FINAL DRAFT (1559 words) Submitted June 2014.

The 'Woman Question' in American Impressionist Painting, 1880-1920

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American Impressionism is generally understood as offering a conservative perspective in terms of its subject matter – an obscuring of the increasing political conflict, social turmoil and economic disparities that characterized U.S. society during the Gilded Age-- yet modern (for its time) in its technique and methods of representation. As one art historian has written, ""in contrast to the swiftly changing social and political landscape, American Impressionism presented images of stillness, solitude and optimism."[1] Today, the consensus among art historians, as well as the viewing public, seems to be that these are lovely paintings—in part because of their subject matter but also because of style and technique: softened lines, brilliant color, diffused light. [2]

Yet in the late nineteenth century, American art critics were sometimes enthralled, sometimes repulsed by the new techniques, and art connoisseurs who valued symbolic compositions did not always find the subject matter suitable. Thinking about the skepticism of nineteenth-century viewers might help us to remember that there is nothing intrinsically beautiful or artistic about these paintings and might prompt us to reflect on why today we find them so lovely. Is it simply that we no longer find the techniques offputting, accustomed as we are to the abstract expressionism that was to follow? Or are we attracted to the idealism informing these works, seeing in them evidence of a world we no longer experience but nostalgically believe once existed? Or perhaps we are drawn to these paintings because they seem highly symbolic to us— as we can discern in

them references to European masters, along with new elements/styles from non-western sources. Finally, do we respond so favorably because we find in them some transcendent meaning?

Many of the works featured in this exhibition use women as subjects in ways that moved beyond traditional portraiture or classic nudes. Yet, despite great variations in style and composition, there is remarkable consistency to these representations of women and domesticity. Whether situated indoors or in plein air, whether painted in somber or bright colors, whether "realistically" or "impressionisticly" rendered, the female subjects are often depicted in contented repose—strolling, picknicking, reading, drinking tea, playing music, eating breakfast, embracing children, doing their toilette. Often the female figures are alone, deeply absorbed in their solitude or happily engaged in daily rituals. As art historian Diane Mancoff has observed of Mary Cassatt's paintings (offering insights that apply more generally): "instead of being confining, the settings…[modestly furnished bedrooms, sun-filled parlors, walled gardens] are always pleasant, and more importantly, private; they define a realm where a woman can spend her time alone, content with her own company and fulfilled in the richness of her experience."[3]

Is it possible, then, to approach American impressionist painting as a kind of documentary record, offering glimpses into elite women's lives, or at least into the cultural values that upheld "woman's sphere" as an ideal? Victorians understood the home as a realm that women controlled and where they were [supposed to be] happiest,[4] a realm where men spent much less time as their work and leisure activities increasingly took place in the "public sphere"—which raises the question of whether contemporary

men and women responded to these paintings differently, given how different their lives were.[5] It's a hard question to answer, not least because historians have been able to gather more evidence of men's reactions to impressionism than women's.[6] For example, a French male critic is known to have marveled at how Cassatt "succeeded in expressing… the joyful peace, the tranquil friendliness of the domestic interior,"[7] but would Mary Ead, an American woman, have had the same response, given the profound isolation and boredom she experienced as a young faculty wife at a small college in California in the 1890s? Ead, who was well educated and had worked as a teacher before she married, describes how she has come to feel about reading and having tea: "unrestrained reading produces stupefaction and revolt. At times when one longs to be abroad in the thick of things, books do not altogether suffice the spirit." "And on days when no social visit or visitor throws a bright ray of fellowship into the home, the lone wife feels that she has nothing to say over the teacups to beguile the tired man, who, for his part, has been among inspiring people all day and feels the contrast of a dull home, she fears."[8]

It is impossible to know how many Victorian women shared Ead's feelings, but we do know that extensive discussions about the "woman question" appeared in U.S. print media, beginning in the 1870s and extending into the next century, as increasingly large numbers of women voiced dissatisfaction with the confinement of woman's sphere and sought access to activities and opportunities outside the home that had traditionally been denied them.[9] As cultural observer Sarah Grand wrote in 1914, "In the club and periodical, at the dinner-table and on the [lecture] platform," "what girls were, are, will be, and should be is the constant question…. although women generally are

becoming conscious that some great change is taking place in their position, they are as yet unaware of the nature of it.”[10]

The woman question first emerged as a cultural concern in the postbellum period as more and more white, middle-class women attended college. In 1870, there were just 11,000 women enrolled in institutions of higher learning. By 1900, this number had grown to 85,000, 36.8% of all students enrolled (but just 2.8 percent of all women age 18-21). By 1920, the numbers had more than doubled again: 283,000 women, 47.3% of all college students. (7.6 percent of women aged 18-21).[11] Although the numbers may seem inconsequential to us, to contemporaries this dramatic rise was hugely significant, reflecting the social changes affecting American women’s lives at the time, and fueling middle-class women’s increasing involvement in social and political reform, such as the temperance, labor, and suffrage movements.

