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THE JOURNAL is published weekly by the American Medical Association, 535 North Dearborn Street, Chicago, IL 60610. Phone 751-6000 (Area Code 312). Cable address "Medic" Chicago.

SUBSCRIPTION RATE—The subscription price per year for members of the AMA is \$2, included in the annual membership dues. The subscription price per year for nonmembers is \$30 in the United States and US possessions; \$50 in all other countries, payable in advance. Price to medical students, interns, and residents, \$10 in the United States and US posses- sions.

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The Cover

Only when she was nearing 40 did Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) begin to paint the subject with which she has become most closely identified, women and children. Prior to that time she had served a characteristically disciplined apprenticeship, studying first at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and then, at her own insistence, in Paris. She also thoroughly studied the works of Correggio in Italy, the paintings of Rubens in the Prado and in Antwerp, and also those of Franz Hals in Holland. Finally, back in Paris she became the only American to exhibit with the Impressionists. She also became a life-long and close friend of Edgar Degas, a relationship that has been much discussed since neither ever married. Of Miss Cassatt, Degas said, "I would have married her, but I could never have made love to her [as a mistress]." Of Degas, Cassatt said that his criticism could "demolish me completely." Yet, in spite of this vulnerability to Degas' criticism, Mary Cassatt was seen as a "self-assured woman, stubborn and determined, indomitable and forceful, vibrant and optimistic in disposition" (Breeskin). A family friend who saw her in 1901 described her as a "tall, slender, erect, scrupulously well-tailored American spinster in her mid-fifties," impatient and annoyed at delays. And in 1905, just about the time she was painting *Mother and Child* (cover) an art student who visited her in her Paris studio found her to be a "fiery and peppery lady, a very vivid, determined personality, positive in her opinions. I was scared to death of her" (Philbrick).

Perhaps it was these very elements of her character and personality, plus the fact that she would never have children of her own, that enabled Miss Cassatt to keep a certain cool detachment necessary to portray a theme without the sentimentality that can so easily destroy it. For example, the moments she captures are so intimate and the subjects so unselfconscious that the viewer is perforce obliged to remain outside. To enter the scene would be to destroy what is happening at that moment between the mother and her child. In her paintings of infants, the mother and child are characteristically absorbed in each other, gazing into each other's eyes, to the exclusion of the entire world. In the paintings of slightly older children, the two are still completely absorbed in each other, but this time, as in the cover portrait of the child after her bath looking into the mirror, the child begins to see her image reflected back at herself in something other than her mother's eyes. It is a painting of the first dim realization that the world lies elsewhere than in her mother's eyes, and, in the tenderness of this scene, that it is a good world as well.

Nowhere, perhaps, can the mother-child relationship be more profitably studied than in a catalogue of the hundreds of paintings Mary Cassatt did on this theme. Certainly, she surpasses all those who have attempted to put it into words.

—M. THERESE SOUTHGATE, MD

(*Mother and Child*, c 1905. Canvas. 91.3×63.8 cm. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.)

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