and the raked aspect of the timber floor behind the master evokes a sensory response to movement. The aspect of air and light in the rehearsal room suggests an atmosphere of freedom which is at odds with the arduous working day of the dancer. Many misconceptions flourished concerning the origins and lives of ballerinas; they were perceived to be poor, their parental origins uncertain and were often considered promiscuous. Contrarily, documentary evidence, suggests that "dancers were essentially lower middle-class women and earned more than a decent wage; Eunice Lipton asserts that "the myths about ballerinas' parentage and poverty are similarly questionable. The family backgrounds of the dancers working in France were roughly of two kinds, some had fathers in the military and others had a least one parent in the theatre".<sup>46</sup> The sexualization of their profession resulted from being women on display".<sup>47</sup>

Degas individualises the ballerinas by movement and gesture. They are free to move about in the confines of the spacious room when they are resting and control their movements within this designated time of repose. Degas intervenes to facilitate the master's ordering of the space. Although they outnumber the master, he activates the ballerinas mobility and puts them through their paces. The controlling point of

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<sup>46</sup> Eunice Lipton, *Looking into Degas*, 1986, p 89.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, 1986, p 91.



contact pulsates between the master and the pupil; and yet, in their own time and space, they are self-possessed and assertive. Degas signifies in The Dancing Class (fig. 16), the disintegration of the old order of authority and the ushering in of modernity, the ballet dancers take their place as autonomous beings, visible even in the private arena.





*Who is the possessor of the Gaze ?*

Representations of woman in art has had a long and troubled history. Assumptions about woman, her nature and her relationship with society have been defined within the patriarchal discourse of power. In his painting, The Death of Sardanapalus, Eugène Delacroix embodies the notion of man's possession of woman as object. Sardanapalus, hearing that his army was defeated, had all his precious possessions, including his women, destroyed. Linda Nochlin comments upon such received and accepted notions of gender difference in art. She cites as an example Jacques Louis David's The Oath of Horatii where the qualities of strength versus weakness is the point of the picture. The three brothers Horatii take a patriotic oath of allegiance to Rome on swords held before them by their father in the presence of their women and children. Nochlin states that "the clear cut opposition between masculine strength and feminine weakness is communicated upon a universal assumption – it is not something that needs to be thought about."<sup>48</sup> She goes on to show that within the pictorial structure itself, the female state of 'resignation' is best served, tucked away in a corner of the painting, whereas the male, its opposite, "is allocated the lion's share of the architectural setting, expanding to fill it".<sup>49</sup>

Woman is visualized as object and man as subject, this is the basic tenet of the gaze. Man's right to possess woman is inscribed in the male psyche and bolstered by iconography, the media and society in general. In looking at woman, men project their sexuality on to women's bodies. The voyeuristic element is embodied in man's

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<sup>48</sup> Linda Nochlin, *Women Art Power and Other Essays*, 1989, p 4.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, 1989, p 4.



fascination with his own masculinity, inscribed on object – woman, “woman signifies not a given difference from man, but difference for men within phallogocentric culture”.<sup>50</sup> The infant, in Freud’s view, before he is aware of gender identification, takes pleasure in being watched. This is understood as the phase of exhibitionism. Sexuality is considered not to be an innate force, but ends the equation as a psychic structure which maps itself on to “the social system of kinship at a psychic level”.<sup>51</sup> The journey of the infant, through to the Oedipal stage when he is appropriated by the ‘Law or Name of the Father’, is marked by his recognition that ‘the Symbolic’ – his mother is - ‘other’, and that masculinity and femininity are contradictory positions. “In the Symbolic, Woman is designated as image, that is, the almost exclusive repository of formative exhibitionism, while masculinity appropriates the activity associated with scopophilia”.<sup>52</sup> In submitting to the ‘Law or Name of the Father’, the male gives up his desire for his mother. He has moved into a masculine position and from that space, observes the ‘lack’ inherent in the Symbolic – woman. His fears of lack when he looks at women are predominantly castration anxieties, but the pleasures of pre-oedipal moments are experienced also.

The scopophilia and castration anxieties propounded by Freud, provides a framework in which to speculate on the consciousness of nineteenth century society. The ethical and moral behaviour of the era is steeped in ambiguity. The duality of men’s fears of women and their physical desire for them resided in the female body of the prostitute. From the 1860’s onwards, the containment of prostitution in France became a very important social issue. A special police force, the ‘police des mœurs’ was set up to control and regulate clandestine behaviour.

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<sup>50</sup> Griselda Pollock and Richard Kendall, *Dealing with Degas*, 1992, p 23.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p 114.

<sup>52</sup> Griselda Pollock and Richard Kendall, *Dealing with Degas*, 1992, p 114.





The arguments used to justify regulated prostitution were constructed to protect “public morality from the spectacle of vice; the protection of male prosperity from the impact of commercial sexuality; and the protection of the populations health from venereal disease.”<sup>53</sup> The prostitute’s body became the locus for “the excessive seminal drain” which threatened society, and her appropriation of the fluid distanced the male accomplice from any deviant sexual involvement.<sup>54</sup> Anthea Callen suggests that in their desire to sanitize society “the bourgeoisie fuelled the puritanical fires.”<sup>55</sup> This repression gave way to a “morbid fascination,” this conflict “between desire to look and fear of contamination, between gaze and touch.”<sup>56</sup>

Degas challenged the perceived norms of his society’s attitude to woman in his depiction of a woman alone, in the work At the Racetrack, Jockeys (fig.2). Her solitary presence, her location, and her defiant act of looking were considered devices, designed to raise questions, examine prejudices and negotiate a position for woman in society. Degas met his audience on a confrontational level by empowering the woman with a gaze, appropriating a male position for her, the racetrack – a bastion of male respectability, and positioning her alone, thus questioning her probable status as a prostitute. The woman occupies a position centre-stage and stares out of the picture at us. This is a challenging action – a radical recognition by the artist of the conventional idea of the gaze within the male discourse of power. Degas has intervened and subverted this space for this woman. The woman’s independent stance, determinedly blocks out the interest shown by the man standing close to her, as looking through the binoculars she turns the spectacle back at her viewers; “this woman was an imposing personage whose monumental form and act of bold looking

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<sup>53</sup> Anthea Callen, The Spectacular Body, 1995, p 37.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, p 37.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, p 161.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p 161





expressed tremendous power, power which at the time was by definition male.”<sup>57</sup>

Her accessibility was fashioned by Degas to reach a chosen audience, and provoke a guaranteed reaction which would translate as a primed fear of the empowered, loose, symbolic woman.

Cassatt denies the authority of man to invade her work In the Loge (fig.4).

