

## SECOND CLASS - IMPRESSIONIST PORTRAITS

### I. INTRODUCTION

Today we are going to look at portraits by two more Impressionist artists, Pierre Auguste Renoir and Mary Cassatt.

What does it mean when you say that you got an impression of something?

That you got its main image or idea but not all the precise details.

The painters we call the Impressionists did not choose that name to describe themselves. The term was first coined by an art critic who took the name from one of Monet's paintings, Impression, Sunrise. In the spring of 1874 Monet, Renoir, Degas, Pissarro and others held a special exhibition of their works in Paris because so many of them had been rejected by the Salon (the official exhibition of the French Royal Academy). After viewing one of Monet's paintings at the show, Impression, Sunrise, a sarcastic art critic coined the term Impressionism and complained that the paintings looked like "palette-scrappings placed uniformly on a dirty canvas."

The critics who attacked the Impressionists were reacting to what they thought was the unfinished nature of their pictures. Let's look closely today at what was new and different in Impressionist art by means of these two wonderful paintings of children.

### II. EYE EXERCISES

### III. IMPRESSIONIST PORTRAITS

#### A. In the Meadow

Artist – Pierre-Auguste Renoir - French (1841-1919)

Year Painted - undated (1888-92)

Medium - oil on canvas

Props - poster of painting, pencils and paper

Activity - Follow a color; Acrostic



#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION (for the teacher)

Pierre Auguste Renoir was born in Limoges, France, the son of a tailor of modest means. As a young child, he and his family moved to Paris where at age thirteen he began work in a porcelain factory decorating china. He first studied drawing in night school and then in 1862 enrolled in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts where he met Monet, Sisley, Bazille, and Pissarro. Along with Degas and Cezanne, these artists would often meet at the Cafe Guerbois to discuss their radical new ideas about what art should be. They found academic art stuffy and unnatural, too hampered by convention, although Renoir himself was no revolutionary and continued to seek Salon approval. But by the summer of 1869, he and Monet were painting out-of- doors in locations such as La Grenouillere, where their almost identical canvases mark the birth of the Impressionist style.

In 1874 Renoir, Monet and others organized a group show in the photography studio of Paul Nadar in order to gain a public audience for their works that had been rejected by the official Salon. This was the first of 8 Impressionist exhibitions held between 1874 and 1886. Because Impressionism was not a school of art with fixed ideas, its membership varied over time. The Impressionists were harshly criticized by the art establishment of their day. Renoir was the first of the Impressionists to gain public recognition for his work beginning with the success of his portrait of Madame Charpentier and her Children at the Salon of 1879. In the early 1880s, after a trip to Italy, Renoir became somewhat disillusioned with Impressionism's lack of attention to form. His art of this time, known as his dry or harsh period, is more sculptural with clean contour lines.

The work we are looking at today is in Renoir's transitional style of the late 1880 to early 1890s when he was trying to create a new Impressionism whose brushstrokes didn't destroy form but rather built it up. Renoir's art is filled with happy images of middle

class Parisians enjoying themselves, such as his famous Luncheon of the Boating Party. Among the Impressionists, Renoir excelled at painting the human figure. His many portraits of women and children use light and color to emphasize the beauty of the human form. Renoir had a sensuous appreciation of paint and continued to work in oils even when crippled with arthritis in old age.

#### DIALOGUE SUGGESTIONS (for classroom presentation)

Show the students the poster of In the Meadow and ask them what is the **setting** for this painting? Where are we in this picture?

Outdoors

In a field or meadow.

The title of this picture is In the Meadow.

Do they think the artist who painted it was a member of the Impressionist group? (Remind your students of the paintings they looked at in the last class.)

Yes

Painting out-of-doors, *en plein air*, was a hallmark of Impressionism.

This picture was painted around 1888 to 1892 by the French artist, Pierre Auguste Renoir. He was a good friend of Monet's and was one of the artists who exhibited in the first Impressionist Exhibition in 1874. (Write his name on the blackboard.) Renoir had a happy nature and loved to paint. Increasingly crippled with arthritis, he continued to paint and even did a canvas on the day he died at age 78 in 1919.

