



**In the Loge**, around 1879, by Mary Cassatt

## Mary Cassatt In the Loge Around 1879

Pastel with gold metallic paint on canvas  
25 9/16 x 31 3/4 inches (64.9 x 80.6 cm)  
Mary Cassatt (American, 1844–1926)



### Let's Look

Look carefully at this drawing. Can you find places where Cassatt smooths and blends the pastels? Now look for places where she doesn't blend the pastels. Do you notice the rougher texture of the unblended lines?

What do you think this woman is looking at? Is she watching a performance on the stage below, or could she be looking at something else?

Why do you think Cassatt chose to show the woman in profile and hide some of her face behind the fan? What kind of expression do you imagine on her face? Do you think she knows we are watching her?

### Let's Look Again

Complementary colors are pairs of colors, like red and green, that when placed next to each other create the strongest possible contrast. How does Cassatt use complementary colors to draw your attention to certain details in this drawing?

The Opera House was *the* place to be on a Saturday night in 1870s Paris. What popular places do you think Cassatt would paint today if she were alive?

### About the Artwork

A woman sits in the loge, or private box, of a theater in Paris looking down at the stage and the crowds of people below and around her. Just over her shoulder, a red wall separates her box from the one next to hers. The stage is hidden from our view, encouraging us to imagine the spectacle happening below. The woman is shown from the waist up as she leans on the railing of the loge, resting her arms over the edge. Bright bands of golden yellow and crimson red curve across the canvas in the background. Holding a green Japanese fan in her gloved right hand, the woman turns away from us so that we only see the profile of her face, which is partially hidden. On the left, above the fan, blurry forms emerge from the red suggesting more spectators on the other side of the theater. Strong outlines, bold and bright complementary colors, and expressive mark making come together to make an exhilarating picture that vibrates with movement and excitement.

Cassatt used soft pastels, a type of crayon made of pure powdered pigments, to make this picture. Different colored soft pastels can be easily blended together to make new colors because they are so powdery. In this artwork Cassatt effortlessly blends the colors to create smooth surfaces, like we see in the woman's cheek. You can also make powerful outlines with a rougher texture and appearance using pastels, like we see around the woman's hands, arms, and hair.



Woman with a Pearl Necklace in a Loge, 1879, by Mary Cassatt



Ballet from an Opera Box, c. 1884, by Edgar Degas

The lively goings-on of Parisian nightlife were a popular subject for Cassatt and other Impressionist artists. The Paris Opera House, shown in this image and the two above, was usually filled with large crowds of interesting people and lots of movement, which were two things that very much interested Cassatt and her artist friends. Artists also welcomed the challenge of depicting the effects of the artificial lighting in such establishments. In this artwork Cassatt used streaks of bright metallic paint to try to capture the light reflecting off of surfaces in the theater.

### About the Artist

Mary Cassatt was born near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1844 to an upper-middle class family. Both of her parents were educated and made schooling and travel an important part of their children's upbringing. As a child, Cassatt and her family even spent several years in Europe, before returning to Philadelphia in 1855. In 1860, she began her studies to become a professional artist at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. This was a trailblazing decision for the sixteen-year-old Cassatt, as most young women at the time were expected to follow a more traditional path that would lead to starting a family instead of pursuing a professional career.

In France she was not allowed to attend the École des Beaux-Arts (School of Fine Arts) because only men were admitted as students at the time. Despite this, Cassatt did not give up her pursuit to become a professional artist, and studied privately with teachers from the school. During this time she trained with some of the best and most successful artists working in Paris, like Jean-Léon Gérôme and Thomas Couture. From these artists Cassatt learned to paint in a very detailed and realistic style. However, she soon became involved with a group of artists known as the Impressionists, whose loose, sketchy brushwork challenged traditional ways of painting. Cassatt adopted aspects of the Impressionists' style and it was with them that she would find her greatest success.



Mary Cassatt, 1914

### An American Impressionist in Paris

Unlike the more traditional artists of the time who primarily painted pictures of historical moments, classical myths, and far-off places, the Impressionists wanted to paint the world around them and show everyday life as they experienced it. The Impressionists were rebels, whose art was so different from what was accepted in the Salons (the great art exhibitions of the time) that they had to start their own independent art exhibitions to promote and sell their art. One such Impressionist was Edgar Degas, who invited Mary Cassatt to exhibit with his fellow artists in Paris.

The Impressionists didn't want to paint inside their artist studios and instead preferred to take their art making out into the parks, streets, and suburbs of Paris. They were interested in how light affected the world around them. Their artworks show how light reflects off of water, trees, and city streets and how daylight outside is different from artificial light indoors. Mary Cassatt's paintings of everyday life in Paris, ranging from mothers and children at home during the day to those same mothers out and about at the theaters of Paris at night, fit in well with the work of her Impressionist friends and colleagues.

Because the art of the Impressionists was so different and new compared to what had come before it, the Impressionists had trouble finding success in Europe. Mary Cassatt, however, was able to persuade many of her wealthy American friends to buy art by the Impressionists. Today, Impressionist artworks are some of the most popular and famous in the world and, thanks to Mary Cassatt, there is more Impressionist art in the US than there is in France where the movement began.

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This pastel is featured in the Philadelphia Museum of Art's exhibition, *The Impressionist's Eye* (April 16–August 18, 2019). This show explores the versatility, experimentation, and innovation of Impressionist artists through sculpture, paintings, and works on paper.

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