The woman in the loge is unaccompanied and in possession of herself alone. She is slightly obscured by her fan but she is the one who possesses the gaze. Anthea Callen accords the fan the quality of “accessory as a state and sign of femininity” and within that context, we might perceive it as a shield to fend off unwelcome intruders.<sup>58</sup>

The self-gratification which the male gaze supposes, is returned to him through the reflective surface of the fan as mirror – “Cassatt reminds the *flâneur* that his gaze is ultimately self-referential, solipistic – he looks only to see, to visualize himself”.<sup>59</sup>

In At the Opera (fig.3) Cassatt situates the woman in an opera box, viewing the spectacle. Woman’s visibility, and her power to dominate the space, is the main scheme at work. The woman is dressed plainly and wears nothing to distract our attention away from her chief activity. She is looking through binoculars with an intent gaze. This act is made all the more notable by the incidental and obviously eager body language of the man with binoculars in the opera box adjacent to hers. His diminutive presence and eager activity contrast with the woman’s ease and composure and proprietorial usurpation of the gaze – “Woman’s vulnerability to intrusive scrutiny whilst out in public is exposed through the witty pun of the painting’s spectator being mirrored by a figure in a distant loge with his binoculars trained on the woman in black”.<sup>60</sup> Although Cassatt’s At the Opera (fig.3) and In the

<sup>57</sup> Eunice Lipton, Looking into Degas, 1986, p 68.

<sup>58</sup> Anthea Callen, The Spectacular Body, 1995, p 187-88.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, p 187-88.

<sup>60</sup> Griselda Pollock and Richard Kendall, Dealing with Degas, 1992, p 112.



Loge (fig.4) are not as directly confrontational as Degas' At the Racetrack, Jockeys (fig.2), Cassatt mediates gently by manipulating the space to exclude us. Using formal devices of cropping the composition, she renders the dominance of the female figures by fixing and compressing them in that space so that there is no room for the spectator in the box – we are not welcome.





## *Conclusion*

On April 6<sup>th</sup> 1874, when Degas was organizing the first impressionist exhibition in Paris, Mary Cassatt's portrait of a middle-aged woman was accepted for the first time under her own name, by the Salon. Cassatt at this time, was already an admirer of Degas having seen his pastels in the window of a picture dealer in the Boulevard Haussmann, "the first sight of Degas' pictures was the turning point in my artistic life."<sup>61</sup> Degas became aware of Cassatt's unique potential when he saw her picture in the Salon in 1874; "... that is genuine. There is someone who feels as I do."<sup>62</sup> Although, mutual admirers of one another's work the two artists did not meet until three years later, when in 1877, Degas invited Cassatt to shun the Salon and exhibit with the Impressionists. Cassatt's opinions of the Salon were in accord with those of Degas, who rejected the inequalities of the jury and prize systems and scorned the Salon's negative approach to innovative art. Degas was influential in shaping the development of Cassatt's art. He directed her towards exploring the creative possibilities of Japanese prints. Cassatt's first one-woman exhibition in 1891 at the Galerie Durand-Ruel, bears testimony to her belief in Degas' advice and her own patience and dedication with the print medium. The exhibition included ten colour aquatints, heavily influenced by Japanese Art in the attention to detail, decoration, unmodelled forms and flattened perspective. The Japanese prints in the 1890 exhibition reflected Cassatt's interest in the informal domestic genre and through careful draughtsmanship and a mastery of flat tones, she zealously emulated Oriental art. Degas also instilled in Cassatt an interest in photography with its multiple scope

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<sup>61</sup> Suzanne G. Lindsay, *Mary Cassatt and Philadelphia*, 1985, p7.

<sup>62</sup> E. John Bullard, *Mary Cassatt Oils and Pastels*, 1972, p 13.



for discovery and invention. Her picture Little Girl in a Blue Armchair illustrates the practical application of the photographic technique of distorting the perspective. The objects in the foreground appear disproportionately larger than those in the background. Cassatt's readiness to embrace new ideas effected Degas and paralleled his enthusiasm for innovation. His interest in the outcome of Little Girl in a Blue Armchair, was evidenced in his meeting Cassatt's invitation to repaint part of its background.

While it is true to say that Cassatt was susceptible to Degas' influence, her art was quite independent of his and she adapted the knowledge gleaned from him to further her own needs. She used pastels, a favoured medium of Degas and embedded ground pumice in her primer when preparing her canvas, for the easy adherence of pastel. Whereas, both Cassatt and Degas can be classed as figure painters, concerned with form and movement, Cassatt's representations of women are independent, and carriers of meaning in their own right. Griselda Pollock's examinations of Degas' The Washbasin (fig. 17), suggests that "the viewer is involved in a fiction of clandestine almost voyeuristic viewing."<sup>63</sup> She sees Cassatt's Woman Bathing (fig. 7) as a frank exposition of a normal bathing procedure. Woman Bathing (fig. 7) in Pollock's opinion is not invested with the "implied erotic narrative of undressing and revelation," so prevalent in the works of Degas and his male contemporaries.<sup>64</sup> Cassatt's use of space, her reconstruction of a servant's bedroom, negates the sexual innuendo implicit in Degas' "eroticized space of masculinity in the city, the house that is not a home, in Linda Nochlin's: phrase a brothel."<sup>65</sup> Pollock feels that the 'Japanization' of Woman Bathing (fig. 7) defies a Western interpretation of sexual

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<sup>63</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt Painter of Modern Women*, 1998, p176.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, p 176.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, p 176.





categorization, as it works to evoke "the rhetoric of eroticism embedded in another culture's aesthetic forms."<sup>66</sup>

In a puritanical era where the signs of dirt and its attendant ills, bespoke horror of contamination and stood as a metaphor for social dissolution, the act of bathing implied the presence and evidence of dirt. The prostitute seen as the conductor of syphilis was regarded as the enemy of the state, "the commercial woman henceforth threatens the genetic patrimony of the dominant classes."<sup>67</sup> The success of Degas' images of Bathers must partly reside in the outraged responses which his critics levelled at him. They were purposely sensational and constructed to touch the nerve-centre of his society. Huysman's reflected that society's anxieties, in his declaration, that the Bather's "features invite continence and persuade to horror."<sup>68</sup> Degas selected his model well, when he chose the prostitute. In holding the mirror up to life, the provocative image of woman as prostitute, reflected back a picture of the society's fears, hypocracies and erroneous beliefs.

