

Cassatt

DELPHI  CLASSICS

Masters of Art

Mary Cassatt

(1844-1926)



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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mary Cassatt". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

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Version 1

Masters of Art Series

Mary Cassatt



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Masters of Art - Mary Cassatt



First published in the United Kingdom in 2024 by Delphi Classics.

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ISBN: 978 1 80170 163 1

Delphi Classics

is an imprint of

Delphi Publishing Ltd

Hastings, East Sussex

United Kingdom

Contact: sales@delphiclassics.com

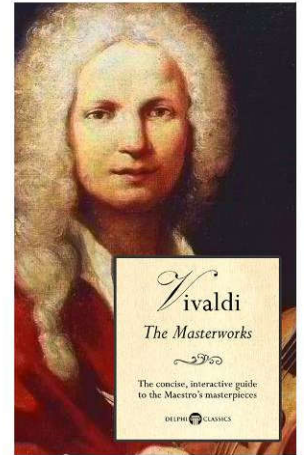
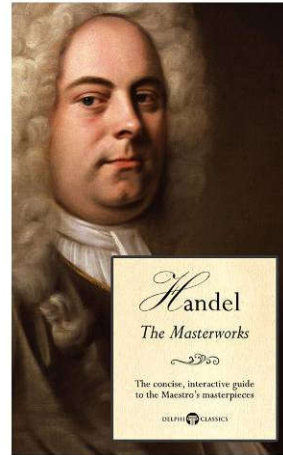
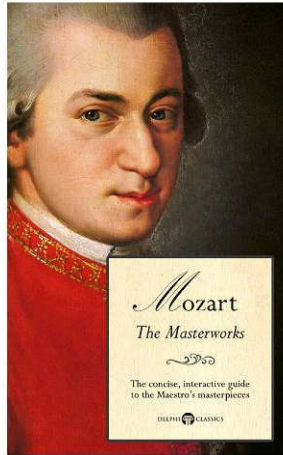
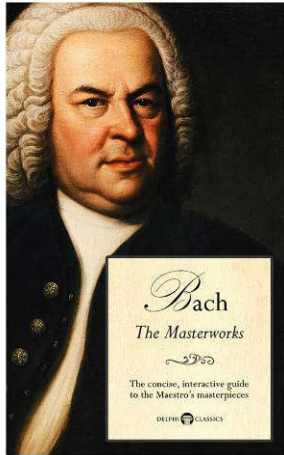
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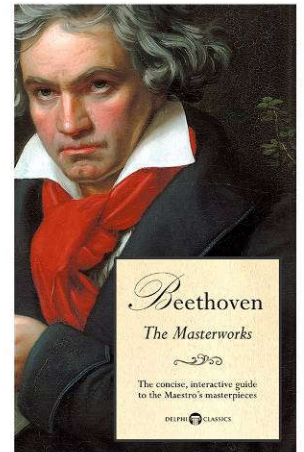
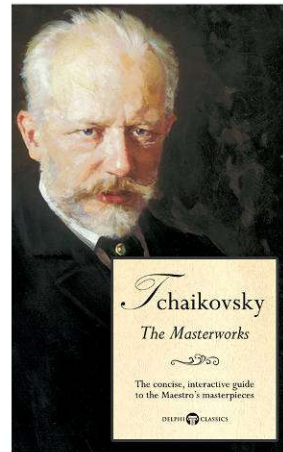
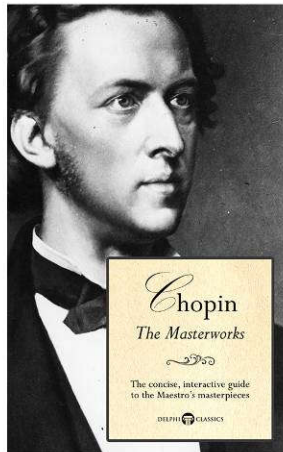
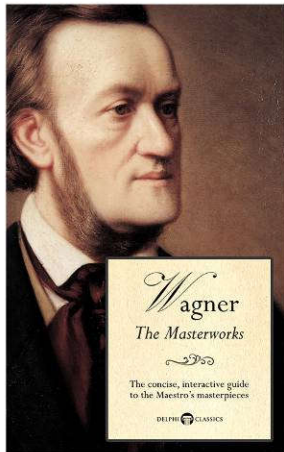
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The Highlights



Allegheny City, Pennsylvania, c. 1900 — Mary Cassatt's birthplace



Mary Cassatt as a young lady

The Highlights



In this section, a sample of Cassatt's most celebrated works is provided, with concise introductions, special 'detail' reproductions and additional biographical images.

Two Women Seated by a Woodland Stream (1869)



Mary Cassatt, the foremost female American artist of the late nineteenth century, was born on 22 May 1844, in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania. She was the fourth child of a prosperous family. Her father Robert was a successful stockbroker and financier, who also served as mayor of Allegheny City. Her mother, Katherine Kelso Johnston, came from a banking family that had provided her with a fine education, including a French-speaking governess. The Cassatts were of French Huguenot origin — their ancestors having disembarked in New York in 1662 after fleeing religious persecution. Robert was a man of restless spirit and blessed with an acute sense of entrepreneurship; he preferred a comfortable life of leisure to the simple attainment of wealth. After two years of living in an affluent Philadelphia home, the entire family embarked on a prolonged tour of Europe, partly insured by the Great Exhibition at London's Crystal Palace, which took place in the summer of 1851. Following a spell in Britain, they spent almost two years in Paris — no doubt partly due to the mother's French education. She spoke French fluently and swiftly dispatched her children to local schools to master the language and soak up the culture.

By 1853 Cassatt's older brother Alexander had decided on a technical career and the family relocated again, this time to Heidelberg, Germany, and later to Darmstadt, where Alexander attended the renowned Technische Hochschule. Two years later, the Cassatts returned to American shores, pausing briefly in Paris to see the World's Fair of 1855. Although Mary was only eleven at the time, she likely saw the large art exhibitions of works by Ingres and Delacroix, and also Courbet's unofficial "*Pavillon du Réalisme*." During her four-year residence in Europe, she had become fluent in French and German, absorbing the diversity and richness of European cultures. On their return to Pennsylvania in 1855, the Cassatts settled in Philadelphia, which offered the children the advantages of higher education, as well as enabling prestigious introductions into society.

By the time she was fifteen, Cassatt had decided upon the career of an artist, enrolling at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in the April of 1861. Judged to be the most prestigious academy in the United States, it offered traditional training for its students: first, drawing from plaster casts of antique sculpture; then, drawing from live models; and finally, copying in oil the somewhat modest collection of paintings held in the Academy's collection. It would not have been an easy start to a career by any standards. At that time, female art students were still not fully accepted among their peers and often had to defend themselves against the ridiculing of male classmates. Her parents were also reluctant about her choice of study, as they had expected her to marry a man of their class and to have children.

Undeterred, for four years Cassatt continued her studies, painting local models in West Chester, where her parents had moved in 1862, and producing meticulous copies at the Academy. With the advent of the Civil War of 1865, she had become increasingly frustrated with her training. She regretted the lack of originality, sensing that creative freedom was being suppressed at the institution. Taking the bold step of leaving the Academy, she sailed abroad to further her studies, accompanied by her mother. The lack of any notable public art collection in America only supported her conviction that she needed to improve her knowledge of fine art in Europe, which

offered an abundance of famous collections. Of course, Paris was the obvious choice for any ambitious artist of the period. Such a decision would have been deemed as almost unthinkable for a young woman from Cassatt's social background. Not yet twenty-two years old, she was certainly attractive and wealthy enough to entice suitors. Her father, in a fit of fury, had told her that he would "rather see his daughter dead than have her go off to Europe by herself to become an artist." Although it was considered a sign of good breeding for a woman to become an amateur artist, pursuing the profession seriously in a commercial sense was judged an outrageous act by many of her social peers. Nonetheless, her independent nature saw her through the obstacles in her path. One important aid was an accompanying Academy friend, Eliza Haldeman, who also sought a stay in Europe. The realist master Thomas Eakins, another friend at the Academy, was going to be enrolled in the *École des Beaux-Arts*, which provided further support.

Since the *École des Beaux-Arts* refused female students, Cassatt contacted several notable painters that were known to give private lessons. She was accepted by Jean-Léon Gérôme, a young painter known for his realist technique, who produced noted exotic and historic canvases. One of the most gifted draftsmen of his time, his name was even known among academicians back in Philadelphia. Cassatt also spent much time in the Louvre, copying works of the Old Masters. These copies were eagerly sought after, especially by American tourists, who along with thousands of other visitors from around the world, flocked daily to the museum. For art students, the Louvre was also an opportune meeting place, where new ideas and opinions could be exchanged and profitable friendships formed.

