

Morisot and Cassatt the Exploration of Female Identity in the 19th Century

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Abstract: This paper explores the limitations of church and social influence on women in Europe prior to the 19th century. The author argues that the decline of the domestic economy in the mid-18th century made domestic work more associated with women, leaving most women unable to pursue elite professions such as music, dance, and art. During this period, influenced by the patriarchal social concept, most women did not have the opportunity to pursue these industries, but spent a lot of time and energy in the family, becoming slaves to the family and children. However, the birth of Impressionism reduced the constraints and restrictions of the academic art style and promoted the rise of female artists in the 19th century. This paper will compare the themes, perspectives and self-cognition of the two artists, Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt, to show that under the influence of Enlightenment thought, the two artists integrated female identity and family into their painting career, but expressed their different identities.

Keywords: Impressionism, Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt, Women Studies.

1. Introduction

Before the 19th century, the minds of most European women were constrained by the influence of the church and the society. Bridget Hill believes the death of the domestic economy in the mid-18th century meant that housework became more associated with women (Barker 1997). As a result of the thought of the patriarchal society, the vast majority of women at that time had no opportunity to pursue elite industries such as music, dance, art and so on. They spent a lot of time and effort on their families, turned themselves into vassals of their families and children. However, the birth of Impressionism reduced the shackles and restrictions of the academic art style and facilitated the rise of 19th-century female artists. In this paper, I will compare the subject matters, perspectives and self-cognitions of the two artists, Berthe Morisot and Marie Cassatt, to show that under the influence of the enlightenment, both artists combined female identity and family into their painting careers but express distinct recognitions of their own identities.

2. Background

2.1. Social background

In the 19th century, France experienced the baptism of Enlightenment thought, which promoted the emancipation of women's minds, some women started to have the right to enjoy equal treatment as men. Similarly, in the North American continent, the Enlightenment wave also had a great impact on the guiding principles of education. As R. G. Paulston, an American historian of education, put it, "it (the Enlightenment) introduced some new ideas into culture and politics. This influence represents a transient but strongly interdependent overall ideological influence." (Paulston 1968) Under such background, the status of women in both European and US societies has also changed qualitatively. They are no longer confined to families. Women begin to receive education and pursue freedom and equality in the context of the big society. They, especially those in the upper class, were able to get rid of the bondage of old-fashioned

ideas, which enabled them to have the opportunity and financial support to study art.

2.2. Artists Background

Under such social background, in the 19th century, two female artists who had a great influence on Impressionism stood out from different countries -- Morisot and Cassatt. Their family backgrounds had a certain influence on their later creative style. In 1841, Morisot was born in a wealthy government official's family in Bogeys, France. She had the luck to enter a professional art school and received an orthodox classical education. Cassatt, similarly, was one of the very few American artists to be active in French art in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, she was unconstrained by secular ideas and had a strong will to devote herself to her beloved art career. Born in Philadelphia, Cassatt clashed with her father at the age of twenty by declaring that she wanted to be an artist. At her insistence, her father finally allowed her to attend the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and she began painting. Both of them were talented people born after the Enlightenment. They made full use of their favorable conditions to pursue their dream of painting, got rid of the inherent social prejudice against women, and realized their value.

3. Inclusivity of Impressionism

Impressionist painting was extremely inclusive in the 19th century in terms of the use of color, theme, and talent acceptance, and this facilitated the environment for the two female artists.

Unlike academic artwork that focused on historic plots and social events, impressionists mainly pursued light, color change, and color effects. Beginning with impressionism, European artists tried to make painting free of the influence of literature and pay more attention to the language of painting itself (Zhao 2003). They want to give the viewer visual impact through the colors, lines and so on, regardless of what the content looks like, so impressionism is more inclusive than any other form of painting, not limited to expressing a fixed theme. Artists can sit anywhere in a city

and start painting. It is very friendly those who have never been exposed to art, so, unsurprisingly, it appealed to the two female artists under discussion today.

The Salon des Refuses showed the unique tolerance and individuality of Impressionism in another way, which opened up the door of impressionism for Morisot and Cassatt. Salon des Refuses, meaning "rejected exhibition" in French, is an annual exhibition holding the works rejected by the Paris Salon jury (Boime 1969). The participants included Edouard Manet, Camille Pissarro, Antoine khin Roy and John Joan. This exhibition gave the Impressionists more freedom because they did not have to obey the principles of the so-called authoritative academy. This paved the way for Morisot and Cassatt to be famous on the stage of Impressionism.