Where Cassatt was artistically indebted to Degas, she in her stead, assisted his reputation by seeking out potential buyers for his work in America. Her family, successful railway magnates, well centred in the upper circle of society, provided valuable connections in establishing links with buyers. As early as 1873, when Cassatt had first seen Degas' work, she encouraged her friend Louisine Waldron Elder, later Mrs.H.O.Havemeyer to buy one of Degas' pastel drawings. The Havermeyer collection became one of the most important private collections of European works of art acquired by Mary Cassatt for her friends in America. Cassatt hoped that the art bought by the private individual would ultimately transfer into public collections,

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<sup>66</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt Painter of Modern Women*, 1998, p 176.

<sup>67</sup> Griselda Pollock and Richard Kendall, *Dealing with Degas*, 1992, p 174.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, p 175.





thus enriching a society; "all the great public collections were formed by private individuals."<sup>69</sup> Cassatt's own family, especially Alexander Cassatt, her brother, who owned some works of Monet and Pissarro was among the major lenders of French Impressionist work, in an exhibition organized by Durand-Ruel in New York during 1886. Participating with two private lenders Erwin Davis and the Havermeyers, Alexander completing the prestigious circle made "the most important event in the history of American patronage of French Impressionism possible."<sup>70</sup>

Degas and Cassatt contributed to the investigation and interrogation of woman's presence in society. In contributing to the debate, they played an active role in exposing the lack of reference points, indicating the way to a truthful account of women's lives. Using aspects of modernity as a canvas to explore the everyday life experiences of laundresses, milliners, mothers, children and people at leisure, together, they built up a work of monumental significance to the veracity of women's existence. We witness woman's connectedness with society; her work place; her home; and above all, her standing, alone, unproscribed, unified and in possession of herself at the opera or at the racetrack.

Rigorously self-disciplined, the two artists absorbed painterly qualities and solved artistic difficulties through the study of Classical art. Cassatt was greatly influenced by Ingres and Correggio and Degas by Ingres and Delacroix. They brought their precision, talent for colour and compositional order to bear on the great works which they produced under the name of Impressionism.

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<sup>69</sup> Nancy Mowll Mathews, *Cassatt a Retrospective*, 1996, p282.

<sup>70</sup> Suzanne G. Lindsay, *Mary Cassatt and Philadelphia*, 1985, p13.



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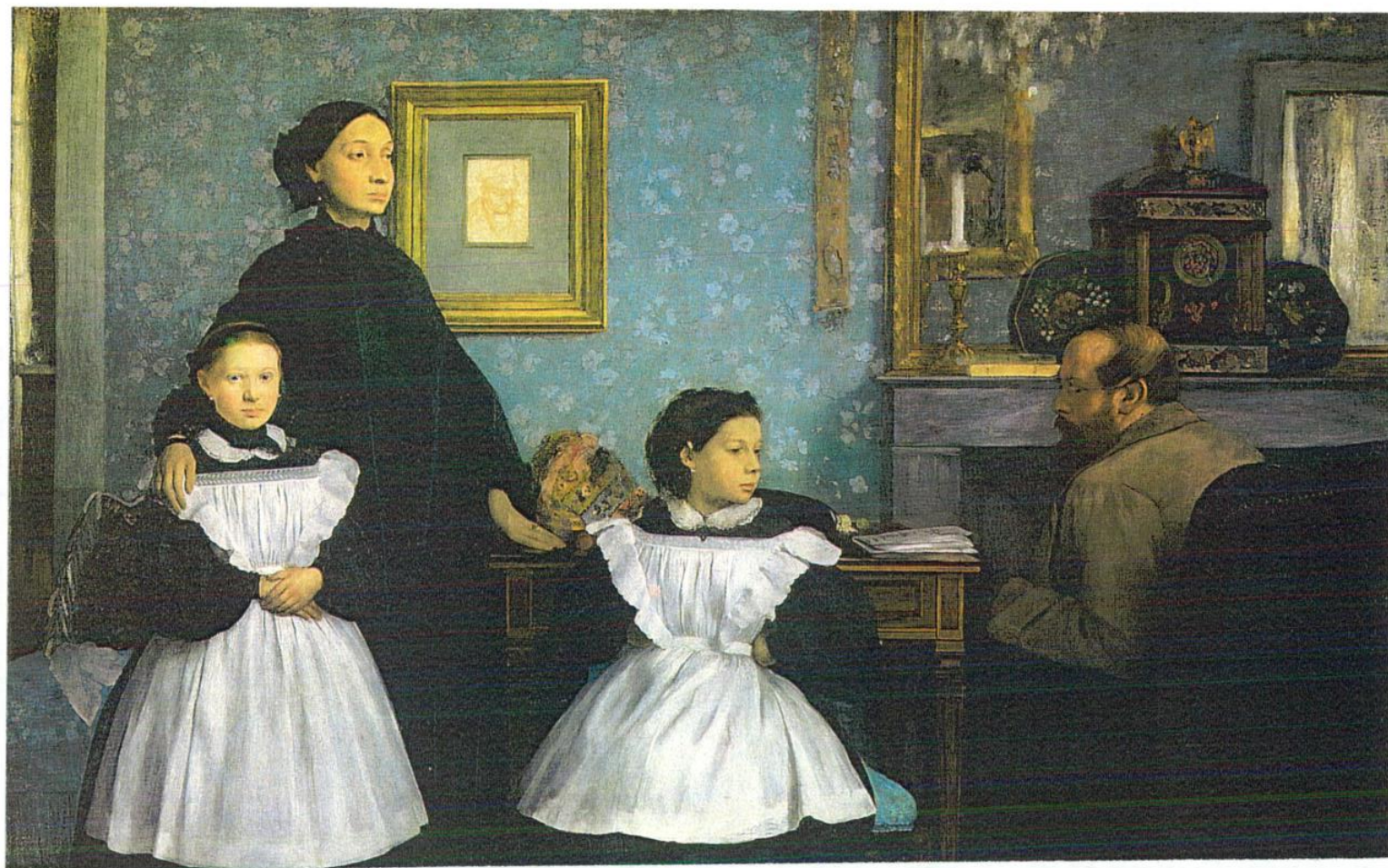


fig.1. Degas 1858-67 The Bellelli Family (Paris, Musée d'Orsay)