The only important public space of the Parisian art world was the annual exhibition at the Salon, where all major artists submitted their work. A jury with close links to the Academy presided over the selection process, often judging the quality of the works with a conservative set of rules, favouring the austere academic style of the *École des Beaux-Arts*. In April 1868, Cassatt received news that her painting of a young woman with a mandolin had been accepted for the Salon. Her satisfaction with this first public acknowledgment was partly eclipsed by her disappointment with the official nature and narrowly-defined style that the institution demanded. Her ambivalence towards the Salon was to last for ten years until she finally stopped submitting her work there altogether.

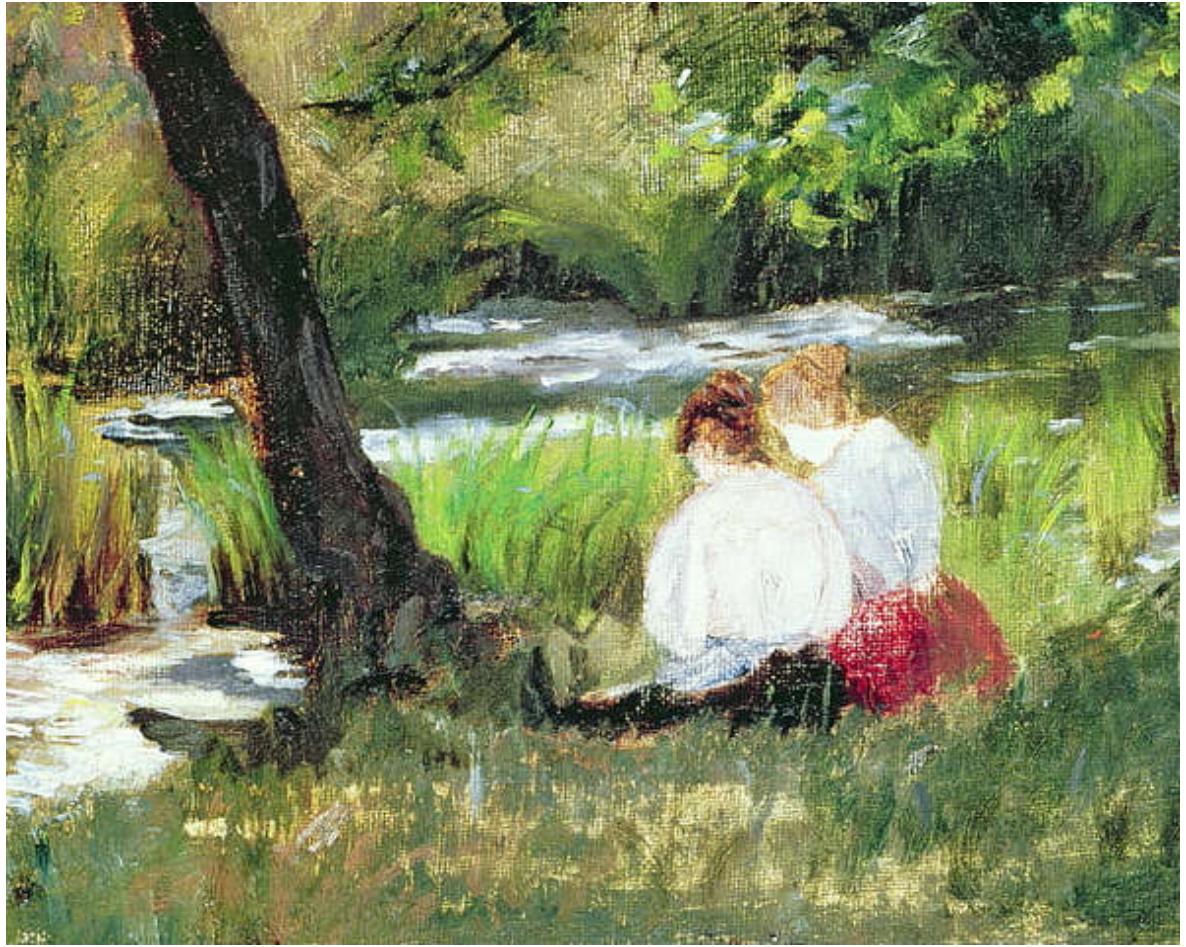
The most significant source of inspiration for Cassatt during this period was the work of Edouard Manet (1832-1883), famed for his bold and realistic depictions of everyday life. His *Olympia* (1865) had caused a sensation in the Parisian art world, as the confrontational gaze of the depicted prostitute proved disconcerting for many Salon members. Cassatt would have seen his canvases at the Salon, where he continued to exhibit, in spite of the severe censure of the critics. Cassatt was also influenced by the early paintings of Edgar Degas (1834-1917), who exhibited in the Salon between 1866 and 1870. In time, the two would become close friends.

Held today in the Musée de la Ville de Paris, Cassatt's early painting *Two Women Seated by a Woodland Stream* (c. 1869) indicates the influence of both Manet and Degas. It is a study of two women seated under a rich canopy of trees, beside the bank of a brook. The canvas is one of Cassatt's few works where the dominant feature is the landscape rather than the presentation of figures. Although the *en plein air* technique of painting would become a popular convention of Impressionist art, Cassatt usually demoted the landscape to a subsidiary role in the background. The sketchy nature of the composition hints that it was never finished. In the canvas, the artist takes great interest in the treatment of light, organising her palette to give the

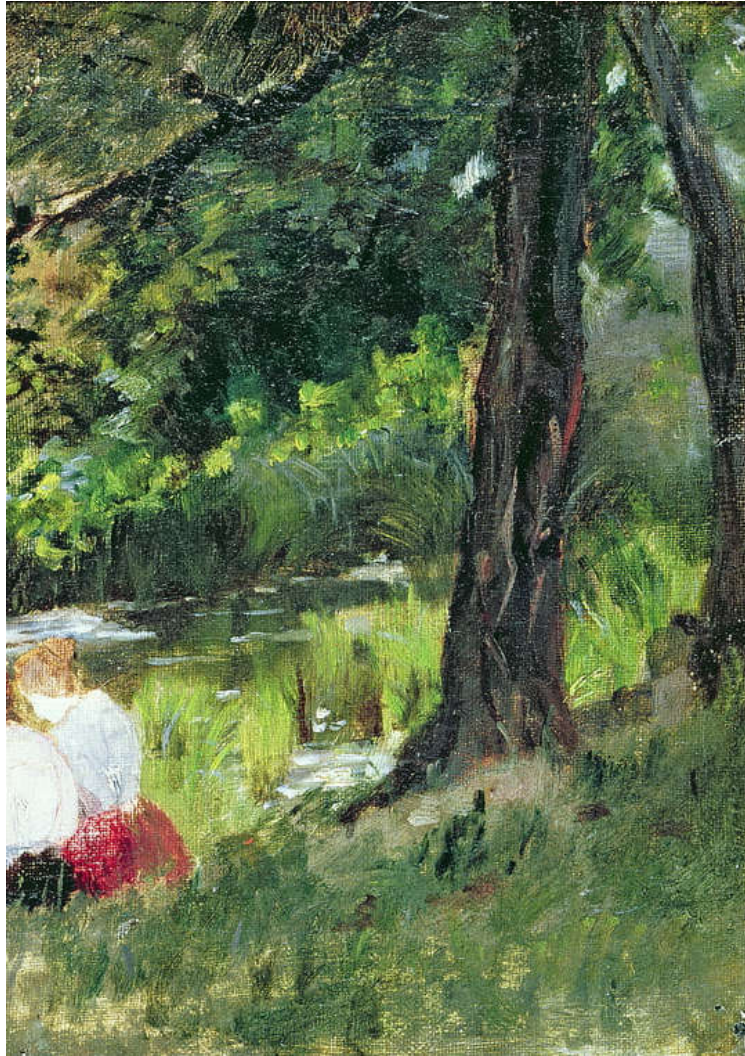
impression of gaps between the trees, while simulating the movements between the leaves. The treatment of light is typical with the approach of the Impressionists that Cassatt was now spending increasingly more time with.

Cassatt was by no means a precocious talent and it would take many years to launch her career, which would not peak until several decades after completing this painting. Still, the careful attention to the Impressionist technique, breaking away from the narrow strictures of the Salon, reveals that she was a determined and responsive student, imbuing the prevalent trends and assimilating new techniques with surprising ease.