Morisot and Cassatt were not impressionists at first, both of them explored the field of realism for a while and eventually settle in Impressionism. Morisot studied with the academic artist Chagana and the classicist master Ingres's student Joseph Gishard when she was a girl. Their profound accumulation of classical painting laid a solid foundation for Morisot's realistic approach. Morisot met Manet in 1868 through the introduction of the artist Fontaine Latour, and the two established a deep friendship as "teacher, friend and confidant." Morisot became a constant presence in Manet's paintings and modelled the woman in white in his famous *Balcony*. As a leading figure of avant-garde art, Manet is the guide and leader of Morisot on the road of Impressionist art (Ma 2021).

In Cassatt's early years, she studied painting with Jean Leon Gerome, the classicist master. Gerome was the most highly regarded classical master of his generation, a representative of the academy, and the most trusted court artist of Napoleon Bonaparte. However, Cassatt remained suspicious of classicism until the realism of Manet and Courbet's paintings in the Salon des Refuses of 1868 gave her a new shock. Their bold rebellious themes and rough brushstroke influenced Impressionism as a whole, as well as the young Cassatt. In 1875, when Salon rejected Cassatt's portrait of her sister Lydia, Impressionist master Edward Degas took the opportunity to invite Cassatt to join the Impressionist group the following year (Yang 2016). It was because Impressionism was inclusive enough that it became a breeding ground for the art of Morisot and Cassatt.

4. A Female Perspective

The works of Morisot and Cassatt have similarities in the subject matter of their paintings. They are keen on the portrayal of independent women and family relations and have their unique female perspectives and views on the cognition of female characters. Most of their works mainly reflect the theme of a domestic setting, especially the relationship between mother and children.

The subject matter of Morisot's paintings changed markedly before and after marriage. Morisot worked mainly on family themes and wanted to solidify the sweetness and intimacy of moments through artistic creation. In 1872, *Cradle* by Morisot was created, and it was exhibited with other works of hers when Morisot took part in the first Impressionist exhibition. In *The Cradle*, an elegant young mother is seen looking down at her newborn baby. The baby is placed in a cradle, which takes up nearly half of the canvas. The gauze curtain of the cradle covers the baby, but the delicate and lovely body of the baby also visible to the audience. Morisot's personal feelings flourish in this painting:

the main character is her sister Idema who is gazing affectionately at her daughter Planck. The rounded lines on the two beloved characters and the soft colors enriched the very simple epitome of life with strong appeal, and the whole picture seems quiet and peaceful. The triangular composition makes the picture look very balanced and stable, and the use of faint yellow and white gives a sense of purity, which also reflects Morisot's emotional world and the warmth towards her family.

After getting married, Morisot's newly gained freedom was reflected in the background of her painting, but her theme remains unchanged. Morisot and Eugene Manet were married in 1878 and had a lovely daughter, which provided much of Morisot's creative inspiration. With the freedom she never had before she was married, Morisot had more opportunities to work outdoors. The background of the painting created afterwards is no longer a narrow interior, but has flowers, trees, and a wider sky. However, the theme of her creation is still closely related to the family. Morisot painted *Eugene Manet and His Daughter at Bougival* in her mansion in Bougival, outside Paris, where the family of three lived at the time. The outline of the figure and the overall colour seem to become blurry because of the sunlight. With a large number of color blocks pile up together, the picture exudes a gentle and quiet atmosphere. Eugene, dressed nicely as a gentleman, is sitting on a bench in the garden, looking rather stiff and nervous, because his daughter is using his legs as a table for toys, and it seems that he was afraid that if he accidentally moved, his daughter would drop her toys on the floor, which might cause her to cry. Similar to *Cradle*, this work also vividly shows the carefulness of love and the harmonious atmosphere between parent and daughter. The strong parent-child love is also reflected in the brilliant blooming flowers in the background, which makes the audience seem to be filled with strong affection and a happy atmosphere when looking at this work.

Cassatt's preferred subject matters are similar to Morisot's in the sense that they are mainly based on family, and most of the time, she was also trying to depict the glory of motherhood and intimate moments between parents and child. *Taking a Bath* depicts a gentle mother sitting her daughter on her lap and bending down to wash her daughter's feet from an overhead perspective. In the picture, the mother's left hand is holding her daughter's waist tightly, and she is worried about her daughter falling because she is not sitting firmly, while her right hand is gently washing the stains on her daughter's feet. The mother and daughter's heads lean on each other as if nothing can disturb this intimate moment, and the warmth between the mother and daughter is vividly reflected. The female artist Cassatt once said, "There are two paths for painters to take: one is the easy road, the other is the rough road." She claimed to have taken the latter route. She may have "failed" as a woman, as she said, but she succeeded as a painter. Although Cassatt never got married in her life, she still had a unique view of the relationship between mother and family. These paintings reflect her respect and appreciation for the role of mother, as well as her desire to become a mother.