In the face of such widespread social changes, elites had to rethink the purpose of education for the ”modern woman”—a term that contemporaries used to describe an emerging class of women who were delaying marriage for several years (or avoiding it altogether) to pursue other interests.[12] The modern woman desired an “independent” life, and was severely criticized for being selfish and seeming to refuse to fulfill her social obligation to have children and thereby “advance the race.”[13] Although historians now understand that the birth rates of all groups of women were declining in this period—a phenomenon attributed in part to the increasing urbanization of society—to most contemporaries it seemed that birth rates were

only falling among the upper classes, fueling concern that "civilization" would decline as the "lower classes" out reproduced their social superiors.[14]

In this highly charged atmosphere, most white middle- and upper-class women felt they had to make a choice: either marry and have a family or retain the freedom and independence to devote themselves to a lifelong pursuit.[15] To pursue an avocation like art-- especially if one was determined to earn one's living from it-- was a bold and courageous act for women to take in the second half of the nineteenth century. Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) is often cited as an example of such a woman, and her scornful branding of women (who were often married) whom she considered amateurs should be understood in this context.[16]

As a documentary record, then, these paintings offer only partial information: we may glimpse some of the rituals and routines of elite women's lives-- the private and intimate activities (the combing of hair and bathing of children), and the social activities that engaged women of the upper classes (visiting for tea, holding musicales at home, promenading in the park, going to the theatre) but there is much about these women's lives that is omitted. The belief that women's lives were centered in the home is true but not the whole truth: All women's lives extended beyond the domestic sphere—some worked for wages; some inspected factories, some served on municipal governing boards, some planned public events. Many were active in Church and charitable endeavors, labor organizing, and social reform movements. Perhaps most relevant here, some organized art exhibitions and helped introduce American impressionist paintings to new audiences.[17] None of

this subject matter finds its way into American impressionist painting, which for the most part remained focused on the private lives of elite women, but even here there are significant omissions: we never see how much effort is involved in household management and childrearing; nor do we view the labor of working-class women that make the lives of privileged women possible—the maid who brings the tea, the nanny who puts the children down for a nap, the cook who prepares the dinner meal-- all the servants, tutors, and nannies who populated these households but are just outside the frame.

But what we do see—and contemporaries discerned this as well—is the deep respect, even reverence, accorded to women's lives. However idealized these women may be, they are not one-dimensional icons of mothers, virgins or whores. These figures are not shrouded in mystery or objectified; they have lives and thoughts of their own. The sensuality, intelligence, energy and engagement captured on canvas may be, in the end, what we find most lovely.

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[1] David R. Brigham, *American Impressionism: Paintings of Promise* (Worcester: Worcester Art Museum, 1997), p. 10. There are many excellent overviews of American impressionism. Interested readers may want to consult some of the following: H. Barbara Weinberg, Doreen Bolger and David Park Curry, *American Impressionism and Realism: The Painting of Modern Life, 1885-1915* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994); William H. Gerdts. *American Impressionism*

(New York: Abbeville, 1984; second edition, 2001); Judith A. Barter, *The Age of American Impressionism: Masterpieces from the Art Institute of Chicago,* 2011. Soon to be published is Katherine M. Bourguignon, Frances Fowle and Richard R. Brettell, *American Impressionism: A New Vision, 1880-1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming, August 2014).

[2] Brigham, *American Impressionism,* 10

[3] Debra N. Mancoff, *Mary Cassatt: Reflections of Women's Lives* (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1998), p. 41. Although art critics at the time often felt that women artists brought a special sensitivity to their subjects (see footnotes 7 and 8 below), I am unable to discern such gender differences when comparing the works of Frederick Frieseke, William Merrit Chase, Robert Reid and Childe Hassam with Mary Cassatt, Lilla Perry or Helen Turner.

[4] There are many, many examples that could be cited here, but Bisland's is interesting for being articulated by a woman who understood the yearnings of women for independence but nonetheless felt that they were fools for relinquishing the realm that would provide them with the most security and happiness. See Elizabeth Bisland, "The Modern Woman and Marriage," *The North American Review* 160 n. 463 (June 1895): 753-755.

[5] In her book, *Consumers' Imperium, h*istorian Kristin L. Hoganson explores how middle-class and upper-class American women helped create a "cosmopolitan domesticity" by decorating their homes with foreign objects and creating themed rooms—a French drawing room, Spanish music room, English dining room-- or

eclectic rooms that mixed objects from different parts of the world: French furniture, Japanese screens, Chinese vases, Turkish rugs, etc. While Hoganson does not discuss painting directly, the cover illustration on her book is an impressionist painting, *Morning News,* by Helen M. Turner (1858-19), and so the question arises what meanings American female consumers imparted to impressionist paintings created by American artists as opposed to French artists., by female artists as opposed to male artists? Was an impressionist painting of an American scene, painted by an American woman, considered to be of greater or lesser value value? More or less authentic? *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), pp. 13-56.