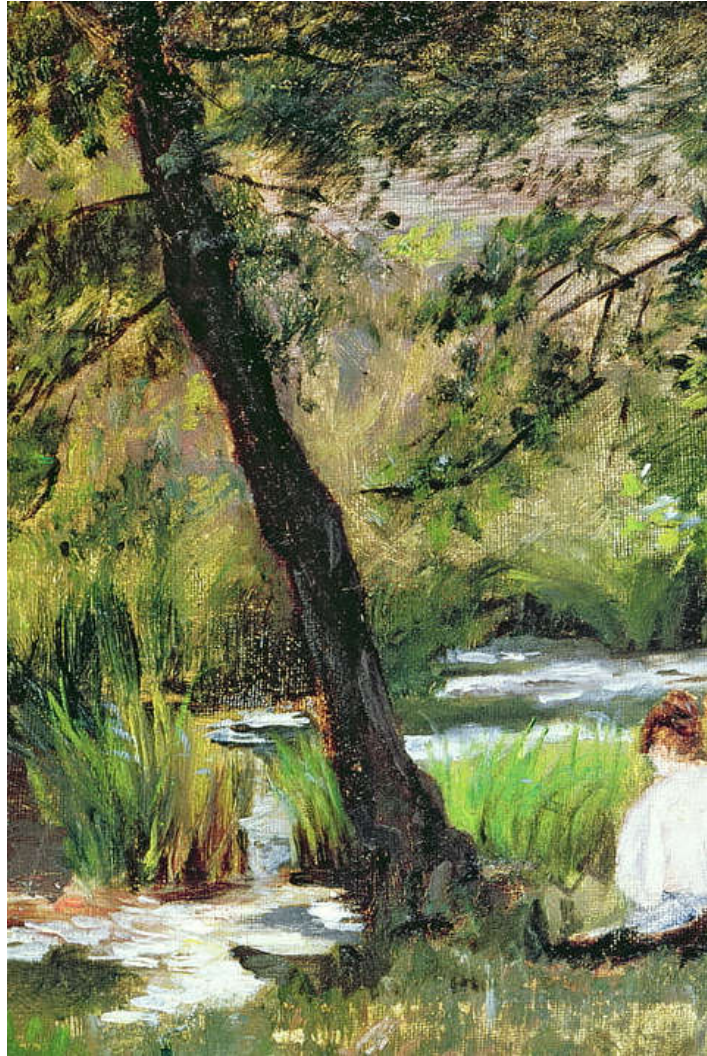




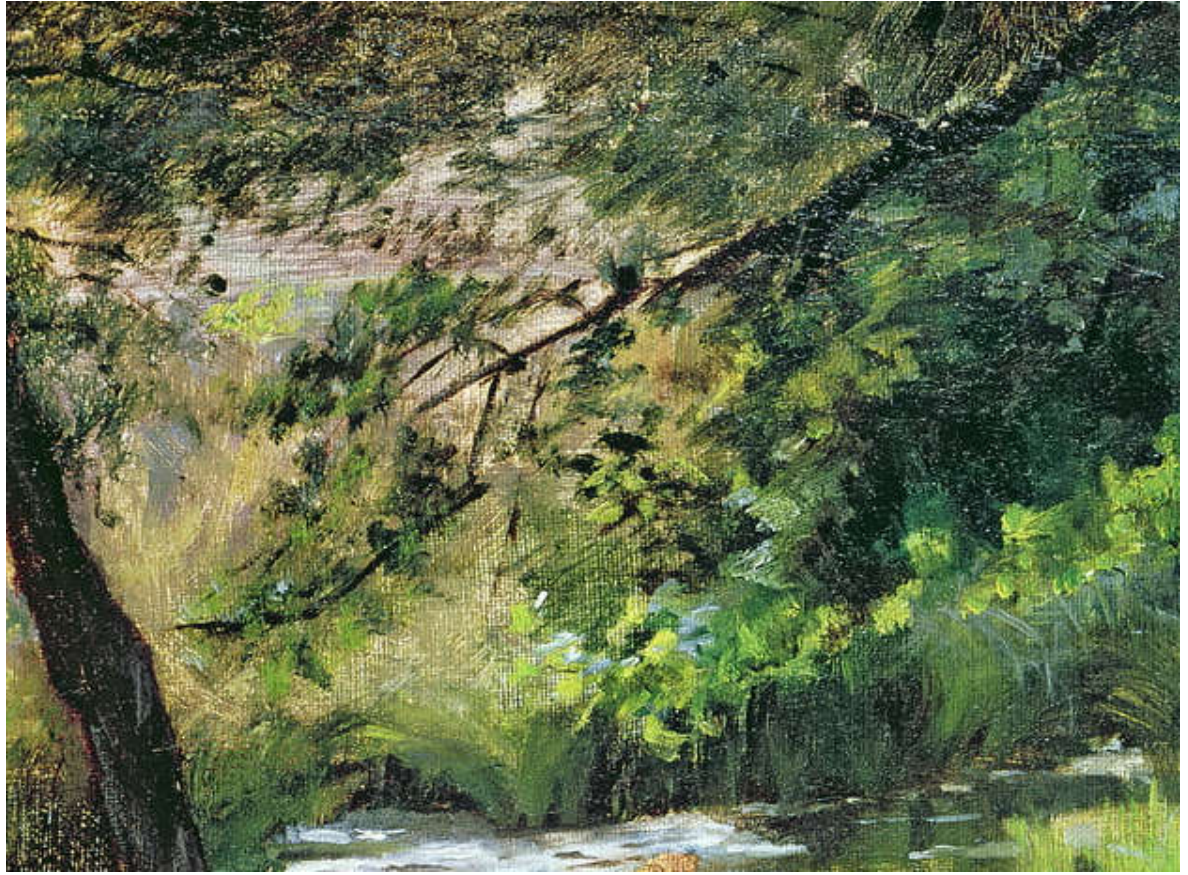
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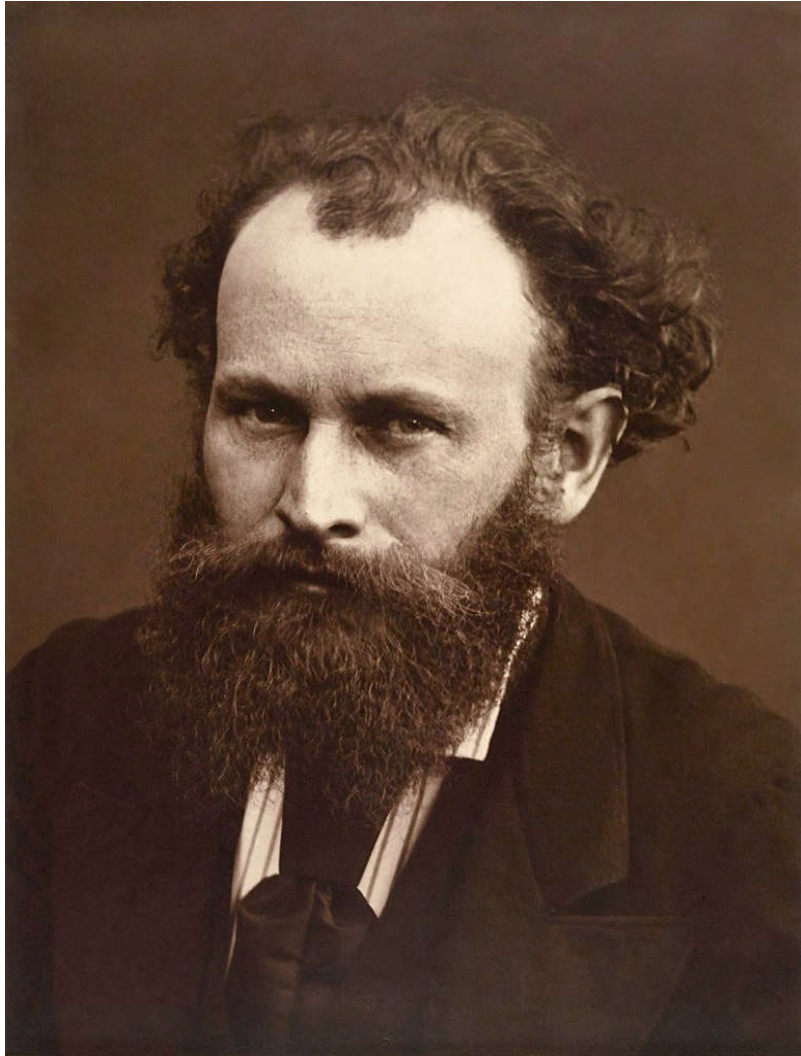
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Students and model, believed to be one of Jean-Léon Gérôme's classes at the École des Beaux-Arts



Manet, c. 1869



Manet's 'The Luncheon on the Grass', Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 1863

On the Balcony (1873)



In July of 1870 Cassatt's devotion to study came to an abrupt end with the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. She decided to return to her family in America and the ensuing year and a half was the least productive and most challenging period of her career. Sorely missing the inspiring milieu of Paris and all access to its superlative galleries and collections, Cassatt almost gave up painting entirely. Ultimately, her unflinching desire to attain the status of a reputable artist earning a living conquered her doubts. Towards the end of 1871 she was sailing back again to Europe, settling in Parma, northern Italy, where she was employed to copy works by Correggio for the archbishop of Pittsburgh. This fortuitous commission provided funds for her travel expenses, now that her family was unwilling to finance her professional training. In due course, their misgivings would be replaced with admiration for her achievements.