5. Divergent Expression of Culture and Cognition

Although Morisot and Cassatt are often grouped together as female impressionism artists in the 19th century, they have very different representation of female figures in their works.

These differences are caused by various factors, but the most important one is that they are deeply influenced by the different cultures of France and America, as well as the different emotional tones they put into the characters in the paintings. Morisot, especially in her early paintings, mostly represents herself as a woman constrained by the surroundings, while Cassatt's works show much less concerns over the so-called norms.

The protagonist of Morisot's *At the Ball* is an "alternate self" that was constrained by social norms of the upper class. She very much sympathizes with the woman in the painting. The woman is elegant and dignified. She wears a white evening dress with several flowers of different colors on her chest, which makes the pure white evening dress look less monotonous. She leans back in her chair and holds a folding fan in her left hand, slightly against her cheek. The woman in the painting, though graceful, looks stiff, like a beautiful puppet whose soul has been removed. The woman in the painting, known as Mademoiselle M, has the same brown eyes and black hair as Morisot and is dressed in the style Morisot preferred to wear. As depicted in an 1885 self-portrait, Miss M shares Morisot's gentleness and reticence, and they both have the modesty of upper-class women -- sublime and well-informed. Although painting another woman, similar details suggest that she is using herself as a reference. Through the painting, we sense her unwillingness to attend formal upper-class parties. Talking and exchanging views on art freely in a cafe is her truly desired social activity. But these were impossible for her at that time. She could only sit in a chair like Miss M in the painting. We can easily imagine that people around Miss M were likely talking about luxuries, tobacco and other topics, but she seemed indifferent to them staring at the front with empty and slack eyes. The frame of the painting is like a cage, she is restricted in this small area of the chair, losing freedom.

On the contrary, the socialite in *Lydia with a Pearl Necklace* by Cassatt symbolizes Cassatt's dissatisfaction and struggle against the ideological feudal era. Unlike Morisot's melancholy at the Ball, the woman who appears in the theatre, Cassatt's sister Lydia, is more radiant. The brush strokes in this painting are very clear and bold, and the overall tone is also based on enthusiastic colors such as red, orange and yellow, which makes people feel warm. Lydia wears a low-cut evening gown that is more revealing than Morisot's Miss M. She also holds a folding fan in her right hand, but the fan is folded in her lap, and she does not use it to hide her face like Miss M. The upper half of her breasts are exposed - Cassatt does not think there is a stigma attached to showing off the body that women are proud of. Lydia's toothy smile is also rare in the upper society debutantes, where people were asked to have perfect elegant manners. Most of the families were also committed to developing their daughter as a lady

who "can be showed off at parties". Women smile instead of grin. However, Cassatt deliberately contradicted the public aesthetic, which aroused some controversy at that time. As Paul Gauguin commented, Marie Cassatt was attractive but more powerful (Yao 2006). Cassatt's unique sense of power also comes from her personality. In her 1878 self-portrait, she presents clear differences in self-recognition from Morisot -- the 34-year-old Cassatt is leaning against a chair with an ungraceful posture, but her expression on the face, eyes, and slightly tilted head seem very haughty and daring to the world. Her life is destined to be rich because of her family background, but she did not seem to be satisfied with this kind of life and had the gut for taking risks. Getting married and raising children was a constraint for her, so she took on herself and decided to put her time and energy into pursuing a career in art. Cassatt's pride, independence and love of painting put her at the forefront of her time as a pioneer.

6. Conclusion

Although Morisot did not give up her lifelong happiness for the sake of her artistic career like Cassatt, they both provided new thoughts and reinforced women's career independence in the 19th century. At the same time, Morisot also proved that art is not a burden or an accessory to the family, but an independent career, a charming and elegant industry, which is justifiable for people to pursue. Even with their "rebellious" dreams of becoming pioneer female artists, Morisot and Cassatt can follow through and shine their unique light in their field. Morisot and Cassatt were famous for their style and enrichment in Impressionism and history of art as a whole.

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