From looking at this painting, what subjects do you think Renoir liked to paint?

Girls.

His favorite subjects were women and children.

He was never totally satisfied painting a landscape without people in it.

Do you remember a painting that we looked at last year that was also by Renoir? (Here's a clue: the two children looked alike but were very different.)

Renoir painted the portrait of Madame Charpentier and Her Children in 1878.

The two children both wore dresses and had long golden hair, but they were actually brother (Paul) and sister (Georgette). This was the style of the time.



Do you think the painting we are looking at today is a portrait? (Encourage your students to give their reasons why or why not.)

This is not an easy painting to categorize.

Some art historians consider it a genre scene.

Others call it a double portrait even though

we can't see the girls' faces very well. Renoir painted these two girls together at least six times wearing the same dresses. Although the girls are unidentified, they may be Julie Manet, the thirteen-year-old daughter of Eugene Manet and Berthe Morisot and Jeannie or Paule Gibillard, the daughters of Morisot's sister Yves.

Berthe Morisot was also an Impressionist painter and Renoir sometimes painted at her country house.

Can you find any other people in this painting?

There are two figures in the distance in the meadow.

One is reaching up to touch the hat of the other.

How are the two girls portrayed here alike?

They seem about the same age.

They both wear dresses.

They both wear their hair long and pulled back on top.

They are both sitting.

They are both facing away from the viewer.

How are they different?

One has blonde hair, the other brunette.

One has on a white dress with a blue/green sash, the other a coral colored dress.

One holds a bouquet of flowers and the other doesn't.

Renoir creates a number of balanced contrasts in this painting.

Do the girls appear aware that someone is painting them?

No. They are preoccupied with picking flowers.

Is this a formal or informal **pose**?

Informal, relaxed pose.

What type day has Renoir depicted? What **season** do you think it is?

Spring.

The flowers are blooming in the meadow.

Have the students imagine what types of sounds you might hear?

Birds, bees, other insects, leaves rustling in the wind.

What is the **weather**? How can you tell?

Sunny, blue skies, clear, breezy

Renoir has painted the leaves on the trees as if they are moving.

Let's look carefully at how Renoir has used light in this painting.

On what objects does the sun shine in this painting?

On the distant hill and meadow, and on the girls.

Remind the students that the Impressionists were very interested in capturing sunlight. Point out how Renoir has created a shimmering effect of dappled sunlight by adding dabs of white and yellow paint to the girls' hair, the bark of the tree, their dresses, and the grass near them.

What part of this painting is meant to be in shadow?

The grass behind the girls, part of the tree trunks.

What colors has Renoir used to create shadows?

Mostly dark green and brown with some rusty tones.

The Impressionists avoided using black to depict shadows as was traditionally done. Instead they believed that shadows were made up of the reflected colors of the objects around them.

Everything in this painting seems very natural, yet it has a very well thought-out compositional shape. Have one student trace with his finger the line formed by connecting the bonnet in the lower right corner up along the girl in white and out through the meadow in the distance up to the blue sky in the left corner. Are most of the colors along this line light or dark?

Light

Now trace a line from the lower left corner up along the girl in coral and to the trees beyond. Are most of the colors along this line lighter or darker than the ones you just looked at?

Darker

What letter have your two lines made?

An "x"

What has the artist placed at the crossing of the "x?"

The bouquet of flowers.

What objects are the most blurry and soft?

The grass, trees, and the distant landscape.

What in this painting is painted with clearer lines?

The two girls.

What type brushstrokes has Renoir used to paint the girls' hair?

Long, curving, flowing strokes of paint

Where else in this painting can you find brushstrokes like this?

In the leaves of the trees and the grass.

By using similar soft brushstrokes, Renoir has given equal emphasis to both the sitter and the setting, creating a balance between the two.

Do they look they were painted quickly or slowly?

Quickly, without time to paint in all the details.