Cassatt spent eight months in Parma and it would be among the happiest times of her life. Bursting with excitement and new sensations, life in Parma was colourful and wholly different from anything she had experienced before. Along with her traveling companion from Philadelphia, Emily Sartain, she received a warm welcome from the local art community. It differed greatly from the more prestigious destinations of Rome, Florence and Venice that teemed with ambitious young artists trying to find their way. Cassatt was attracted to the wealth of artworks by the High Renaissance master Correggio, whose soft and elegant style made an impression on her development. Art historians now identify Correggio's Madonna and Child scenes as a chief source of influence on Cassatt's celebrated mother and child paintings, recognised today as her greatest achievements.

Emily Sartain was a daughter of a renowned engraver, through whom Cassatt became acquainted with Carlo Raimondi, a professor of engraving at the Academy at Parma. From Raimondi she received an introduction to the printmaking techniques that she would explore with great success in her middle career. It was during this promising period that a painting she had sent to the Salon in Paris was accepted and for the first time she felt that her career had truly started.

In September of 1872, Cassatt travelled to Spain, studying the works of Titian, Velázquez, Murillo and Rubens at the Prado, before continuing on to Seville, where she commenced her first major body of works inspired by Spanish subjects. Enthused by the city's resplendent colours and the characteristic flavour of the local customs, she painted a series of canvases of subjects in traditional costumes. She was partly influenced by Manet, who had painted a similar series a decade earlier.

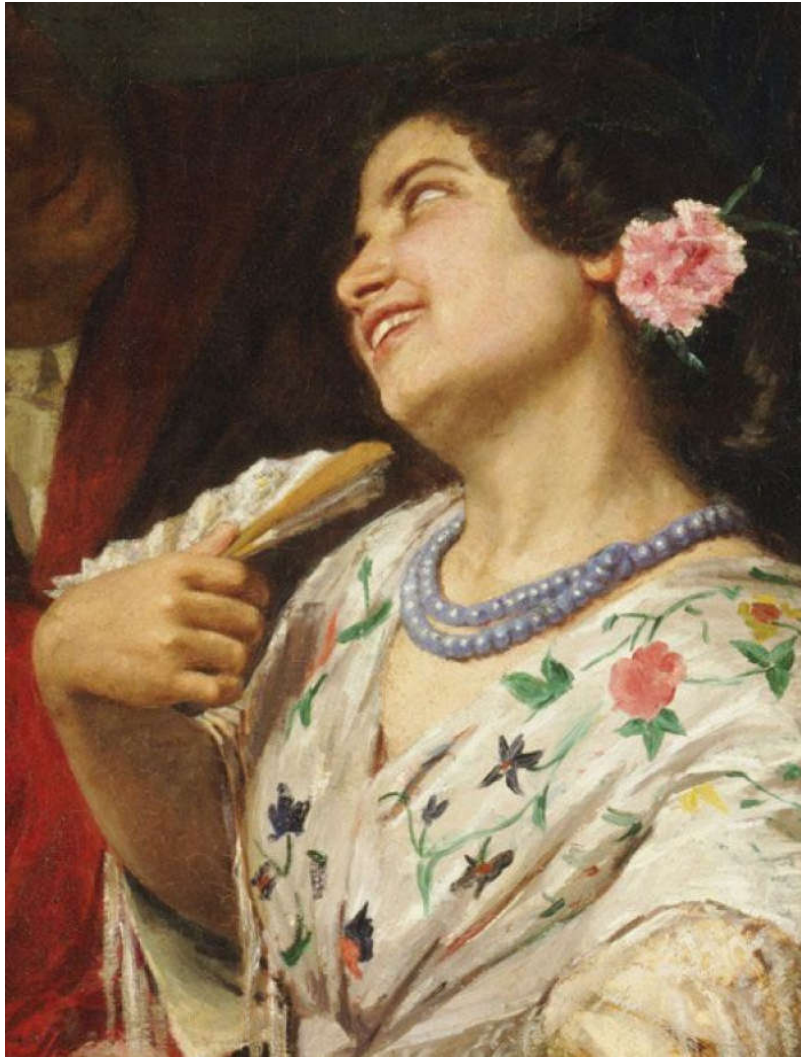
Held today in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, *On the Balcony* (1873) presents two women and a male companion in Spanish costumes on a balcony, viewing the unseen vibrancy of a carnival below. It was doubtless inspired by Manet's famous *The Balcony*, which in turn was sourced by a Goya artwork. The painting also reveals the influence of Velázquez and the Spanish realist tradition of Murillo, introducing a more sombre and restrained palette than employed by her French Impressionist friends.

Interestingly, the two girls are depicted in full light, while the male's figure is cloaked in shadow in the background — the wide brim of his traditional hat obscures his features, giving an ominous hint to the unsuspecting females. Both girls seem to

be on the look out for love and enjoyment. The girl to the right appears to have found it, as she looks up into the man's face with a coquettish gesture, while her companion looks dreamily below at the carnival's sights. The question as to which girl can expect a more promising outcome is left for the viewer to decide...

The canvas employs typical conventions for suggesting depth, revealing time spent in galleries copying from the Old Masters. The use of the balcony rail, on which both girls lean, adds a three dimensional quality, conjuring the impression of a drop below. The girl in the striking red shawl particularly leans over the rail, her right elbow overhanging, emphasising the illusion of depth. Meanwhile, the man's outstretched left arm — his hand being the only part of his form represented in full light — grips the surrounding casement wall. The fingers are finely delineated around the bricks, suggesting a firm hold. This projects the wall out into the foreground, enhancing the impression of depth.





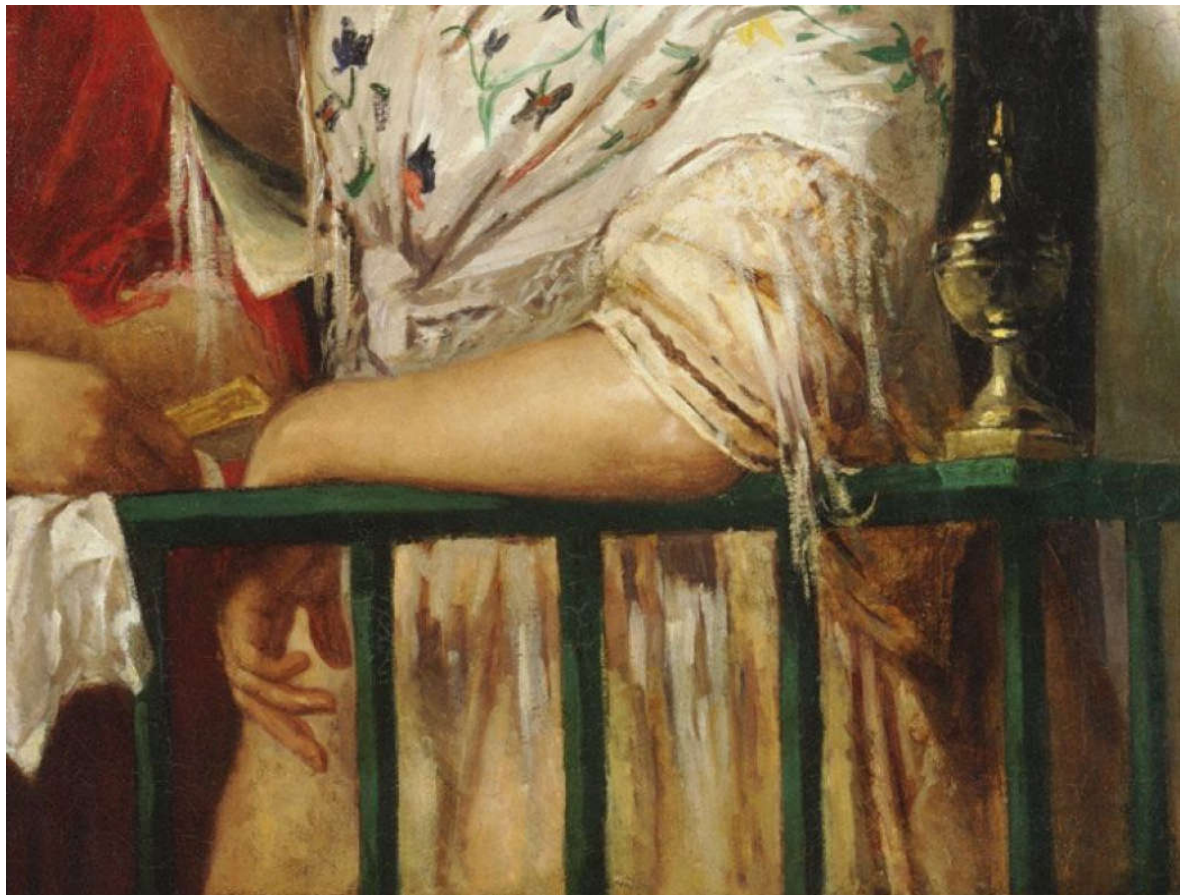
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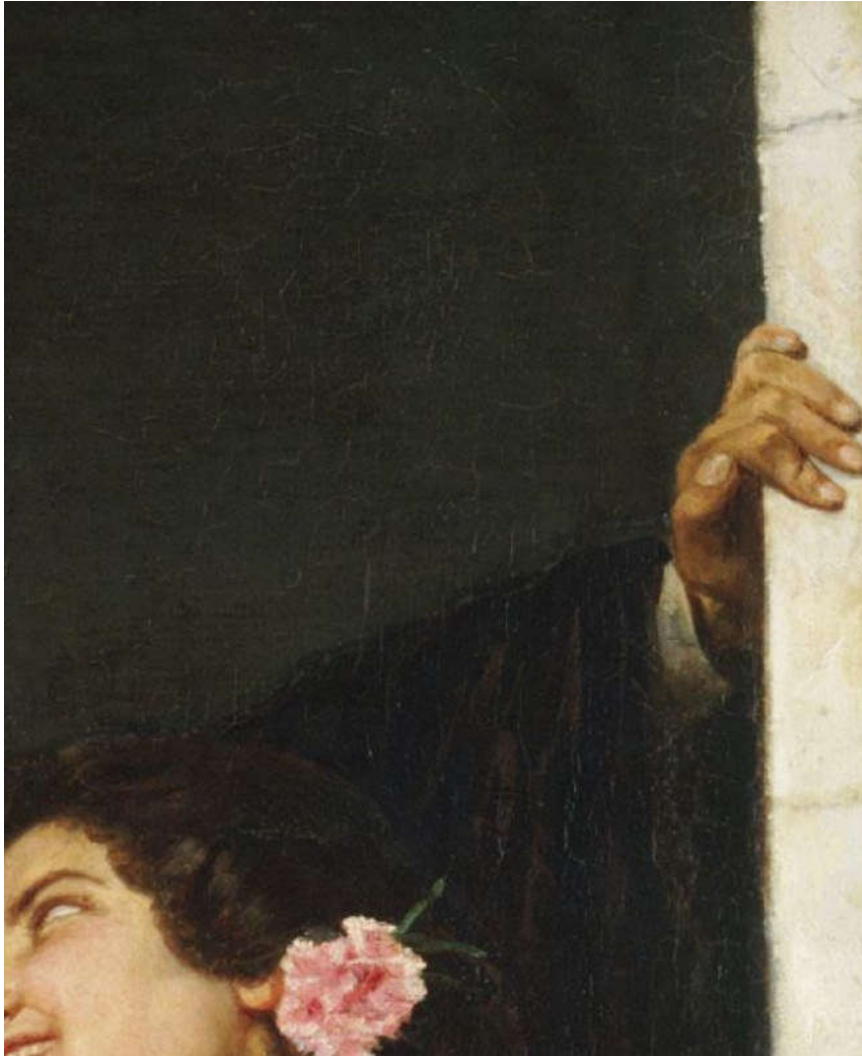
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'Madonna and Child with an Angel' by Antonio da Correggio, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1525



