

Meet the Masters

January Program

Mary Cassatt "The Letter"

William H. Johnson "Three Children"

Artwork Overview:

Please refer to the following pages.

About the Artist:

Please refer to the following pages.

Topics for Discussion:

1. From what angle is the artist viewing each of these scenes?
2. Which of these is viewed from the close-up angle? Why do you think the artist used this angle?
3. Is there something missing in one of the prints?
4. Both artists use repeated shapes and colors in their works, can you tell what shapes are repeated and explain how this brings unity into the composition?
5. Shape is also important in these works. How did each artist treat shape in these works.
6. How does your response to "The Letter" differ from your response to "Three Children" ?

Hands-on Art Activity:

The Printmaking Process

Materials: Foam core 4"x6" or styro foam trays
Plain white paper 4"x 6" and 8 1/2" x 11"
Pencil and ballpoint pen
Roller brayers
Trays for paint
Red or blue acrylic or thick tempera paints

Directions:

1. Draw design on paper with pencil. Keep design simple and do not use sport logos. Flowers, faces and animals are good subjects for this project.
2. When the design is ready for to be printed hold the paper up on a window with plain side facing you. Draw design on back of the paper.
3. Using the pencil cover the front of the drawing with graphite.
4. Place the paper over the foam core and draw the design again. This will appear backwards, however during the printing process the design will print correctly.
5. Using a ballpoint pen draw deep lines into the design. Add dots and lines to fill space if necessary.
6. Using the brayer roll ink onto the foam core or styro foam tray
7. Place paper over the foam core and rub evenly.
8. Carefully remove the paper to see your print

Printmaking

Mary Cassatt, *The Letter*



Mary Cassatt, *The Letter*, c. 1891, drypoint, soft-ground etching, and aquatint in color, 18¹³/₁₆ x 12¹/₈-in. Rosenwald Collection © 1996 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

The Art

The Letter, a delicate aquatint etching, shows the privacy of a middle-class interior in France of the early 1890's. Describe in detail what you see.

A young woman is quietly absorbed in the simple task of sealing an envelope. A blank sheet of paper sits on the oddly shaped writing desk. We might assume a note of some sort is in the envelope. No writing tool is in sight.

There are essentially only a few colors in this print. The blue of the dress is identical to the surface of the desk; flat slabs of brown press in on the scene from either side. Sharply angled slats of the same hue push horizontally into the center, as if holding the woman both down and against her chair.

Variations of a warm, rosy beige wash the background, the floral designs in the dress, and its bodice. Black softly caps the head and adds detail to the whole drawing. Even the white of the envelope is warmed by the colors surrounding it. The sheet of paper, a paper raft on a blue sea, seems brighter and crisper because of its stronger contrast.

The pattern of the dress and that of the wallpaper are so similar they seem to spill into each other. Cassatt's "camouflage" is so skillfully accomplished that were it not for the hair and blue of the dress, this woman would nearly disappear into the background!

The envelope is dead-center in the composition. In spite of the size and visual activity of the other elements in the scene, according to the artist, this picture is about a letter. The title of this print is as subtly evocative as the print itself. There must be a story here somewhere. What news

does the letter carry? For whom is it intended? How does the woman feel about it?

This is a very tightly arranged scene, almost uncomfortably so. But we are drawn to it by Cassatt's delicate, artful line work and sensitive handling of the materials and technique.

The Artist

Mary Cassatt was an independent, focused woman who was born in Pennsylvania but lived most of her life in Europe. Her father was a prominent industrialist, so she had the means to study and travel as she wished. Her parents doubted young Mary's decision to become an artist. "I would rather see you dead," her father said when she told him of her ambition. Their support grew, however, as Cassatt's talent, and so fame and fortune, grew. They eventually moved to Europe to be with her.

Cassatt attended the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts at a time when the more prestigious art schools of Europe were not even accepting females. In 1865, she left for Europe and spent the next nine years traveling to different countries before deciding that Paris was best suited to her dreams.