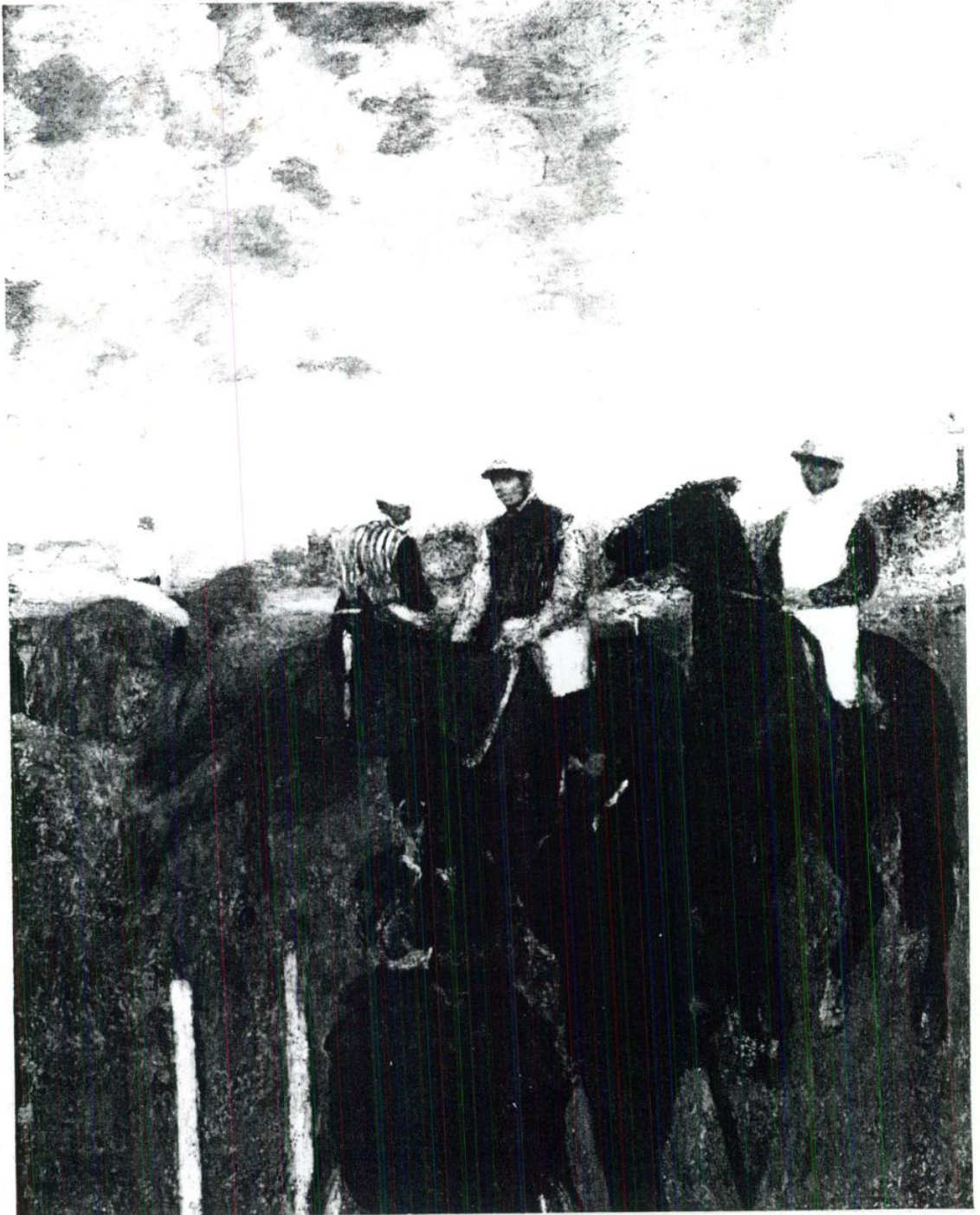


fig.2. **Degas** 1868-1919 At the Racetrack, Jockeys  
(Weill Bros.-Cotton Inc. Montgomery,Alabama)



for the first time



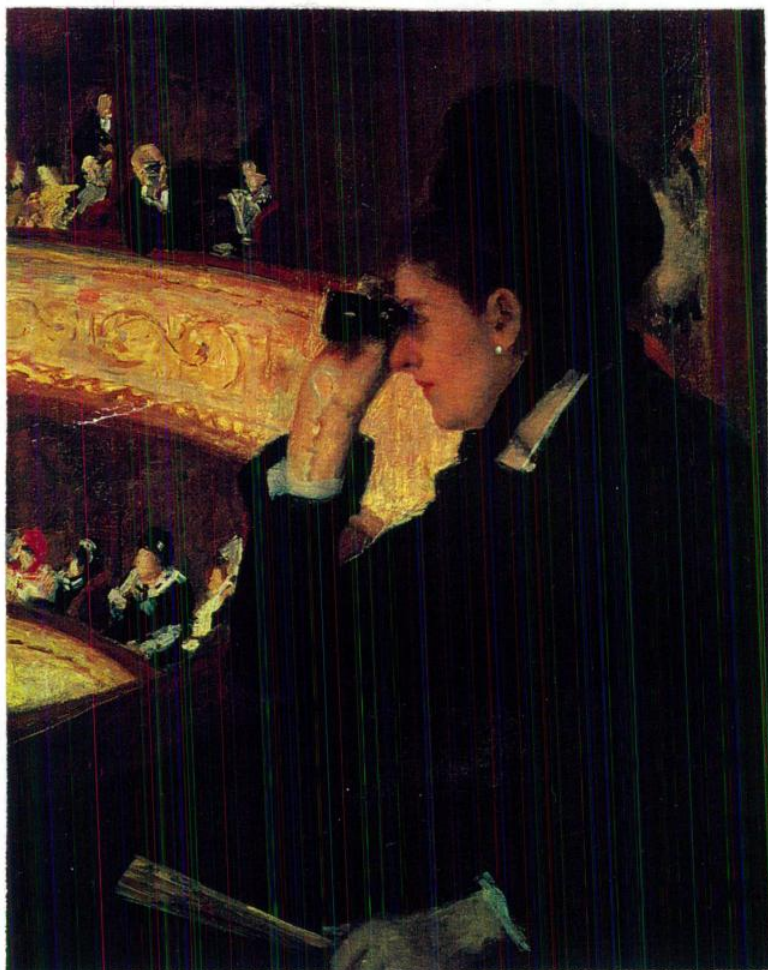


fig.3. Cassatt 1879-80 At the Opera  
(Boston, Museum of Fine Arts)