'The Balcony' by Édouard Manet, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 1874

Woman with a Fan (c. 1878)



In 1874, after eight years of wandering around Europe, including brief spells in Holland, Belgium and Rome, Cassatt settled permanently in Paris, with bold plans to defy the strict traditions of the Salon establishment. She was accompanied by her older sister Lydia, when she took an apartment and studio in the bustling city. The two sisters would remain close up until the time of Lydia's sudden death five years later.

Sales of her works had remained slow and the early recognition she had savoured in Parma still eluded her in the French capital. Over the course of time, she established a reputation as an accomplished painter of portraits and she was sought after by the many American visitors to the Continent. One important patron was Mary Ellison, the daughter of a Philadelphia businessman, whom Cassatt met through mutual friends. This resulted in Mary Ellison asking her father to commission Cassatt to paint a portrait, *Mary Ellison Embroidering*. As Cassatt regarded portrait painting as a less elevated subject than one of her own creation, she liked to position her sitters in genre-type poses, usually occupied in activities such as reading, sewing or other activities, as influenced by the Dutch school.

In April 1874, the first exhibition of the Société Anonyme des Artistes Peintres, Sculpteurs, Graveurs, Etc., took place in the studio of the photographer Nadar on the Boulevard des Capucines, showcasing works by Degas, Monet, Renoir, Cézanne and Pissarro. This unique opportunity provided Salon-neglected artists an unrestricted exhibition venue, where no jury could refuse their entry. The only condition was the rejection of any work that had already been submitted to the Salon. As you can imagine, such a bold venture caused a sensation in the Parisian art world. This exhibition was what later became known as the first Impressionist show. The name Impressionist was taken from a French critic's hostile review of the show, condemning the new style, with a direct reference to Monet's painting *Impression-Sunrise*, which was featured in the show. Following her final rejection by the Salon in 1877, it would not be long till Cassatt joined the ranks of this breakaway group of rebel artists.

Cassatt was invited by Degas to exhibit along with him and his fellow painters. He had already appreciated her entry for the Salon in 1874, when he reportedly declared: "Here is someone who feels as I do." Cassatt had been a great admirer of Degas' paintings, long before she had actually met him. The first meeting between the two occurred in Cassatt's studio. Like Cassatt, Degas was a fierce critic with a sarcastic sense of humour and, also like Cassatt, he had something of temper. What her parents must have thought about her consorting with an artist infamous for painting prostitutes is left to your imagination! Their close friendship would last until Degas' death in 1917.

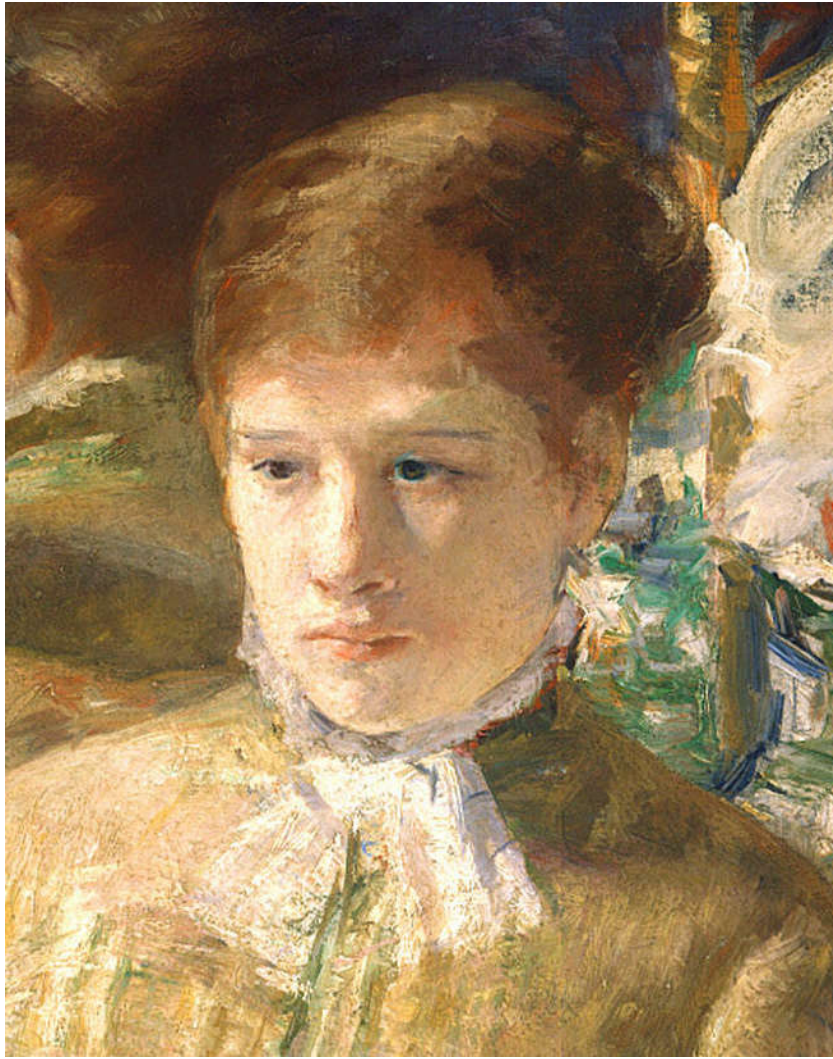
The decision to relinquish the official pursuit of recognition via Salon was a bold and daunting prospect, especially when considering how she was aligning herself with a controversial band of avant-garde artists, who gathered around the central and iconic figure of Manet. By publicly becoming an Impressionist, she had in effect turned her back on the traditional system, a step that would be extremely difficult to revoke. Like Degas and Manet, money was fortunately no significant issue for Cassatt, though

Impressionists like Monet and Pissarro often suffered extreme poverty due to their chosen alliance to the group. Cassatt's frank and open bearing, as well as her free-speaking American upbringing, eased her entry into a society of almost all males. Fortunately, she was not the only woman of the group, as Berthe Morisot, Manet's gifted sister-in-law, was also a member and the two became good friends, as they started exhibiting together.

