In the Loge  
Mary Cassatt

Mary Cassatt (American, 1844–1926) was born near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1844 to an upper-middle class family. Both of her parents were successful professionals, 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 toward 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 Art) 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.

The Opera House was shown in this image and the two above, Paris looking down at the stage and the crowds of people below and around her. Just over her shoulder, a red wall is hidden from our view, encouraging us to imagine the 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 the artwork Cassatt used streaks of bright metallic paint to try to capture the light reflecting off of surfaces in the theater.

Let’s Look
Look carefully at this drawing. Can you find places where Cassatt smooths and blends the pastels? Do you notice the rougher texture of the unblended lines?

What do you think this woman’s 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 our attention to certain details in the drawing?

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 the artwork Cassatt used streaks of bright metallic paint to try to capture the light reflecting off of surfaces in the theater.

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 is hidden from our view, encouraging us to imagine the 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 the artwork Cassatt used streaks of bright metallic paint to try to capture the light reflecting off of surfaces in the theater.

About the Artist
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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 style 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 Cassatt, there is more Impressionist art in the US than there is in France where the movement began.