

A Woman in the World of Art – the Case of Mary Cassatt

Kobieta w świecie sztuki – przypadek Mary Cassatt

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Keywords

art, American painting, Cassatt, woman, Impressionism

Kluczowe słowa

sztuka, malarstwo amerykańskie, Cassatt, kobieta, impresjonizm

Abstract

Visual arts constitute a significant segment of broadly understood culture. American painting includes numerous excellent artists, such as Winslow Homer, Edward Hopper, Andy Warhol, and many others, and encompasses all fields of visual art – from landscape and historical painting to Abstract Expressionism. The question of women's presence in culture or – to be more precise – in the world of art is definitely a broad and interesting issue. The aim of this paper is to present and analyse the artistic output of an outstanding American woman painter Mary Cassatt and her influence on American culture. Painting was for a long time a male domain. Cassatt – the only American artist to exhibit with the Impressionists in Paris – can be undoubtedly called a pioneer.

Abstrakt

Sztuki wizualne stanowią istotny segment szeroko rozumianej kultury. Dzieje malarstwa amerykańskiego obejmują szereg znakomitych artystów, jak Winslow Homer, Edward Hopper czy Andy Warhol i wielu innych, jak również rozmaite pola sztuki wizualnej – od krajobrazu i malarstwa historycznego aż po abstrakcyjny ekspresjonizm. Kwestia obecności kobiet w kulturze czy – mówiąc bardziej precyzyjnie – w świecie sztuki to z pewnością szeroki i interesujący temat. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie i analiza twórczości wybitnej amerykańskiej malarzki Mary Cassatt i jej wpływu na amerykańską kulturę. Malarstwo było przez długi czas męską domeną. Cassatt – jedyną Amerykankę, która wystawiała swe prace u impresjonistów w Paryżu – można niewątpliwie nazywać pionierką.

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«Cassatt's art expresses her notions of feminism through her portrayal of women as contemplative and spiritual beings as opposed to decorative objects».

– Erica H. Hirshler, associate curator of
*American paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*¹.

American Painting – introduction

American art, at first, imitated European styles; then, however, it was gradually becoming more and more independent. Most of early American art – late eighteenth century through the early nineteenth century – consists of history painting and, to a great degree, portraits (like in the case of the great genius of colonial painting John Singleton Copley).

American professor of art history, Wayne Craven, underlines the fact that the country was then just taking shape and needed this kind of painting:

America was changing from an assortment of provincial colonies on the periphery of civilization to a unified nation taking its position near the center of the world stage. Now a country with heroes and international figures, there was need of painters who could tell of its greatness, its victories, its ideologies².

Next, the artistic output of American realism representatives gained popularity. In the 1820s, the Hudson River School of landscape painting was established. Important American landscape and plein-air painters included: the founder of the American school of landscape painting Thomas Cole, famous for the grandeur and dramatic quality of his wilderness scenes, (“the first artist whose scenes of wilderness and descriptive views of well-known places struck a resounding cord among Americans”³), George Inness, who first painted in an American mode and then was converted to a European style, as well as Cole’s pupil Frederic Edwin Church, whose greatest pictures can be characterized by “meticulous detail within a broad panorama”⁴.

The Ashcan School of painting, whose core was known as The Eight, (New York c.1892-1919), was a progressive set of American painters and illustrators who depicted New York City life in a gritty, unpolished style. The

¹ G. Gouveia, *Essential Mary Cassatt*, New York 2001, p. 105.

² W. Craven, *American Art: History and Culture*, London 2003, p. 136.

³ Ibidem, p. 200.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 207.

group included Robert Henri, George Bellows or John Sloan. One of Henri's students, a prominent realist painter known for his melancholy depictions of every-day alienation, Edward Hopper, is famous both for his urban and rural scenes.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Impressionists with their style of painting characterized by loose brushwork and vivid colours were in fashion. After World War II, New York – replacing Paris – became the centre of modern art. It was there that new trends were born and works which fascinated the whole world were created: peculiar Abstract Expressionism of Jackson Pollock, Pop-Art (example: Andy Warhol), as well as the urban graffiti. Although the world of painting was a male domain for a long time, the output of prominent female artists over the centuries has showcased a wide range of ideas and is worth discussing. As for American painting, Mary Cassatt is an intriguing example. Before we analyse her life and artistic output, let us say a few words about Impressionism – the style she is associated with.