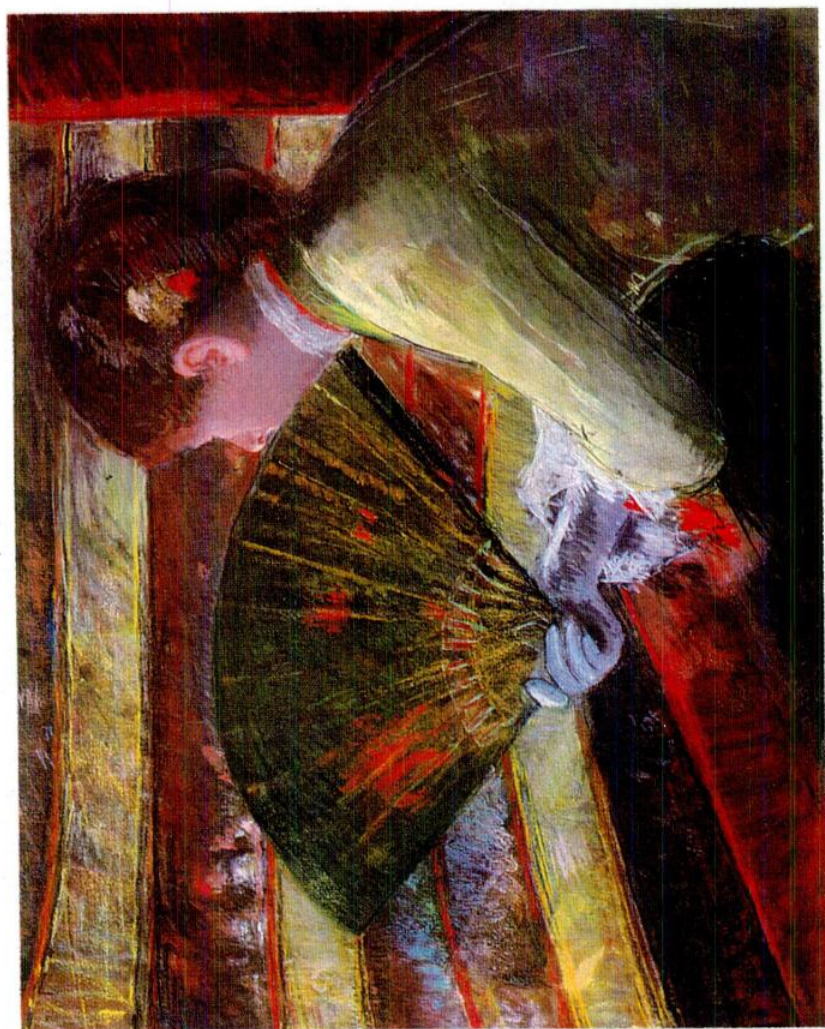


fig. 4. Cassatt 1879 In the Loge (Philadelphia Museum of Art)







fig.5. **Degas** 1873 Laundress  
(William Beadleston Inc)





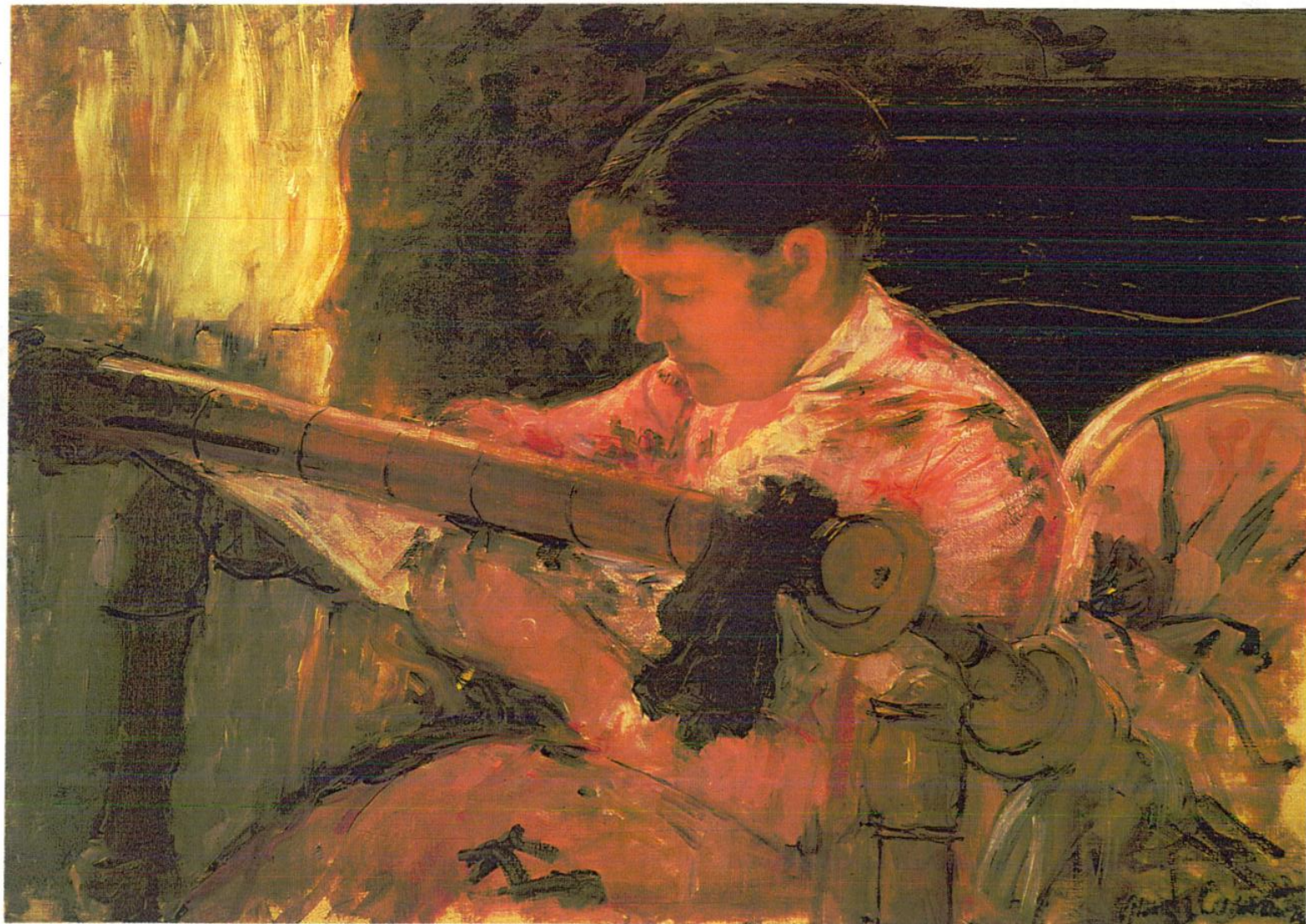


fig.6. Cassatt 1881 Lydia at a Tapestry Frame (*Flint Institute of Art*)