It was in Paris that she came to the attention of Edgar Degas, already a luminary in the art world and a leading Impressionist. As typically critical and disagreeable as he could be, he nonetheless was impressed by Cassatt's work, inviting her to join the other Impressionists to exhibit with them. She became well-established in the art world and salons of Paris, and this recognition extended across the ocean to America.

Cassatt's style was like Degas's in its use of freer brush strokes and a brighter palette, but she differed from him and other Impressionists with forms that were more solid, not diffused by light, weather, and color. She was also influenced by Japanese master printmakers. Some of her finest works are the exquisite prints reflecting their styles.

Although she never married nor had any children, she was best known for her charming, sensitive portraits of mothers and children. In that Victorian period of lush sentimentality, she managed to accomplish this subject matter with a realism that was both tender and genuine.

Cassatt settled in Paris in 1874. Nearly blind the last decade of her life, she died at her chateau near Paris in 1926.

Guided Analysis

Elements and Principles of Design

Cassatt builds mistakes in perspective into this and other prints. Our own position as viewers is challenged by the distortions: where could we be in this scene so all the odd angles would make sense? If we were standing above the figure, as the angle of the desk and the shoulders indicate, it is doubtful we would see the woman's face as above our own. The space is so shallow it threatens our equilibrium. Further, the writing table could neither push in nor fold up as Cassatt has rendered it.

Mary Cassatt, *The Letter*

Somehow, though, we are able to abandon the “logic” of this glimpse into turn-of-the-century life and simply enjoy the experience!

Subject

Mary Cassatt’s subjects were almost always women and children, especially a mother and child engaged in daily home activities like bathing or playing. Her models were often servants or other working-class women hired to pose. Surprisingly, these adoring mothers and their children were rarely related or even knew each other! Cassatt actively sought out models for how they looked together, how they would add to her composition. Like all painters, she was immersed in the complex process of constructing her scenes, from composing the settings and postures to manipulating the light, the clothing, the textures — every detail of the piece.

Is your response affected by knowing that the tranquil woman sealing an envelope in this print is probably wearing a “costume” and sitting within a “set?”

Style

Cassatt was persuaded to join the Impressionists by none other than Edgar Degas himself. She accepted with delight, later declaring, “At last I could work in complete independence, without bothering about the eventual judgment of a jury. I had already recognized who were my true masters. I admired Manet, Courbet, Degas. I hated conventional art. Now I began to live.”

She was intensely loyal to this group, not only exhibiting with them but buying their art and bringing it to the attention and understanding of her friends. She did more than any other American to bring this radical new art to the consciousness of others in her native country. She is credited with suggesting for purchase by wealthy Americans some of the finest examples of not only Impressionism but much of the great art in Europe that was still purchasable.

Although Whistler, Manet, Degas, and Lautrec were also influenced by Japanese woodcuts, it was perhaps Cassatt who most completely absorbed their purity of line, flat planes, and surface designs, translating them into her own unique style. Her beautiful color etchings, including *The Letter*, are her finest examples.

Point of View

Consider your place in this scene: you are nearly at the elbow of this unknown woman, in her house, perhaps even in her bedroom. You are so close you can touch her — yet she is completely at ease in her activity, unaware even of your presence!

You are near enough to note the fine wisps of hair that frame her face; near enough to spy upon her letter . . . and still you go unnoticed. It is as if this quiet woman were an exhibit at the zoo, so used to gawkers that she doesn’t care to acknowledge this new intruder in her space: you!

You observe her intently and wonder at the similarities of design in her dress and the wallpaper as your eyes travel between the two. “Her dress looks old-fashioned,” you think.

Media & Techniques

The Letter is a drypoint, soft-ground aquatint etching. Etching began around 1450 where it was used to decorate armor and metal weapons. Rembrandt used the technique with nearly every one of his subjects.

Traditionally, a copper plate is prepared with a film of wax. Using a very sharp, fine tool, the etcher draws the design into the film, exposing the copper below. Then the edges and back of the plate are coated with an acid-resistant varnish and the plate is put into an acid bath. The acid eats away at the exposed copper but nothing else. The lines of the drawing are “etched” into the plate and hold the ink. Deeper lines, made by repeating the acid process, hold more ink, producing shading in the finished print. Before printing, the varnish and wax are removed.