American Impressionism – a Handful of Reflections

Impressionism developed in France between 1867 and 1880 as an alternative to the French academic manner. This anti-academic painting was turned towards naturalism and based on an individual impression⁵. The subject matter was becoming less formal. The common topic to the Impressionists was everyday life; their works contained numerous scenes depicting leisure time entertainments. As British historian of art Mary Hollingsworth puts it, “An impressionist painter strove at depicting and perpetuating fleeting impressions, evoked in him by means of a scene happening before his eyes”⁶. The artists aimed at the optical impression of what was luminous and transitory. It was easier to paint outdoors on account of the smaller format size. The typical features of this painting were: quick and expressive brushstrokes, bold and vibrant colors, and an emphasis on the play of natural light.

This is how the aforementioned Wayne Craven sees it:

Its [Impressionism's] artists preferred sunlight to shadows; light air, and color as experienced out of doors; the fleeting daily scene as opposed to mythological gods or religious icons; the image as registered in an instant on the ret-

⁵ M. Hollingsworth, *Sztuka w dziejach człowieka* (orig. *Art in World History*), transl. S. Rościcki, Warszawa 2006, p. 480. Translation mine – M. M.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 426.

ina of the eye rather than the studied composition of the academic painters, and a technique consisting of a multicolored patchwork of tiny brushstrokes⁷.

The most prominent exponents of American Impressionism include: James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), William Merritt Chase (1849-1916), Theodore Robinson (1852-96), Julian Alden Weir (1852-1919), John H. Twahtman (1853-1902), John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), Childe Hassam (1859-1935), and, last, but not least, Mary Cassatt (1844-1926), whom we will soon discuss in more detail. They all contributed to making Impressionism an established and accepted style in America⁸.

The important role which Mary Cassatt played in this period of American painting is mentioned by art historian William H. Gerdts:

French Impressionist painting would not be correctly identified in America until it was seen in large numbers. Similarly, American artists were rather haphazardly deemed “Impressionists” until the aesthetic was wholeheartedly adopted by native artists, and this occurred only in the late 1880s, with one exception. That exception was Mary Cassatt, and even in her case there is some confusion regarding the appearance of her work in America during the crucial decades of the 1870s and ‘80s⁹.

To American, especially cosmopolitan American painters, styles that had been or were being developed in Europe – from Renaissance art to French academicism, to Barbizon realism and Impressionism as well – were usually unselfconsciously accepted as the cultural fountainhead out of which America’s own culture should emerge¹⁰. In fact, numerous American artists simply “...felt compelled to assimilate the lessons of Paris, which remained the influential capital of the art world”¹¹. In other words, many of them tried to adapt the French style to their own distinctly American subjects.

According to Marek Gołębiowski, who specialises in American culture, the attractiveness of Europe and the facilitation as far as travel was concerned had huge consequences for American art:

The dominant component in the development of American painting in the last quarter of the 19th century was the attractiveness of Europe. On the one hand, European painting at that time was plentiful, rich and creative, while on the other, new inventions facilitated travel across the Atlantic; consequently,

⁷ W. Craven, op. cit., p. 349.

⁸ See for example: W. H. Gerdts, *American Impressionism*, New York-London 2001.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 32.

¹⁰ W. Craven, op. cit., p. 330.

¹¹ E. B. Davis, E. E. Hirshler, K. E. Quinn, J. L. Comey, E. E. Roberts, *American Painting*, Boston 2003, p. 15.

Americans started to study in Europe in large numbers. Some of them – like Whistler, Sargent and Mary Cassatt – played an eminent role in European painting¹².