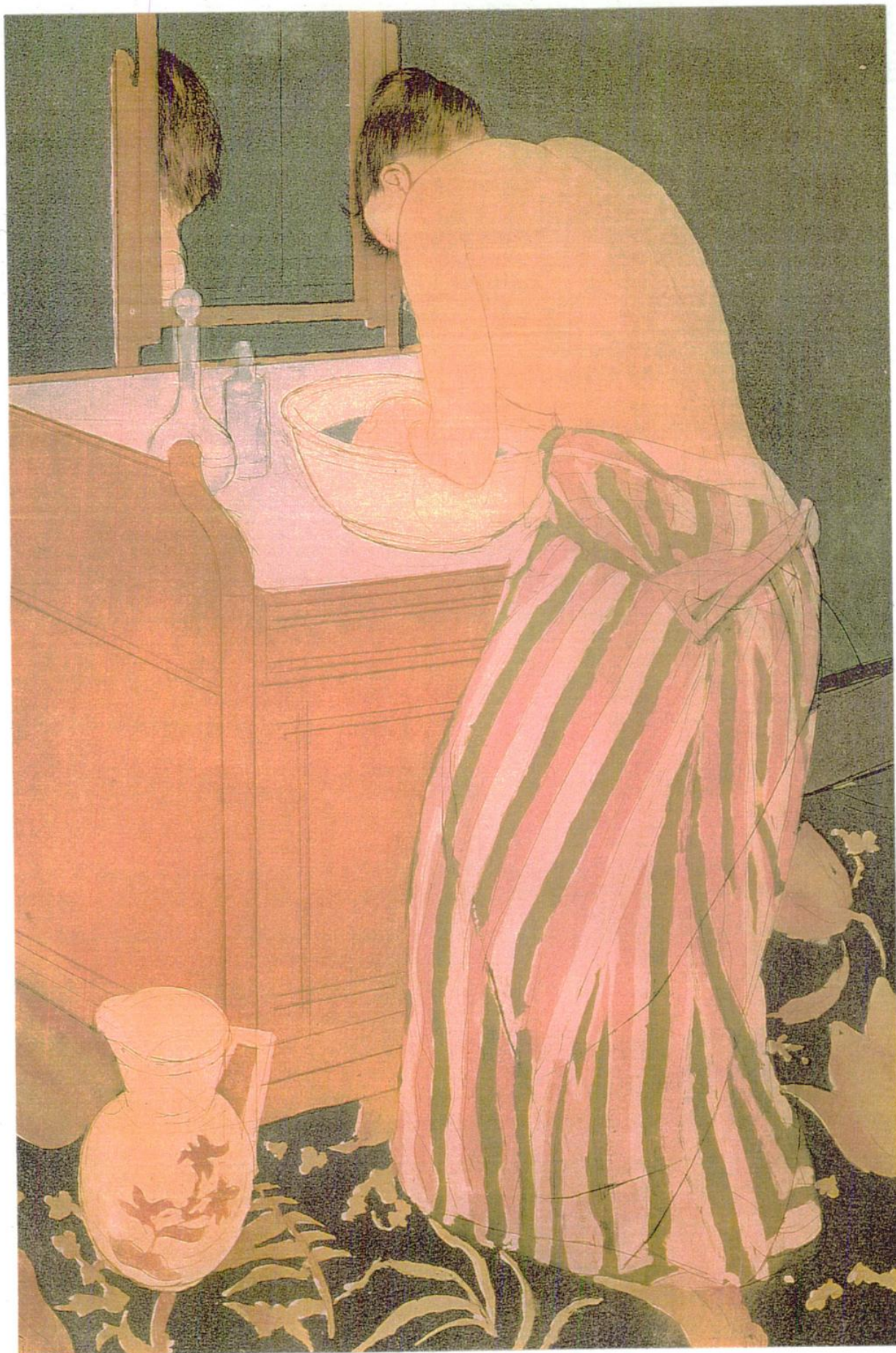


fig. 7. **Cassatt** 1891 Woman Bathing  
(New York, Metropolitan Museum of Arts)