[6] This is not surprising, since most professional art critics who published their views in this time were men. Male critics commenting on the paintings of female artists often discerned something especially feminine in their work. In addition to Joris Karl Huysmans' comment on Cassatt (fn 8 below), see Duncan Phillips' comments about Helen Turner (1858-1958) in his memoir, *A Collection in the Making* (New York: E. Weyhe, 1926), pp. 56-57 and an anonymous critic's observations about Helen Turner published in *the Spur*, New York, March 1921, both quoted in Jane Ward Faquin, *Helen M. Turner: The Woman's Point of View* (Memphis: Dixon Gallery and Gardens, 2010), p. 12.

[7] Joris Karl Huysmans, a contemporary of Cassatt's upon viewing the 1881 impressionist exhibition, described a special sensibility in Cassatt's work, "a flutter

of feminine nerves" and a "note of tenderness," which he believed differentiated her work from that of her male French colleagues—attributing this quality to both her nationality and gender. "This indeed is the most characteristic quality of her talent, that Mlle. Cassatt, who, I believe, is an American, paints French women, but manages somehow to introduce into her Parisian interiors an 'at home' feeling. She has succeeded in expressing, as none of our own painters have managed to do, the joyful peace, the tranquil friendliness of the domestic interior," cited in Mancoff, *Mary Cassatt: Reflections of Women's Lives,* p. 56.

[8] Mary Eads, *The Sewanee Review* 23.4 (October 1915*):* 412. Ead's perspective was by no means universal among women of the middle and upper classes, and even she upheld domesticity as an important ideal: "By nature and training I believe in the sweet old fashioned ideals of home, in its peace and rest as a retreat from the world." (417). Ead's solution was to encourage women to find some larger interest that could be pursued before they had children and then resumed after their children were raised.

[9] Hoganson makes the argument that "cosmopolitan interiors can be read as protests against the constraints of women's domesticity," and in particular as "protests against the narrowness of *American* domesticity." *Consumers' Imperium,* p. 34, emphasis in original.

[10] Sarah Grand, "The Modern Girl," *The North American Review* (June 1914): 158, 451, 706.

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[11] These numbers originally appeared in Mabel Newcomer's *A Century of Higher Education for American* Women (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 46 and are assembled into a table in Louise Michele Newman, ed. *Men's Ideas/Women's Realities* (Pergamon Press, 1985), p. 62.

[12] Historians haven't yet pinpointed when the term, "modern woman," was first used—probably in the early 1890s.

[13] Elizabeth Bisland believed that woman's "instinct" for childrearing would always mean that she must marry, and like many people of her generation, she felt that women did not have sufficient energy to devote to both homemaking and career: "Using all her energies for her own needs, she can not give vigor to her children. If she employ for her own ends her store of life she robs the child." Bisland, "The Modern Woman and Marriage," *The North American Review* 160 n. 463 (June 1895): 735.

[14] For a good overview of contemporaries' concerns about the meaning of declining birth rates, see Newman, ed., *Men's Ideas/Women's Realities,* pp. 105-155.

[15] Mary Ead, *The Sewanee Review* 23.4 (October 1915): 409-417, describes the five-to-ten years after college that ambitious young women spent pursuing careers before they married, commenting that "independent women are coming more and more to regard marriage as a matter of definitely giving up a "career" (414). What Ead did not understand was that this phenomenon was not new to her generation, but that American women had been expressing such ambivalence for more than a generation.

[16] Nancy Mowll Mathews, the foremost biographer and scholar of Cassatt's life, has written, "there is no doubt that Cassatt was profoundly feminist from an early age. She held women in as high esteem as she held men, if not higher in some ways. She believed in a woman's right to education and advancement in the world outside of the home. She was fully aware of and did not hesitate to raise her voice against the vast injustices suffered by women in modern life." *Mary Cassatt: A Life* (New York: Villard Books, 1994), pp. 307-308. Also see Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women* (New York and London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), p. 7. Cassatt's decision to make art her life's work occurred in the 1870s, but even a generation later, the same dynamics still held. As a contemporary, Cleveland schoolteacher Bertha Monroe Rickoff, observed in 1893: "How long before the spirited American society girl will have some higher ambition placed before her than social success… [Even] in art studies and literary society [where] she may find occupations, which, while being more soul-satisfying than fancy work, lack the stamp of purpose, because essentially amateur." Bertha Monroe Rickoff , "Women and the World," *The North American Review* 157 n. 443 (October 1893): 451. For other female artists' lamenting of the specific challenges they faced in this period, see quotation by Mrs. Sargent Florence: "No one knows better than I the limitations of my own work…. but it is because the energy, time, imagination, and physical strength that men use freely for their art has in my case had to go in ceaseless struggling… not for money only but for the 'right to work,'" quoted in *International Studio* 59 (July 1916): iii.

[17] Mary Cassatt and Lilla Cabot Perry both played significant roles in educating the American public about impressionist painting. For discussion of Perry's role, see Meredith Martindale, Nancy Mowll Mathews, and Pamela Moffat, *Lilla Cabot Perry: An American Impressionist* (Washington D.C., 1990) and *A Museum of their Own: National Museum of Women in the Arts* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2008). For discussion of Cassatt's role, see Mathews, *Mary Cassatt: A Life,* and H. Barbara Weinberg, "Mary Stevenson Cassatt (1844–1926)," Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cast/hd_cast.htm (October 2004).