Yet these American-European artists did not lose their American identity:

In the 19th century, it was not unusual for well-to-do Americans to visit Europe to enjoy its culture or to move there permanently. For the most part, these expatriates remained “definitely and frankly American,” as Cassatt described herself. They stuck close to family, friends, and other Americans, about whom they read in newspapers like the *American Register*¹³.

In the United States in the late nineteenth century, there was a visible tension between two camps of artists. One of them wanted to accept foreign styles and incorporate them into the local painting, the other one tried to defend itself against any novelties. In other words, the continuing cultural tug-of-war between the powerful allure of Europe and a strong and clear American chauvinism is evident not only in painting (also in literature). According to Craven much incorporation took place:

Realism was not the only potent force in American painting in the late nineteenth century, for there were many artists who associated themselves with a variety of international, cosmopolitan art movements. Numerous foreign styles were introduced to the mainstream of American painting, mainly by American expatriate painters studying abroad. American artists contributed significantly to the international movements, and artists such as Whistler and Sargent were as well-known as any painter of their day¹⁴.

Talking of American Impressionism, one should emphasize that it was not an exact copy of its French archetype. There were certain visible differences:

By the early twentieth century, Impressionism was firmly ensconced in the United States and found adherents from Maine to California. American painters adapted French Impressionism to their own taste. Although they used bright colors and unblended brushwork, they did not allow the figures they depicted outdoors to dissolve in light, preferring to give them weight and substance. They most often selected attractive subjects, creating images of

¹² M. Gołębiowski, *Dzieje kultury Stanów Zjednoczonych/The History of American Culture*, Warszawa 2004, p. 223. Translation mine – M. M.

¹³ G. Gouveia, op. cit., p. 11.

¹⁴ W. Craven, op. cit., p. 324.

sunlit gardens and girls dressed in white, and they infrequently explored the grittier subjects of industry or urban life¹⁵.

As Gołębiowski states, “Even after coming into contact with Impressionism, the bleak format of romantic sentiment and nostalgia did not allow to be easily eradicated from American painting of the last decades of the 19th century”¹⁶. Therefore, it definitely retained its own character.

Mary Cassatt (1844–1926) – an American in Paris

Mary Cassatt (1844–1926) ranks among the greatest artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That she achieved this status, rare in any case, is even more astonishing because she was a woman and an American in a field dominated almost completely by European men¹⁷.

Mary Cassatt – one of the most prominent 19th-century American painters and an art pioneer – was one of the few Impressionist women painters. Some other examples include French artists Marie Bracquemond (1840–1916), Berthe Morisot (1841–1895) and Eva Gonzalès (1849–1883).

Cassatt was, and still is, considered one of the most important American expatriate artists of the late 1800s, along with John Singer Sargent and James McNeill Whistler. She worked within a wide range of mediums: oil paintings, pastels, etchings, aquatints, and even a massive wall mural. Her pictures, the majority of which were made in France, can now be found in private collections and in numerous museums all over the world. Cassatt remained in France for the rest of her life except for occasional trips to visit the United States, but retained the U.S. citizenship.

This single career woman and a Victorian suffragist, who remains a feminist role model today, was born into a prosperous, socially prominent family that gave her the emotional and financial support to be a professional artist. She studied painting at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where one of her classmates was future artist and infamous Academy head Thomas Eakins (1844–1916), and throughout Europe. Interestingly, she found that French art schools were even more restricted for women than they were in America, as The Ecole des Beaux-Arts did not accept women in its program¹⁸.

In Paris, the centre of the art world in the late 1860s, she began to enter her paintings in the Salon – an important art show held once a year. To be featured in the Salon, an artist had to submit his or her works to a conserv-

¹⁵ E. B. Davis, et. al., op. cit., p. 139.

¹⁶ M. Gołębiowski, op. cit., p. 222.

¹⁷ A. D. Breeskin, *Mary Cassatt* [in:] <http://www.marycassatt.com/> (dostęp: 10 VI 2016).