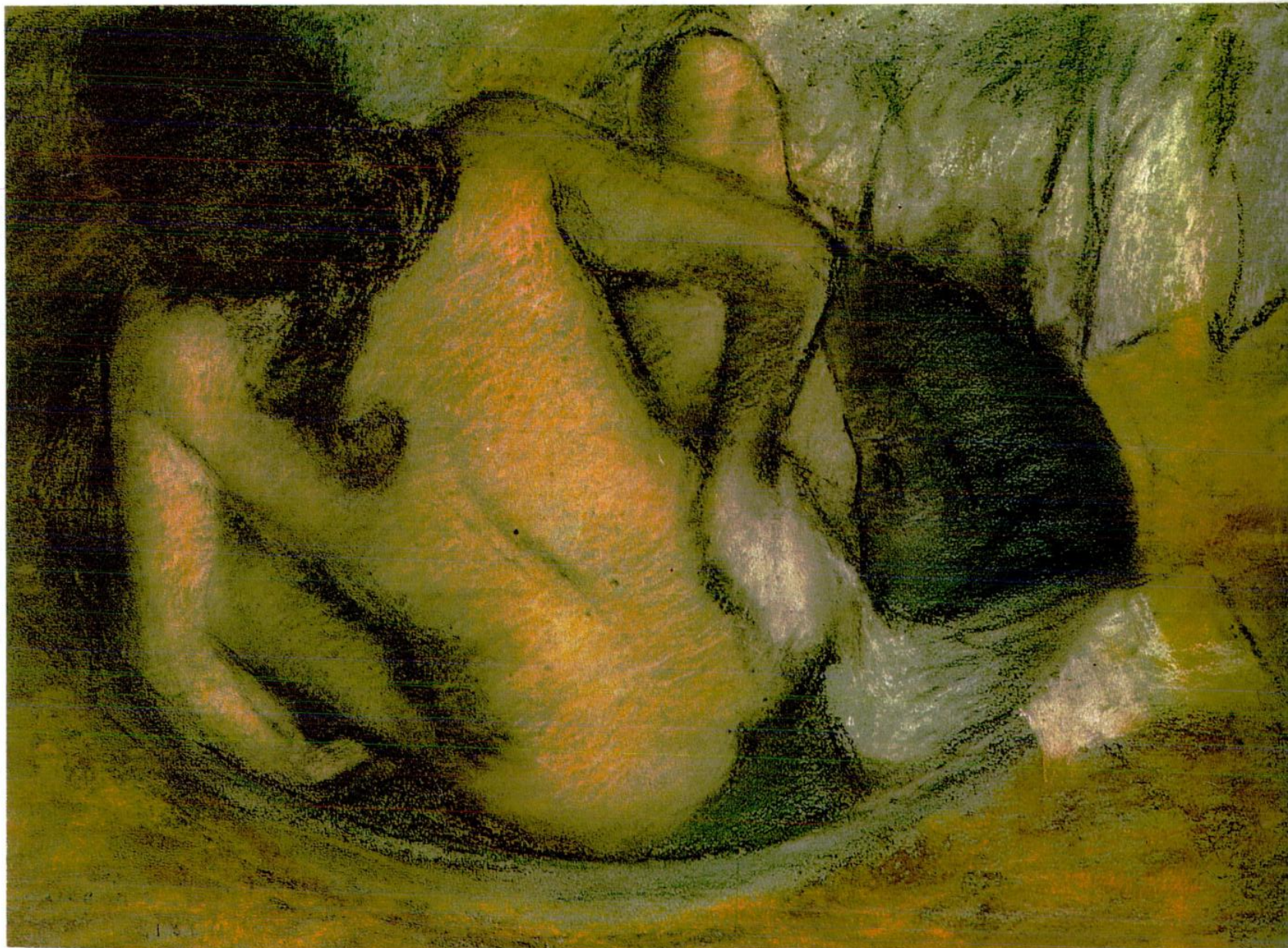


fig.8. **Degas** 1884 The Tub (*Glasgow Museums and Art Galleries, Burrell Collection*)







fig.9. **Cassatt** 1897 Breakfast in Bed  
(San Marino, California, E.Huntington Library  
and Art Gallery)









fig.10. **Degas** 1880 Admiration  
(Paris, Bibliothèque d'Art et d'Archéologie,  
Fondation Jacques Doucet)



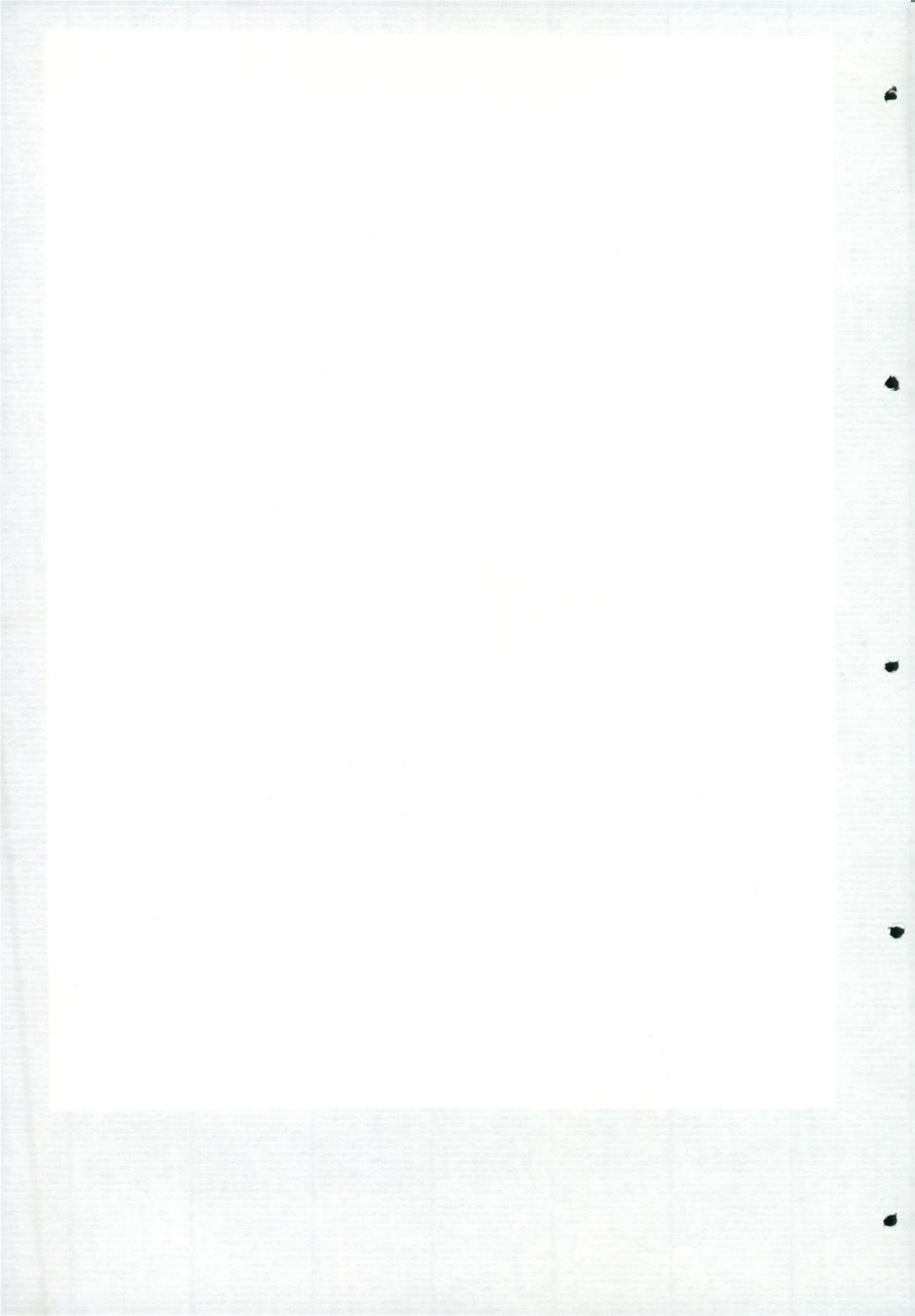




fig.11. **Degas** 1878-79 Ballet Dancer in her Dressing Room  
(Winterthur, Oscar Reinhardt)









fig.12. Cassatt 1880 5 O'Clock Tea (Boston, Museum of Fine Arts)







fig.13. **Degas** 1875 Place de la Concorde (*Vicomte Lepic and His Daughters*) *Destroyed during World War II*