In 1878 Mary Ellison requested a second portrait from Cassatt, revealing her kind support of her bold fellow Philadelphian's decision. The resulting canvas, *Woman with a Fan*, certainly does not flatter the sitter, but instead focuses on Miss Ellison's contemplative mood and intellectual character. The portrait also promotes her affinities with the Impressionists. The brushwork is open and sketchy, as Cassatt favours a strong compositional structure over pictorial detail. The mirror behind Ellison is a device that she liked to use regularly. The technique would be famously employed a few years later by Manet in his *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*. The mirror enables the expansion of the composition's implied space, depicting areas that the viewer could not otherwise see — a key concept of the Impressionist movement. The inclusion of a mirror also lightens the traditionally dark background, enhancing the sense of depth.

The portrait belongs to a series of theatre scenes that Cassatt painted during the late 1870's. She employs the motif of an isolated female holding an open fan to create a contemplative mood, while separating the viewer from the model. We are not asked to comment on the merits of the young lady's appearance and personal attributes, but we are encouraged to reflect on the importance of a thinking woman, rather than a superficial one.

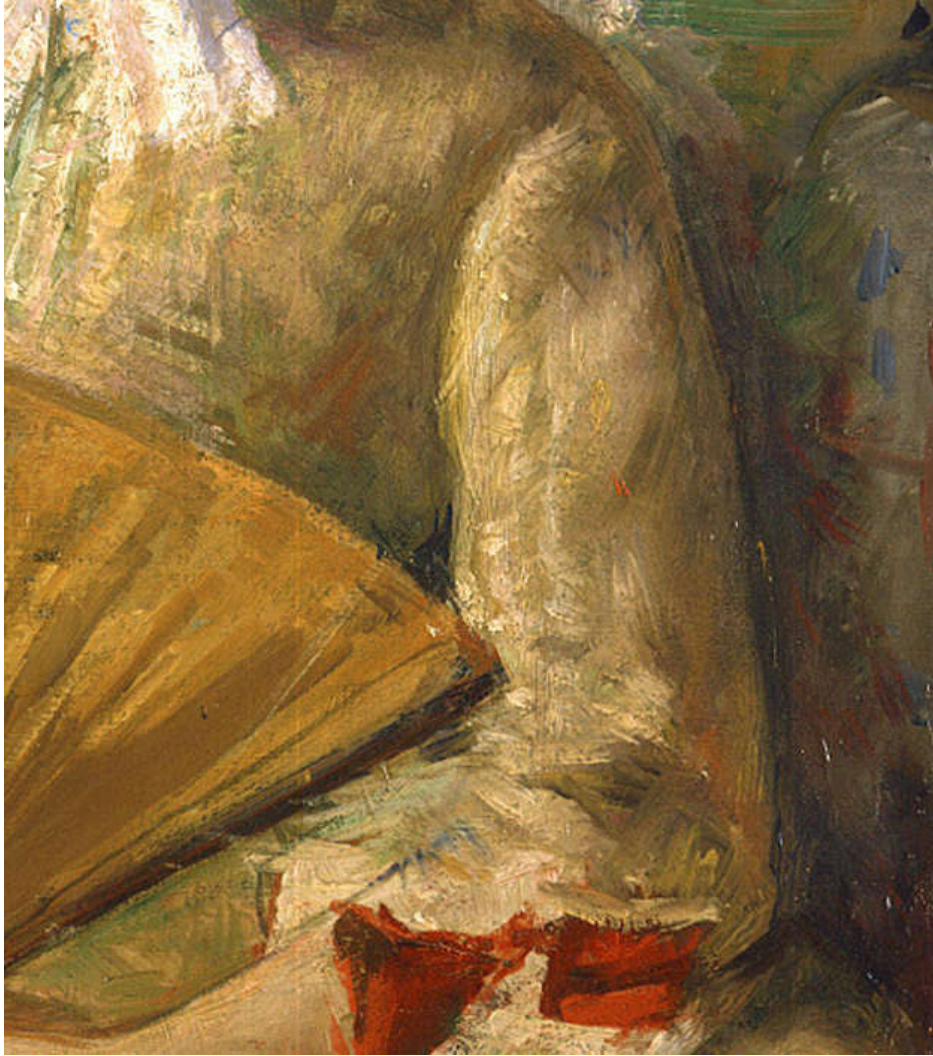




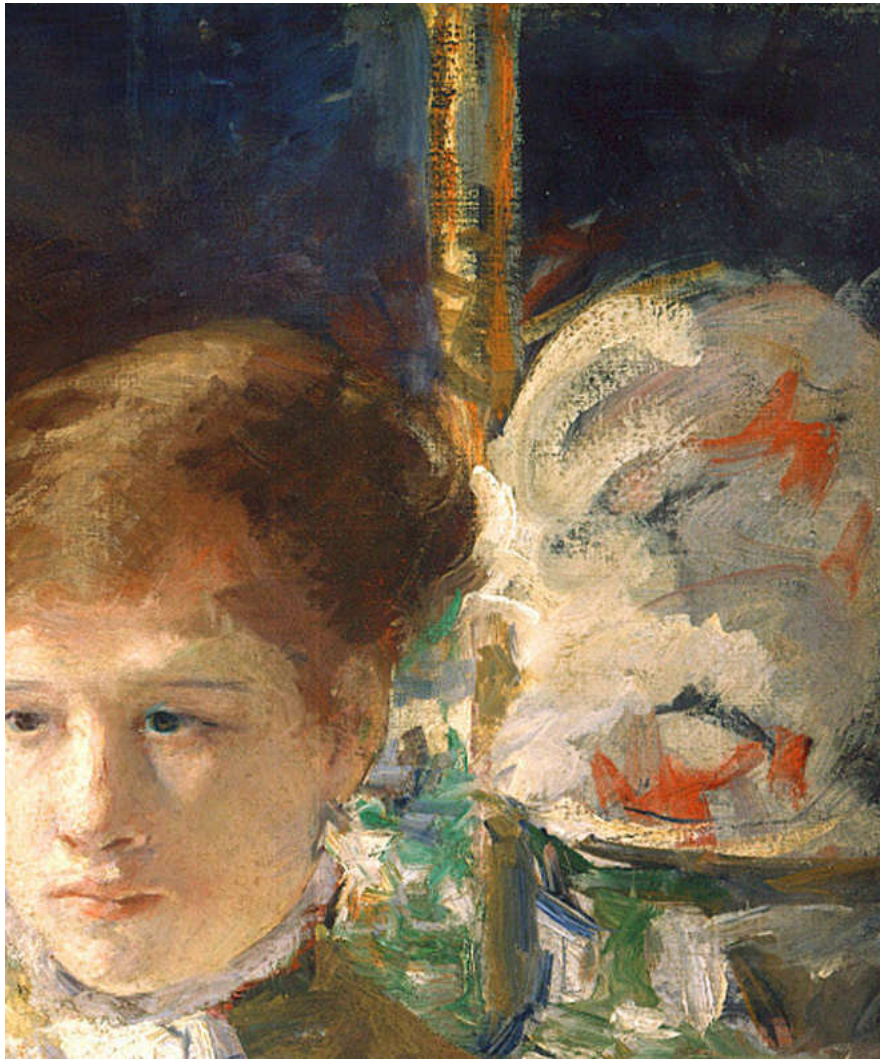
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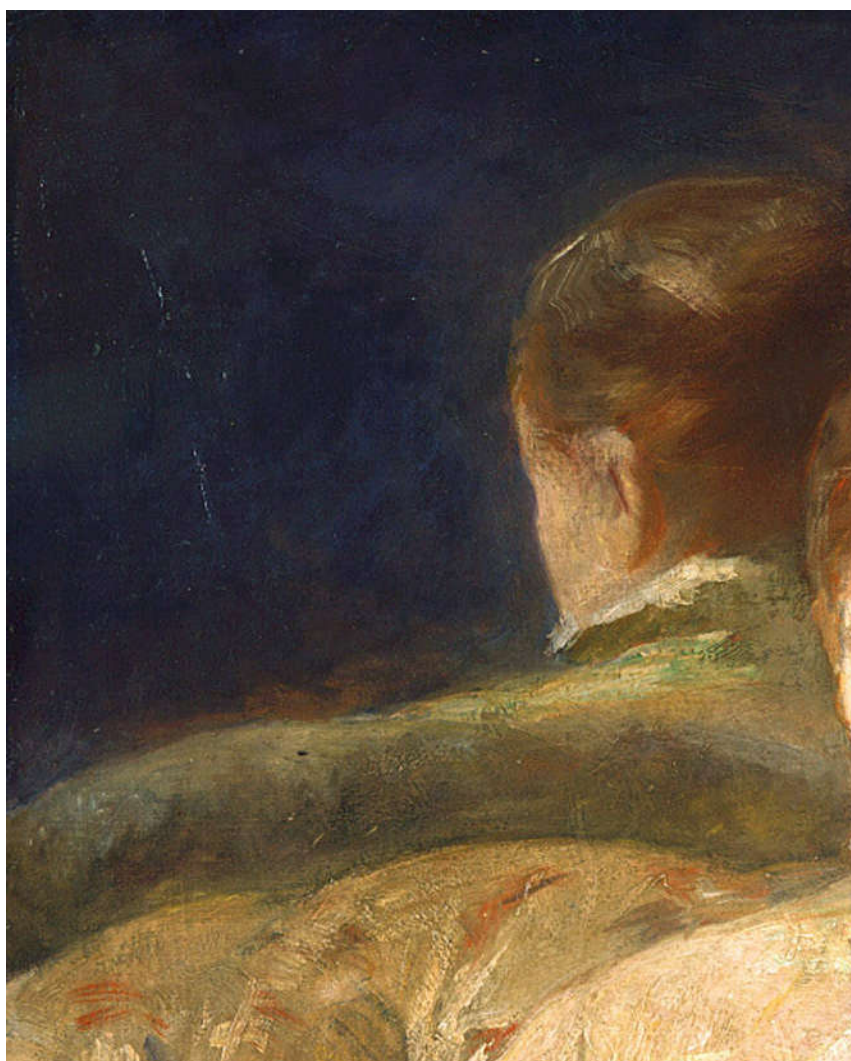
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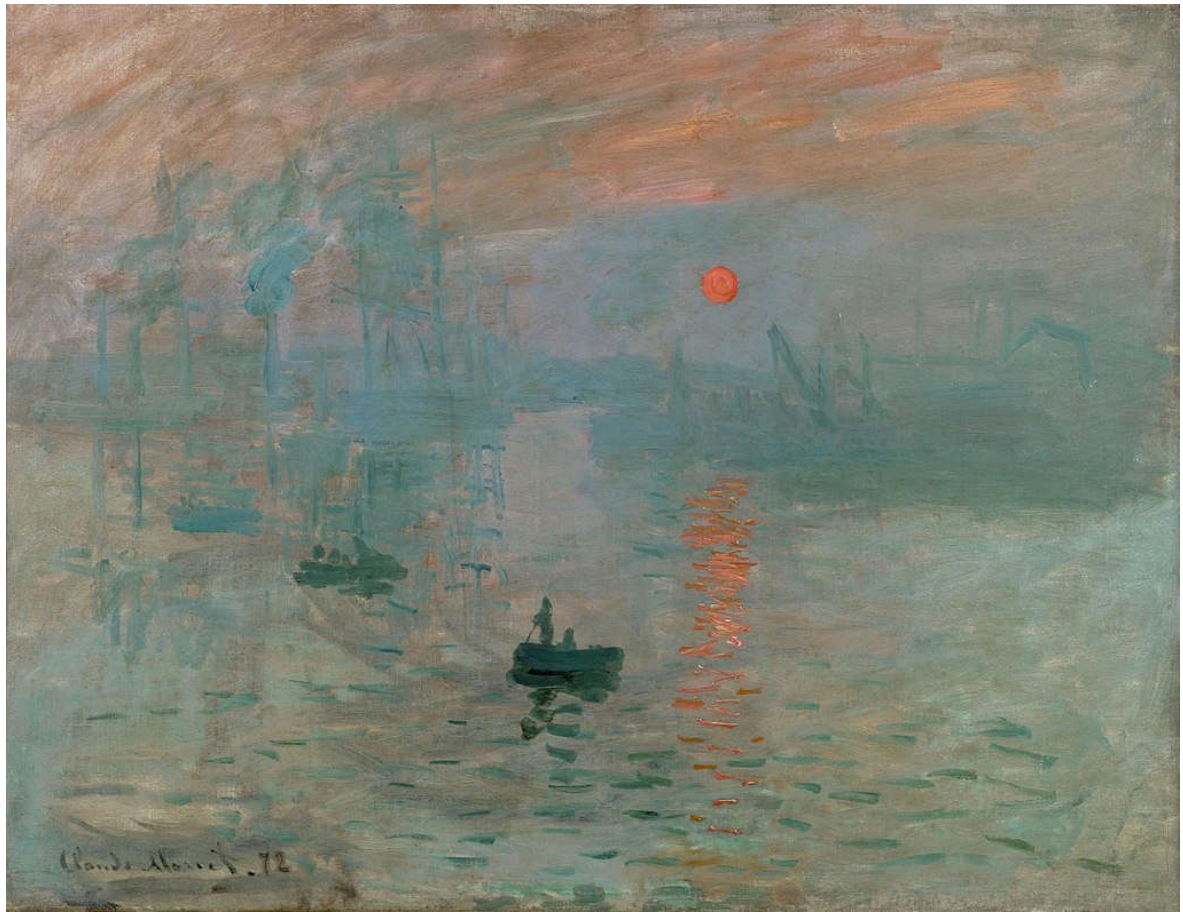
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'Impression, Sunrise' by Claude Monet, 1872 — this canvas was first shown at what would become known as the "Exhibition of the Impressionists" in Paris in April, 1874. It is credited with inspiring the name of the Impressionist movement.