¹⁸ G. Gouveia, op. cit., p. 12–14.

ative jury of Academy members and be accepted by them. Cassatt was not fond of the strict rules of classical art and felt tired of the conservative approach taught in the academies. Soon, she started to explore painting with bright and bold colours.

The turning point came in 1875, when "...Mary Cassatt for the first time came across the artistic output of Edgar Degas, whose works she saw at an exhibition of one of the galleries. The works of the French artist enchanted her"¹⁹. In 1877, Degas himself asked her to exhibit with the Impressionists. She agreed with great joy: "I had already recognized who were my true masters. I admired [the painters] Manet, Courbet, and Degas. I despised conventional art. I began to live"²⁰. Cassatt believed that in this way she could start to work independently, not worrying about the opinions of the jury. Apart from this strong desire to be independent, "nothing predestined Mary Cassatt – a daughter of a rich American banker – to abandon a calm life of a painter exhibiting at the Salon and choose the ungrateful situation of a woman who joins a bunch of the most ridiculed artists"²¹. She "...thus became one of only three women, and the only American, ever to join the French Impressionists"²². In a review of one of her works, Henry B. Fuller wrote for *The Chicago Record*: "Indeed, Miss Cassatt has a reputation for being strong and daring; she works with men in Paris on their own ground"²³.

As for Cassatt's masters, as art lover Georgette Gouveia describes it:

These experimental painters shared a passion for things modern and refused to go along with the demands of the Salon. They declared their independence from the jury system and saw themselves as the wave of the future, with their light-filled canvases, free-spirited brush strokes, and exuberant use of color. [...] Even though the Impressionists were working within a wide range of art forms and styles, they were linked by their shared desire to create modern, unsentimental, spontaneous art that reflected a specific moment in time²⁴.

Since then Cassatt focused her attention on depicting scenes from contemporary life. Under the Impressionists' influence, Cassatt revised her technique, composition, and use of colour and light, manifesting her admiration

¹⁹ F. C. Marchetti, *Malarstwo amerykańskie (American painting)*, transl. H. Borkowska, Warszawa 2005, p. 118. Translation mine – M. M.

²⁰ G. Gouveia, op. cit., p. 37.

²¹ J. Rewald, *Historia impresjonizmu (The history of Impressionism)*, transl. J. Guze, Warszawa 1985, p. 317. Translation mine – M. M.

²² E. B. Davis, et. al., p. 141.

²³ F. K. Pohl, *Framing America: A Social History of American Art*, New York 2012, p. 311.

²⁴ G. Gouveia, op. cit., p. 31.

for the works of the French avant garde, especially Degas and Manet²⁵. “What she gained from Degas was a controlled spontaneity, a disciplined freedom of paint application, and a devotion to contemporary subject matter portrayed in an objective, candid manner”²⁶. Under his influence, she started to show interest in human physicality in a very realistic way²⁷.

The artistic output of Mary Cassatt, who did an almost impossible thing, separating social life from her work, never making compromises, was warmly appreciated in French artistic circles. Cassatt is a good example of an American painter who chose to live the expatriate life abroad and partake of the exciting new influences bursting upon the art world as it made its way toward modernism.

Impressionist Pioneer – Promotion of Impressionism in America

Cassatt played an important role in promotion of Impressionism in the United States, the country in which so far, apart from landscapes, historical painting had dominated. As it has been mentioned, European or, to be more precise, Paris influences began to enjoy growing interest of American elites in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Impressionism started to become more and more popular among vast numbers of American painters and collectors. Cassatt, from her early days in Paris, encouraged the collection of old European masters and the French avant-garde²⁸ and soon became one of the foremost advocates of French painting in America. Thanks to her counsel and advice, “...the vanguard of American collectors [...] were actively buying works by many of her French colleagues²⁹. According to Francesca Marchetti, the author of *American Painting*,

Mary Cassatt, to a much greater degree than John Sargent, contributed to the acceptance of Impressionism in the United States. Despite the fact that in the 1870s she settled down in Paris and rarely visited her motherland, she constantly kept in touch with the elite of rich Philadelphia, giving advice to the greatest collectors as for the purchase of the works of Impressionist masters, mostly her favourite artist – Degas. Thus, in the last years of the 19th

²⁵ H. B. Weinberg, *Mary Stevenson Cassatt (1844–1926)*, Oct. 2004 [in:] http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cast/hd_cast.htm (dostęp: 10 VI 2016).