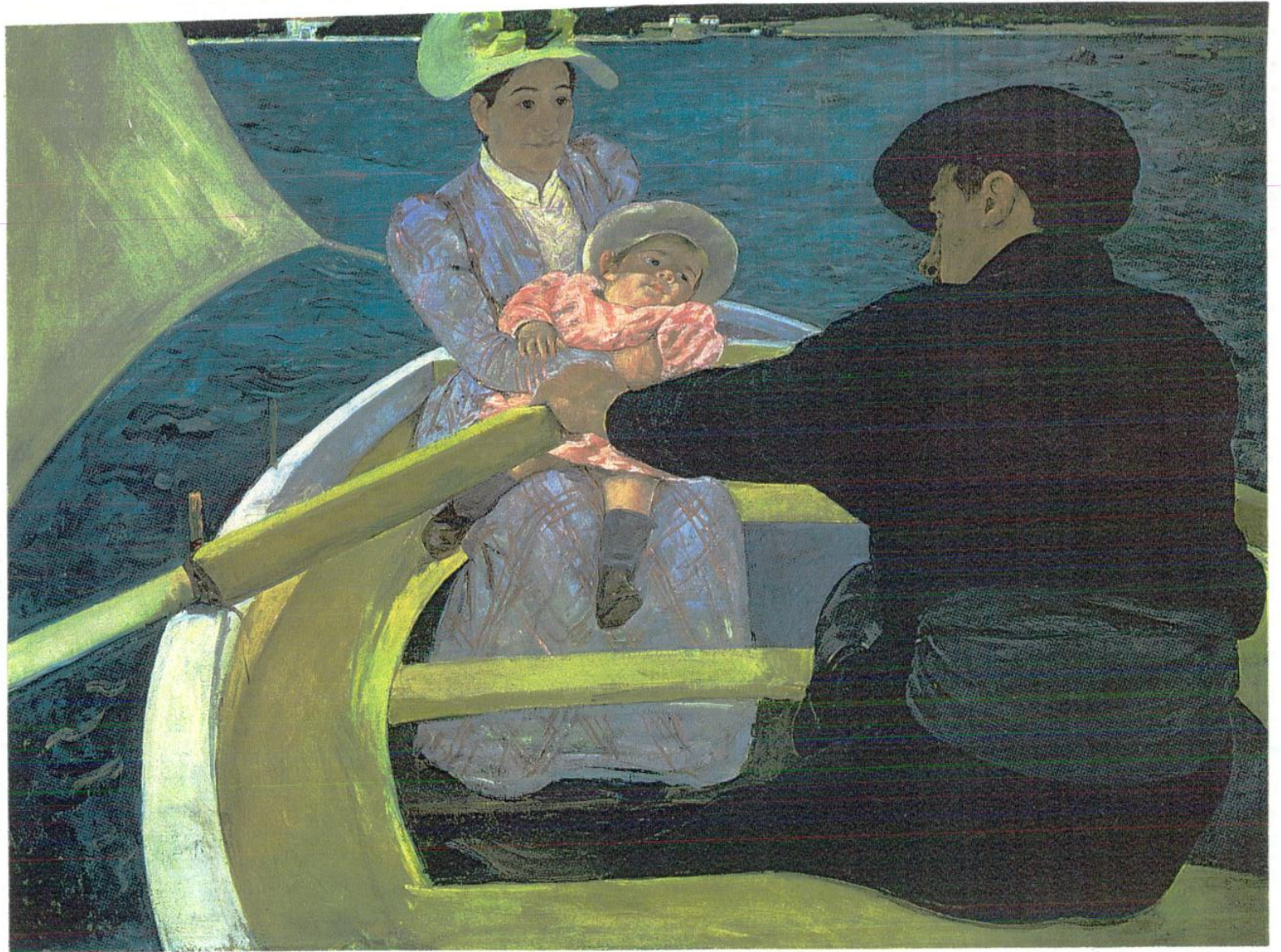


fig.14. Cassatt 1893-94 The Boating Party (Washington D.C. The National Gallery of Art)





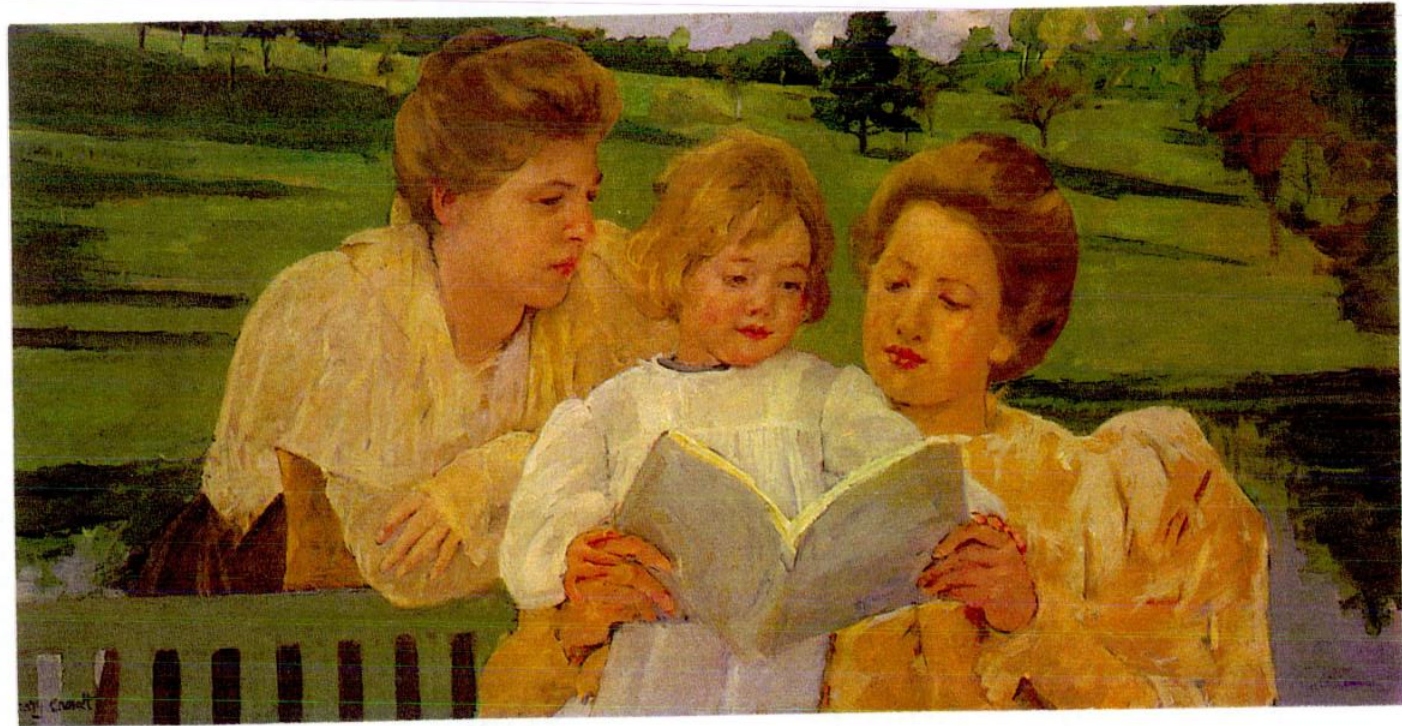


fig.15. **Cassatt** 1901 Family Group Reading (*Philadelphia Museum of Art*)







fig.16. **Degas** 1874 The Dancing Class  
(Paris, Musée d'Orsay)







fig.17. **Degas** 1879-83 The Washbasin  
(Williamstown, Massachusetts  
Sterling and Francine Clarke Art Institute)