Nadar's studio, Atelier Nadar 35 Boulevard Des Capucines, 1860 — the location of the first Impressionist Exhibition in 1874



Self portrait by Edgar Degas, 1863



Manet's 'A Bar at the Folies-Bergère', Courtauld Gallery, London, 1882

Little Girl in a Blue Arm Chair (1878)



For the Impressionists, their principal goal was to represent the world as it is perceived by our eyes. With this in mind, they lightened up their palettes and the play of natural light was elevated to a chief concern in their canvases. Breaking away from the time-old restraints of the Salon and *École des Beaux-Arts*, their choice of new and modern subjects, preferring scenes of everyday life over traditional themes from history or mythology, were now important concerns for the first time. Sadly, Cassatt's own artistic development at this point is only slightly recorded, though we can detect how her works opted for a brighter palette with lighter backgrounds, keeping in tune with her fellow Impressionists. Her canvases from this period reveal a preference for positioning her subjects in tranquil and domestic settings, offering a fascinating window into upper middle class life of *fin de siècle* Paris.

An example of this new stylistic approach is *Little Girl in a Blue Arm Chair* (1878), held today in Washington's National Gallery. The canvas serves as a testament to Cassatt's newly formed relationship with the Impressionists and to her assimilation of a more liberated style of painting. Indeed, Degas is believed to have personally helped in painting areas of the composition. Featuring a limited palette and vibrant brush strokes, it presents a dynamic interplay of forms, immortalising a captured moment of childhood, where the subject hovers between rest and play. The canvas was exhibited, along with ten other paintings, in Cassatt's debut exhibition with the Impressionists in 1879.

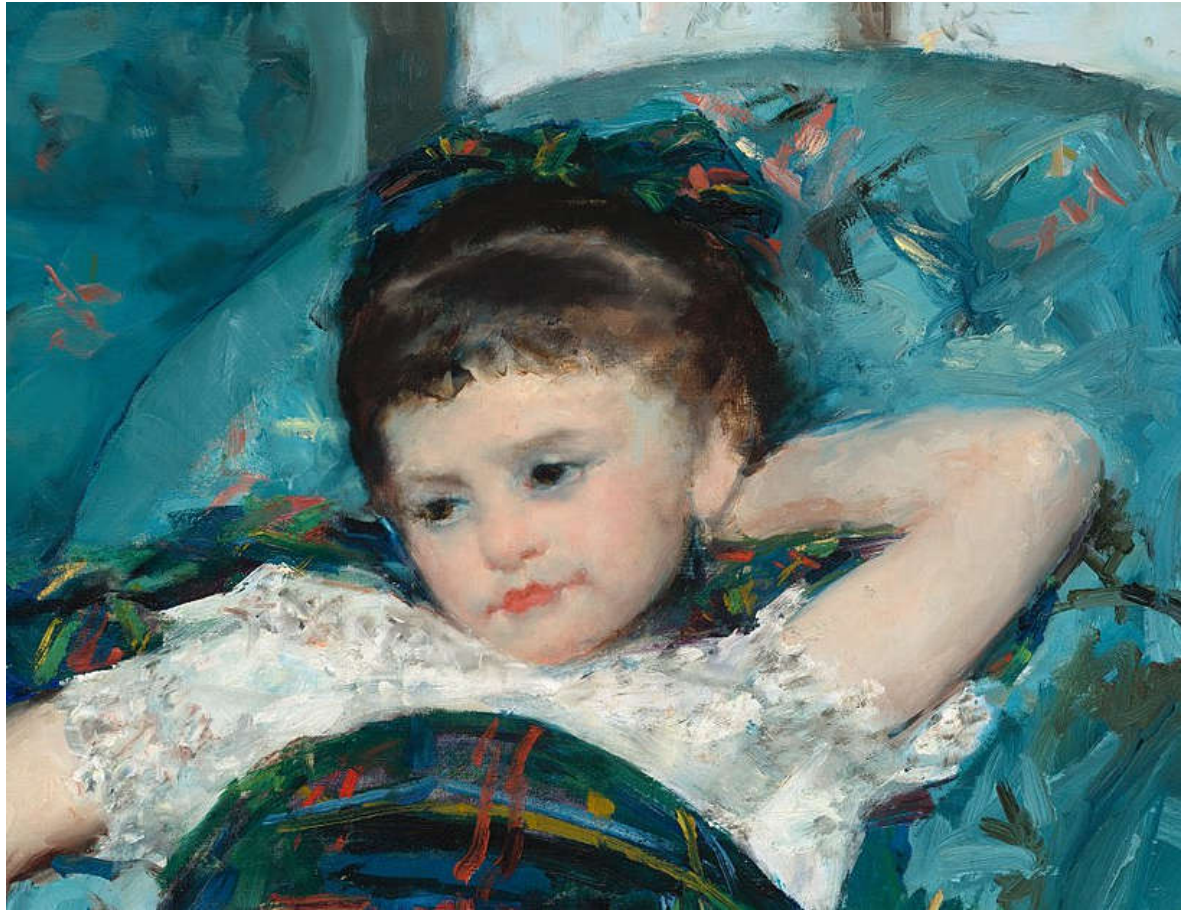
Accompanied by her small brown dog, a little girl is wearing a white dress, while sitting in matching celestial-blue armchairs. The horizontal format, ordinarily used in landscapes or compositions that feature multiple figures, is unusual for the subject. To the right, the girl slumps back with her legs spread, and her left elbow is bent, supporting her head; her other elbow is indolently draped over the armrest. Her white dress has touches of grey, soft pink and powder blue, and a wide plaid sash is tied around her waist. Her socks match the sash, while her black shoes have silver buckles. The small dog's eyes are closed, yet its ears are pricked up, hinting at a playful nature. The vivid and light blue fabric of the chairs is scattered with loosely handled strokes of light greens and darker greens, as well as pinks, reds and purples.

