

A Wanderer's Eyes

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The night casts a shadow upon the city as the church bells toll seven o'clock. The outside world is frozen. Winter has come again. Snowflakes drift from the barely visible clouds overhead, each white speck dancing in the frigid breeze, making its way to the pavement below. The cool air nips at the ears, noses, and necks of passersby, reddening the skin. Electric and candle lights blend together, twinkling throughout the city. A crowd dressed in their finest furs and overcoats line up about the opera house, eager to escape the winter cold. Inside the opera house, men and women chat, speaking in low tones, creating a single hum, which echoes throughout the building. High above the stage, perched in the balcony, sits a young woman dressed in black. Holding an ornate fan in her left hand, she uses the other to hold a pair of binoculars to peer over the crowd, waiting for the show to begin. She sits in the shadows, her elbow upon the railing providing the illusion that she is a part of her surroundings, fashioned by the architect. A sole stream of light captures the whiteness and overall purity of her pearl earring, the curve of her face, and the translucent lace of her dress sleeves. She is a lady who holds her own, with an air of independence and self-confidence about her. As she gazes upon the crowd below, another also looks through a pair of binoculars to survey the scenery. A gentleman disregards the company of his lady friend and instead stares at the lady in black who ignores his wandering eyes. How curious the desires of content men! How sweet the disregard of passive affection!

The above scenario reflects only one of the multiple images conjured up by viewers gazing at Mary Cassatt's painting, *In the Loge*:

The mind runs away with numerous questions and answers while studying *In the Loge*. The artist takes a stand on the role of women in traditional paintings and the role that women play in everyday life. Women's passivity and naïve acceptance of affection, no matter the cause, is the defining theme in this painting. Artistic standards are broken in this piece: the use of color, light, space, and line. However, these standards are not broken simply for pleasure in disrupting the male dominated society. These standards are broken for a purpose: to identify a time honored generalization of the female ideal and to counteract the role women play in society and in their own lives. Mary Cassatt's use of line, contrast of light and darkness, and space also blend well with the ideas of fellow Impressionist Pierre-Auguste Renoir, as seen in his essay, "On Irregularity." Combining *In the Loge* and "On Irregularity" reveals a truism about the nature of art: an artist is able to incorporate artistic pleasure with social purpose.

Completed in 1879, Mary Cassatt's *In the Loge* currently hangs in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. At 32 x 26 inches, this oil on canvas painting is a medium sized piece; its size does not add to or take away from the work. This painting embodies a sense of warmth in the colors used: rich golds and browns complement the polarity of the white and black tones. Primary colors, such as yellow and red, filter throughout the painting even on the woman's fan in the dark portion of the painting, attracting the viewer's eyes to look about the entire painting and not just to focus on one section or specific element. The concept of light versus darkness in this painting also adds to its appeal. Although the lady in black is the main figure in this painting, the artist has placed her in the darkness towards the right side of the painting. The use of light, dark, and space contrasts sharply with the standards established by previous generations of artists. Cassatt also uses line as a way to ensnare the imagination of her audience. The lady in black rests her elbow upon the balcony banister and an invisible line can be drawn, following up her

arm, to the curve of her back, and then around to the continuance of the banister on her right. In this way, the artist is able to incorporate the lady in black with her surroundings and to highlight the woman's face and pearl earring by depicting her in black clothes and shadows (Sayre 122). This use of line also justifies the placement of the woman in a diagonal position. In incorporating the lady in black with the overall architectural design of the building, the viewer's eyes follow the balcony railing in a diagonal direction. If Cassatt had not used line in such an effective manner, her audience's immediate attention may not have been successfully drawn to the lady in black. Many lines are also blurred throughout the painting, with faces other than that of the lady in black being unrecognizable. Her face remains clear and visible, although imperfect. It is the piece's imperfection, however, that gives it its defining character.

Mary Cassatt's painting blends Renoir's beliefs on irregularity with social purpose. In his essay, "On Irregularity," Pierre-Auguste Renoir explains how art, like nature, should not be perfect. Renoir states, "The earth is not round. An orange is not round. Not one section of it has the same form or weight as another... Take the leaf of a tree - take a hundred thousand other leaves of the same kind of tree - not one will exactly resemble the other" (Renoir 50). Cassatt uses this ideology in her painting, especially in the case of the human faces other than the lady in black's own. The other figures do not have distinguishable features, such as eyes, noses, mouths, and ears. However, this lack of clear features only adds to the overall drama of the painting. By not clearly defining the faces in the crowd, the artist attracts the viewer's attention to the woman's face even more, even though on closer inspection the lady in black's face is not exactly naturalistic. Renoir believed that God Himself had not created something perfect in the architecture of the human form, a belief clearly reinforced by Mary Cassatt's painting (51). Perfection itself takes away from any artistic expression as it is the antithesis of life. Perfection

is foreign to human existence; therefore, both the artist and the viewer cannot truly identify with it. As Renoir explains, “Consider the great masters of the past. They were aware that there are two regularities: that of the eye and that of the compass. The great masters rejected the latter” (52). In other words, perfection, which is too unrealistic, cannot surpass the use of the artist’s eye and intuition.

In Cassatt’s *In the Loge*, among the blurred faces of the crowd at the opera house, though indistinguishable, one figure stands out: a gentleman with a pair of binoculars is staring at the lady in black. Although this gentleman is not the central figure in the painting, he is nonetheless important. His importance lies in the fact that he is not the dominant figure in the painting. The lady in black remains the focal point and receives the instant attention of the viewer. *In the Loge* gives the lady in black the dominant role in the painting, thus suggesting that she in fact has become an active member of a man’s world (Sayre 122). Mary Cassatt’s use of light and space helps to illustrate this concept. By seating the lady in black in the shadows and by enveloping the gentleman peering at her in electric light, Cassatt has used light to provide an invisible barrier between the two figures (Sayre 122).

The irregularity of Mary Cassatt’s secondary figures in her painting *In the Loge* blends Impressionist ideals and the ideas of Pierre-Auguste Renoir. Color, light, space, line, and angle each play a part in the effectiveness of the painting. Mary Cassatt breaks traditional modes of thinking, both artistically and socially. Her contrast of light, oddly enough, draws the viewer’s attention to the darkened portion of the piece. Through her artistic devices, Cassatt deemphasizes the traditional, passive role of the female figure in art and society, and instead, places her central figure in an equally active role as the gentleman occupies in the painting. Although the woman of the painting does not merely accept the gaze of the gentleman’s

wandering eyes, she does not venture outside of her own space either; instead, she continues to stare through her binoculars at her own independent target. Mary Cassatt's *In the Loge* blends pleasing aesthetics with social purpose, frenzied brushstrokes with a steady hand, and the viewer's mind's eye with that of the wanderer.

Works Cited

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