²⁶ W. H. Gerds, op. cit., p. 36.

²⁷ W. Beckett, *Siostra Wendy. Historia malarstwa. Wędrowki po historii sztuki zachodu (The Story of Painting. The Essential Guide to the History of Western Art)*, Warszawa 2000, p. 290–291.

²⁸ H. B. Weinberg, op. cit.

²⁹ E. B. Davis, et. al., op. cit., p. 15.

century, the American audience took to bright, cheerful scenes typical of that movement³⁰.

Cassatt's role as an advisor to art collectors benefited many public and private collections in the United States. In this way, perhaps even more than through her own works, she exerted a lasting influence on American taste. What should be underlined, as for American patrons who collected her work, as well as the work of her European (mostly French) contemporaries, they later bequeathed it to museums. To give just one example, an extensive collection of Impressionist art which used to belong to Louisine Elder Havemeyer, Cassatt's close friend, is currently a part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York³¹.

Even today, Mary Cassatt is considered to be one of the most influential artists, a real trendsetter, as well as an example to follow for a younger generation of (not only) female painters. Let us take a look at some of her greatest paintings.

Selected Works of Mary Cassatt

As a matter of fact, "...one can refer to Cassatt as a «full» Impressionist only during the years she exhibited with the Impressionists, 1879-86, and even then not in all her works"³². Art historian Barbara Novak emphasizes that Cassatt's Impressionism was a little "American": "...the fact remains that Cassatt made Impressionism weightier and more solid, rarely allowing light and color to disintegrate form. Indeed, contemporary French critics were astute enough to recognize that «she remains exclusively of *her* people»"³³. With time, her style continued to evolve away from Impressionism in favour of a simpler, more straightforward approach.

Like the Impressionists generally, she chose subjects that were casual, informal vignettes of daily life – scenes at the theater or opera, a boating party or a carriage ride through the Bois de Boulogne. Besides, taking special interest in the woman suffrage movement in her home country, she frequently created images of the social and private lives of women. As Gerdts puts it, "Cassatt painted mostly women and children, separately and together – sophisticated young women, women of fashion, women in upper-class

³⁰ F. C. Marchetti, op. cit., p. 108. Translation mine – M. M.

³¹ H. B. Weinberg, op. cit.

³² H. W. Gerdts, op. cit., p. 36-37.

³³ B. Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century: Realism, Idealism, and the American Experience*, 2007.

dwellings or at the theater”³⁴. Her women were often engaged in a particular domestic activity as well, with special emphasis on the intimate relations between mothers and children.

Cassatt never had children of her own and her fascination with children and mothers is sometimes related to her own unmarried and childless state. This theme – treated with warmth and naturalness in paintings, pastels, and prints³⁵ – became Cassatt’s trademark. Her pictures are distinguished by great firmness in drawing and boldness of tone and colour.

Let us take a look at just a tiny selection of important Cassatt’s works starting with her depictions of entertainments. Theatre, opera or racetrack enjoyed great popularity among Parisians who truly loved such diversions. These were the places to see and be seen. The Impressionists willingly took advantage of these spectacles of modern life, tempted by a variety of lights and reflections. Mary Cassatt was no exception – she created a series of theatre scenes in the late 1870s.