Light enters the composition through the French doors in the background, bringing the texture and pattern of the objects in the room to vivid life. By tilting the picture plane, the artist draws our attention to the disorganised arrangement of the furniture, while echoing the child's feeling of exhaustion. The brownish-grey floor is depicted with lively brush strokes, suggesting a sense of freedom.

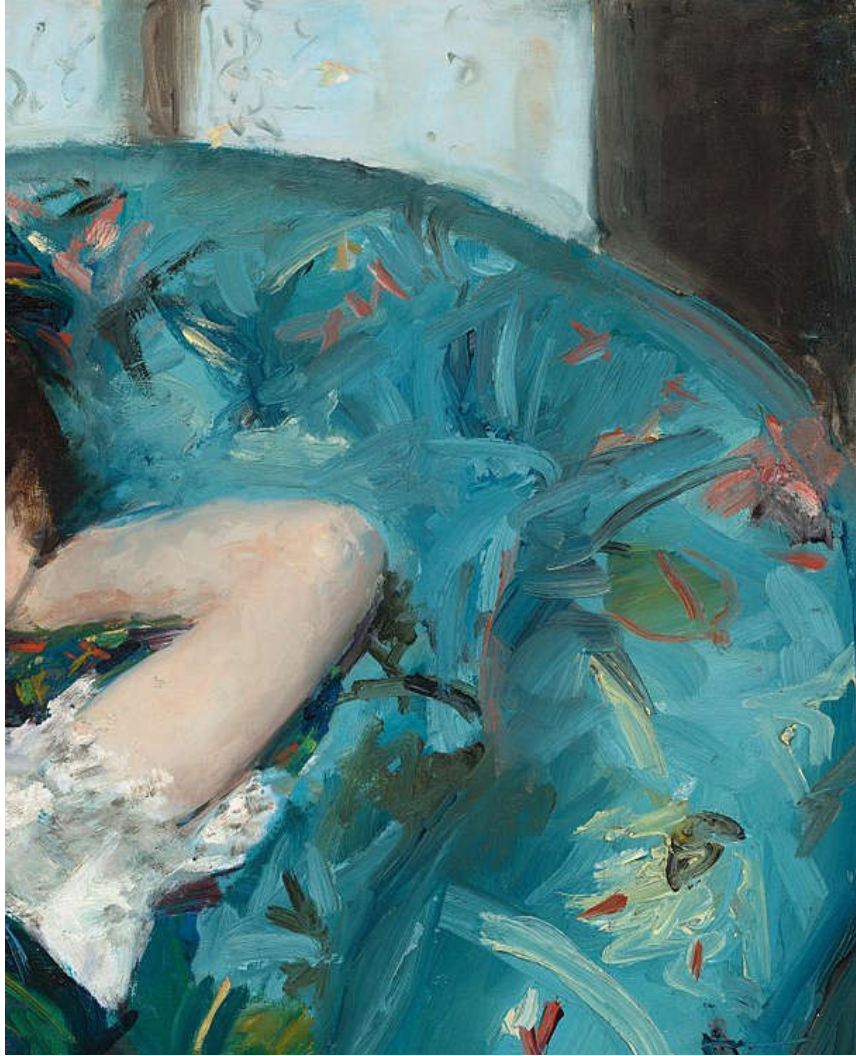
The represented dog lying in the armchair is a Brussels Griffon. Cassatt was likely introduced to this breed while in Antwerp in 1873. Degas presented her with a pup he had procured from the fellow Impressionist Ludovic-Napoléon Lepic, a fellow dog-lover and breeder, and Cassatt went on to keep dogs as her companions for the rest of her life. *Little Girl in a Blue Arm Chair* was purchased from Cassatt by Ambroise Vollard of Paris in 1903 for his gallery and the canvas was later acquired by Hector Brame of Paris. It was sold in 1963 to Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, who lent it to the National Gallery of Art for exhibitions and eventually gifting it to the gallery in 1983. Today, the canvas is duly recognised as one of Cassatt's most enduring and

accomplished works, encapsulating the enduring themes of childhood and experience, freedom and responsibility, order and chaos.





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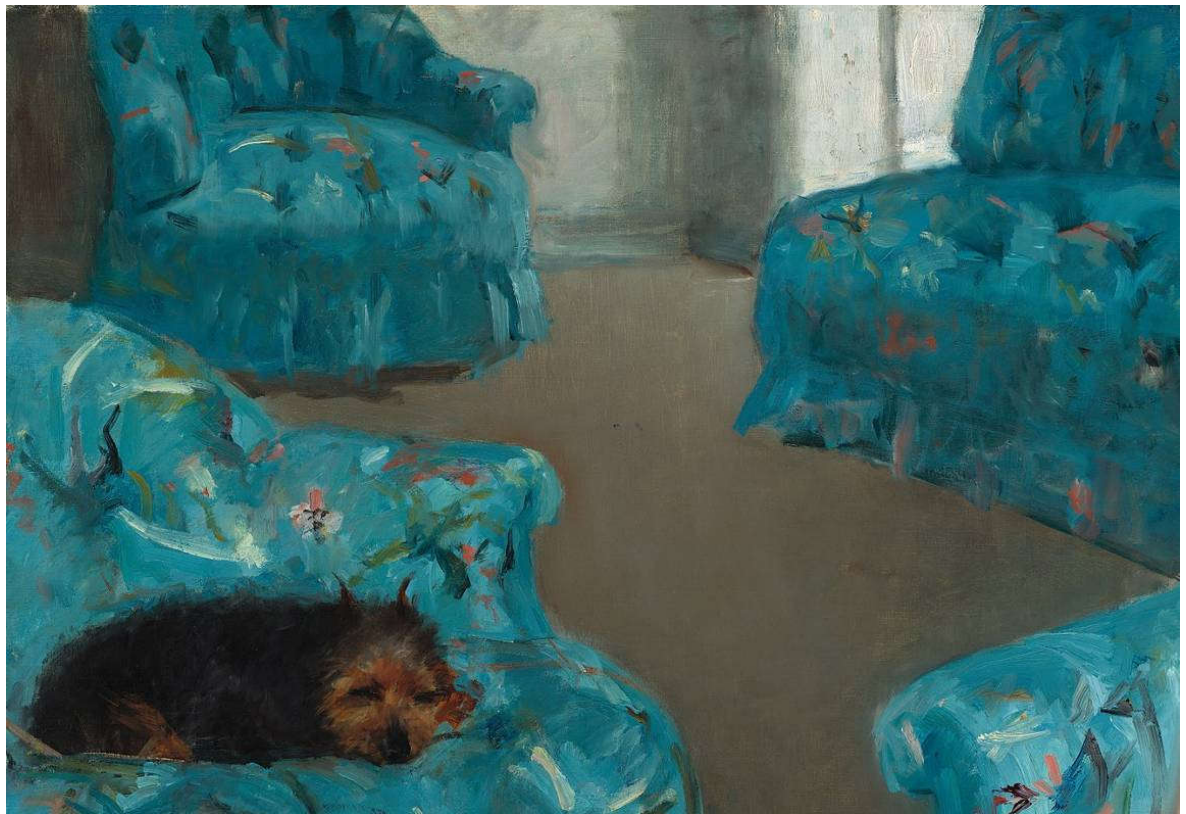
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