Aquatint combines the techniques of drypoint, engraving, and etching. Lines are more diffused, and tones are richer and darker. Finished products take on the look of a water-color painting. Can you see the similarities in *The Letter*?

In an aquatint, the wax is replaced with powdered resin that sticks to the copper with a small amount of heat. This, like the wax, produces a protective film, but is more porous than wax. When the plate is dunked in the acid, the copper between the resin particles is eaten into, forming a solid tone. Any areas to remain white, like the paper and the envelope in *The Letter*, are varnished to protect them from the acid “bite.”

Judgment

A popular novelist who saw Mary Cassatt’s entries to the 1881 Impressionist Exhibition wrote, “Only a woman can pose a child, dress it, adjust pins without pricking . . . This is family life painted with distinction and love.” He implies that Cassatt’s scenes are not only natural, but that one would have to be a woman — most especially a wife and mother — to produce this type of picture. Cassatt was neither. Explain what he might have meant. Do you think the statement would have been offensive or pleasing to Cassatt? How might a woman today respond?

Interpretation

Look again at *The Letter*. What gives this realistic print its air of enchantment? What makes it more than just a collection of lines and color, a fleeting moment of daily life?

Comparison

To which of the prints in this set do you feel *The Letter* most compares? What were your criteria? Did you look at subject matter? Style? Colors?

Printmaking

William H. Johnson, *Three Children*



William H. Johnson, *Three Children*, c. 1939-1942, serigraph on paper, 15¹³/₁₆ x 11⁹/₁₆-in. National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C./Art Resource, N.Y.

The Art

Three Children is a direct, simply detailed print that shows the richness and range of the African-American culture. Three young people, each a different shade of brown, stand shoulder to shoulder, so close that they overlap. Their upper torsos and faces fill the frame of the print and their eyes stare at something just outside of it. What could it be? How do the children feel about it?

Are these three girls, or could the child in the middle be a boy? How has the artist painted this child different from the others? He (or she!) is more angular in every way: his shoulders are squared, his eyebrows arched, his square hat, solidly set on straight, cropped hair, shows off a bright checkerboard band of orange and yellow. Even his jaw cuts in sharply. The other two children are composed of curved lines and shaped, and the colors Johnson used to depict their clothing is brighter.

The background gives nothing away of the story these children might be telling. What came before they were frozen here in time? What is coming after? We may only know a bit more if we look at other prints and paintings from Johnson's life.

The Artist

The career of African-American painter and printmaker, William H. Johnson, spanned the decades between World Wars I and II. Though he was a painter of genuine talent, his life was marked by much sadness and feelings of alienation, the result of having been born black in the deeply racist America of the early 1900's. Further, he was half-white, which estranged him from other blacks as well.

Johnson, who dreamed of becoming an artist as a young child, left his home in South Carolina at the age of seventeen to work in New York. This paid for his training at the National Academy of Design where he was a brilliant student.

After winning numerous prizes for his art, and like many other black writers, artists, and entertainers of the time, he moved to Paris where race was merely another feature of an individual. For many years, he lived and traveled in Europe and North Africa, finally settling in Denmark after falling in love and marrying a weaver, Holcha Krake.

When the Nazis advanced into Scandinavia, Johnson and his wife fled to New York. Here he looked for subjects that reflected his African-American experience. He found them in abundance in big-city Harlem, where hot nights were tempered by cool jazz and the beginnings of black pride were just stirring. He also recalled his early life in the rural South and put these memories to his canvases while living in Harlem.

As World War II neared its end, Johnson's life and spirit began to unravel. His beloved Holcha died of cancer and he discovered he was in the advanced stages of a disease that finally drove him mad. By 1946, he was producing very little, and although he made one last trip to Denmark to recall better times, he sank into insanity there and had to be sent back to the United States. He spent the rest of his life in a grim asylum in New York. He never painted another picture, and he died in near obscurity in 1970.

Guided Analysis

Cultural Context

William Johnson spent 20 years in Europe during a time of such compelling historical interest that it threatened to overwhelm the artist and the art itself.