In her painting *In the Loge* (1878), her goal was to convey the act of concentrating on one thing and of taking in the rest hurriedly. This photographic technique is typical of the Impressionist style that Cassatt embraced in the 1870³⁶. Georgette Gouveia describes the painting in the following way:

Cassatt plays with shifting viewpoints by drawing our attention to a woman in the foreground who looks out to the left of the canvas, and to a man in the background looking straight out at the woman and at us. In this sense, the painting is a masterpiece of perspective. At the same time, Cassatt comments on the eternal balancing act of womanhood – the notion of being on display even when you do not wish to be on display, and yet also relishing the right to display yourself³⁷.

As Elliot B. Davis et. al. put it, “Cassatt’s painting explores the very act of looking, breaking down the traditional boundaries between the observer and the observed, the audience and the performer”³⁸.

Woman with a Pearl Necklace in a Loge (*Lydia in a Loge*) (1879), which shows visible influences of Degas, is another example of a theatre painting. It “...may also be the first truly Impressionist painting by an American to be so recognized and discussed – and condemned, which is not surprising given the early date – in the American critical press”³⁹. It presents a woman (prob-

³⁴ H. W. Gerdts, op. cit., p. 38.

³⁵ H. B. Weinberg, op. cit.

³⁶ G. Gouveia, op. cit., p. 48.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 46-48.

³⁸ E. B. Davis, et. al., op. cit., p. 141.

³⁹ H. W. Gerdts, p. 37.

ably the painter's sister) seated in front of a mirror with the balconies of the opera reflected behind her. Gerdts states:

Her sister, Lydia, is depicted in soft reflected illumination from a chandelier, visible in the background mirror in which Lydia's back and the range of boxes also appear – the background, then, is a reflected "illusion" rather than the real space of the theater. [...] ⁴⁰.

Children emerged as a major subject in Cassatt's paintings at the end of the 1870s (*Little Girl in a Blue Armchair* from 1879) and soon the maternal theme began to be explored by her, like in the picture *Mother About to Wash Her Sleepy Child* (1880). "Bright, shining colours characterize especially the canvases depicting beach scenes, which came into being in resorts to which the artist went together with her mother"⁴¹. *Children Playing on the Beach* (1884) is such a picture.

As Marchetti puts it,

With the sensitivity typical of herself, the artist presented the figures from a very close viewpoint, from a place, in which there could have been the children's mother. Cassatt completely focused on portraiting two girls playing in the sand so that the shadows were eliminated, and the sea in the background is far away and unclear⁴².

The description from The National Gallery of Art tells us:

Children Playing on a Beach demonstrates Mary Cassatt's skill at capturing the natural attitudes of children. The intent expression on one child's face, the lowered angles of their heads, and the set of their shoulders suggest complete concentration on their activities. Especially appealing is the awkward way in which the toddler on the left grips the long handle of her shovel while holding the rim of the bucket with her other pudgy hand. [...] To keep the center of attention on the little girls, Cassatt treated the seascape background more loosely; the boats on the ocean melt into a haze of natural light. She emphasized surface pattern by repeating the accents of dark dresses under crisp white pinafores⁴³.

The Child's Bath (1893), a picture with the Impressionist use of bright colours and absence of dark shadows, in which Cassatt adopted a high viewpoint, depicts a woman holding a child in her lap and washing it in a small

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 37.

⁴¹ F. C. Marchetti, op. cit., p. 118. Translation mine – M. M.

⁴² Ibidem, p. 121. Translation mine – M. M.

⁴³ *Children Playing on he Beach* [in:] <https://www.nga.gov/collection/gallery/ggcassattptg/ggcassattptg-52163.html> (dostęp: 10 VI 2016).

basin. “The picture has a strong design, careful balance of colors, and very precise drawing. Many critics greatly admired *The Bath* at the 1893 show, and the painting became the most famous Mary Cassatt ever did”⁴⁴. In this work, Cassatt “...employed unconventional devices such as cropped forms, bold patterns and outlines, and a flattened perspective, all of which derived from her study of Japanese woodblock prints”⁴⁵.