Perhaps as important as the two world wars was the artistic temperament of the times. "Modern Art" was exploding onto the Western world, but Johnson was not intrigued with the innovations of Cubism and he completely disdained Abstractionism. These were the forces that were to shape art for decades, but Johnson was content to simply make art he liked and most people understood.

It was perhaps because he ignored what was happening in these years that his own work was overlooked. In fact, the complete body of his work was nearly destroyed when a home couldn't be found for it after his death. At the last moment, the Smithsonian Museum took it in, and most of his paintings and prints are housed there still.

Elements and Principles of Design

With only a handful of simple shapes, curved and straight lines, and bright, clashing colors, Johnson has created a curiously expressive piece.

Everywhere in this picture there is repetition of shape, color, and pattern. Johnson balances the composition with these elements. Point out where colors are repeated.

The picture is particularly commanding because the three sets of eyes draw our immediate attention. Not only do they create a striking pattern, but they nearly jump off the faces in brilliant contrast to the warm brown tones. How would you describe each child's expression?

Johnson paints this scene with very little perspective. Can you point out the one technique of perspective drawing he uses? Overlapping. We cannot judge distance or size from the flat, shallow background. The artist was more concerned with the placement of the colorful shapes. He carefully pieced them together like the folk quilts he studied and admired.

Style

Johnson's style was influenced early on by such artists as Impressionist Vincent van Gogh, German Expressionist Edvard Munch, and his particular favorite, Chaim Soutine, a Russian Expressionist.

Johnson was most drawn to Expressionism in his early paintings. He created powerful, complicated landscapes in the 30's, sometimes using a special glass to distort the subject as he painted. Much of his later work, however, including *Three Children*, is done in a primitive, naïve style whose roots were in Africa. It is a mixture of caricature and folk art, thoughtfully composed and expressive in both style and the stories it tells.

Holcha prompted her husband to explore the heritage and craft of quilts made by black women and to note especially their brightly colored block shapes and strong outlines. This led Johnson to the broad, flat planes of color and patterned designs we see in serigraphs such as *Three Children*.

Johnson never surpassed his models of artistic inspiration, but his work is discussed by critics and art historians in comparison to van Gogh, Soutine, and even Picasso, demonstrating that his technical ability merits the comparison.

Subject

In the course of his career, Johnson painted still lifes, Expressionistic landscapes, rural farmers and families he remembered from North Carolina, Harlem in its heyday, religious scenes, and even a series about life in a black army regiment. Race and heritage play a significant part in all that he portrayed.

Media and Technique

Serigraphy is the general term for the process of silk screen printing. It is a process used by both commercial and creative artists.

Serigraphy, like lithography, is a surface-printing technique. A serigraph is made when ink is pressed through a fine mesh of fabric, usually silk. A stencil made of paper or lacquered film is stuck to the fabric, which is stretched taut on a frame. A sheet of paper or another suitable printing surface is placed under the frame.

Ink is pulled across the screen with a tool called a squeegee. Where the screen is "masked" by the paper or film, the ink will not penetrate. A number of pulls are required for different colors, and with each, a different stencil is used. Careful registration, or alignment of colors next to each other, is necessary, though some artists purposely misregister the stencil to produce an interesting effect. Many complex and subtle prints have been made with the serigraphic process.

Point of View

It almost feels as though we are standing directly across from these three children; perhaps we are even part of a circle of friends outside the frame. What are we discussing? Could it be that we are talking about someone outside our group? Have you ever shared in gossip about another person? Have you ever been the subject of gossip or a rumor? Share your experience and how you felt.

Expressive

Did you notice that Johnson left out some facial features? Why do you think he did this? Would the picture be any more expressive were they drawn in? Explain your conclusions.

Judgment

Three Children reflects some elements of children's art. What are they, and why do you think Johnson used this style?

In what ways does your response to Johnson's print differ from your response to Mary Cassatt's *The Letter*?

Activity

Write a poem, story, or short play about this picture. Use expressive dialogue and "paint" a picture with words. With two friends, see how well you can imitate the postures and expressions of the print; role play the conversation the children might be having!