Apart from exploring the theme of mother and child, Cassatt also “...enjoyed open-air scenes where the natural sunlight flooded the canvas, which became saturated with bright colours...”⁴⁶. *The Boating Party* (1893/1894) – a depiction of a typical nineteenth-century middle-class outing – is among the painter’s most ambitious canvases. Its meaning remains open to interpretation. Gouveia describes it in the following way:

A major work from 1893–94, *The Boating Party*, combines three crucial elements found in Cassatt’s work over the years: storytelling, key to her earliest paintings; the mother-and-child theme; flat blocks of bold colors, which evoke her enthusiasm for Japanese prints. The result is an intriguing narrative painting. The oarsman’s midnight-blue outfit ties him to the sea and all the yearning and adventure it suggests. The yellow-green of the boat’s interior and the oar and the moss-green of the sail serve as an anchor to the woman and child, who wear pale-green hats. The oar also serves as a barrier between the man and the woman. They do not seem to be husband and wife, and yet she looks tenderly, almost expectantly at him. The child, on the other hand, looks quizzical, even fearful. The man’s face is half-hidden but he appears to meet the woman’s gaze⁴⁷.

Art historian Frances K. Pohl emphasizes the “shallowness” of the space and the “flatness” of the canvas, comparing *The Boating Party* to one similar work of Thomas Eakins:

The space is a shallow, Modernist space, with the interior of the boat tipped up to cut off the recession into the distance. Broad areas of flat color – blue, yellow, green – create patterns that, again, emphasize the flatness of the canvas rather than any illusion of three-dimensionality. Cassatt’s painting was strikingly different from the work of many of her American contemporaries who depicted similar subject-matter, such as Thomas Eakins *Max Schmitt in a Single Scull* of 1871⁴⁸.

⁴⁴ T. Streissguth, *Mary Cassatt: Portrait of an American Impressionist*, Minneapolis 1999, p. 89.

⁴⁵ *The Child’s Bath* [in:] <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/111442> (dostęp: 10 VI 2016).

⁴⁶ W. Craven, op. cit., p. 347.

⁴⁷ G. Gouveia, op. cit., p. 91.

⁴⁸ F. K. Pohl, op. cit., p. 313.

Summary

As one could notice in the above deliberations, women in art is an interesting subject worth more in-depth research. Given the limited framework of this analysis, the author did not aspire to show a detailed picture, but just present a tiny fraction of this phenomenon, focusing on one American artist.

Mary Cassatt created in the period when Impressionism was considered controversial by the dominating circles of traditionalists and women were almost completely non-present in the world of art. American painting of that time was also a male domain. In the Victorian era, it was considered unusual, even morally repugnant, for a woman to be an artist or to make a career. Yet throughout her life, and in her art – as it has been shown in this paper – Cassatt clearly demonstrated tenacity and strong will to fulfil her dreams. She “...refused to conform, rejecting the role of gentle wife and assuming, instead, the position of equal to men in the art world of Paris”⁴⁹. She was also a passionate advocate of women’s rights whose courage continues to inspire feminists today.

Having immersed herself in the European artistic riches, she became a pioneer and one of the greatest promoters of French painting in the United States. Her contacts with wealthy friends in America did much to bring avant-garde into this country. Thanks to her – above-discussed – dramatic theater scenes, psychologically telling studies of women, and fresh, original mother and-child oils, pastels, drawings, and prints, Cassatt has definitely earned her place in the pantheon of great American artists⁵⁰.

In her last years, Cassatt was lionized – and sentimentalized – as a painter of mothers and children, most notably by her biographer Achille Segard⁵¹. It was not, however, until the first major retrospective of her artistic output, at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 1936, that the full range of her talent and influence started to be appreciated. The analysis presented above, hopefully, showed clearly one of a relatively small number of American women to become professional artists in the nineteenth century, when most women, particularly wealthy ones, did not pursue a career.

⁴⁹ F. K. Pohl, op. cit., p. 312.

⁵⁰ G. Gouveia, op. cit., p. 112.

⁵¹ See: A. Segard, *Un Peintre Des Enfants Et Des Meres / A Painter of Mothers and Children*.