Tell students that Renoir did not draw on his canvas first but rather painted his colors directly on the canvas in free brushstrokes. Instead of mixing his colors on a palette, he applied them “wet on wet” on the canvas without letting them dry.

What is the mood of this painting? Put another way, would you like to join these two girls?

The mood is sunny, relaxed, warm, innocent, sweet, and happy, leisurely. There is harmony between the models and their surroundings.

Renoir has created an impression of a beautiful spring day and of youthfulness.

### FOLLOW THE COLOR ACTIVITY

In order to understand better how the Impressionists painted by placing dabs and dashes of separate colors next to one another instead of blending them in, have each student choose a color and follow it around the canvas. Have them make a list of every place that they find their particular color. Then compare results. Can you find echoes of a main color such as coral in other places around the canvas? Explain how this technique contributes to the overall uniform, harmonious effect of the painting.

### ACROSTIC

Here’s a fun way to write a poem based on the first letters of Renoir’s name. Can you think of other words to describe Renoir’s art?

R adiant  
E veryday life  
N atural light  
O utdoors  
I nformal pose  
R elaxed feeling

### B. Spring: Margot Standing in a Garden

Artist - Mary Cassatt American (1844-1926)

Year Painted - 1900

Medium - oil on canvas

Props - poster of painting, mirror, assortment of hats,  
paper, pencils and crayons, markers or Craypas

Activity - Self-portrait with hat



#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION (for the teacher)

Mary Cassatt was the first great American woman artist and her work remains highly regarded today. She enjoys the distinction of having been the only American officially associated with the Impressionist movement in France. Born in what is today part of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to well-to-do parents, Mary spent from 1851 to 1855 with her family in Europe searching for a cure for her brother's illness. Returning to Philadelphia, she spent four years (1861-65) studying art at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts during the Civil War when restrictions on admitting women to art academies were loosened. In 1865 she went to Paris to further her studies, spending long hours copying old master paintings and sketching. She also traveled to study art in Italy, Spain, Holland and Belgium. After a stay in the United States during the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), she moved permanently to Paris in 1873. Her parents and sister Lydia came to live with her there four years later and often became the subject of her paintings in the 1870s. Cassatt did not return to America again until 1898 and then only for a visit. She never married and stayed within a close circle of family and friends.

One of those who encouraged Cassatt's work was the painter Degas. In 1877 he invited her to join the group of independent artists who were holding separate exhibitions of their paintings. Cassatt exhibited in four of the eight Impressionist exhibitions. Degas especially influenced her artistry, and like him she preferred figure painting. She painted no still lifes or landscapes without figures and relatively few portraits of men. Her specialty was women and children whom she rendered with warmth and naturalism. Her depictions of motherhood avoid all false sentimentality and create a feeling of intimacy and psychological truth. Cassatt also was a gifted printmaker. Her more than 200 prints reflect the influence of Japanese printmaking style with its cropped figures, high horizon line, asymmetrical composition, and decorative patterning. Cassatt also played an important role in American art as an advisor to wealthy collectors such as Louisine Havemeyer. She encouraged them to buy works of new artists such as the Impressionists as well as old masters. Many of the works in the Havemeyer Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art were purchased with her advice.

#### DIALOGUE SUGGESTIONS (for classroom presentation)

Now we are going to look at a picture by an artist who also loved to paint women and children. Her name was Mary Cassatt and she was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She was the only American to be an established member of the French Impressionist group. (This is a good time to remind students that not all artists are men. Despite the limits placed by society on the independent activities of "respectable" women in the nineteenth century--they couldn't go out alone in Paris or wander about freely--, Cassatt was able to flourish as an artist and earn a living as a professional painter. She accomplished this partly by painting settings in and around her own home, using members of her own family and her French neighbors as her models. Cassatt never married and had no children of her own.)

Show the students the poster of Spring: Margot Standing in a Garden and ask them what is the subject of this painting?

A little girl, perhaps around age five.

Her name was Margot Lux and she lived near Cassatt's country home north of Paris that she had purchased in 1893.

The artist painted Margot more than two dozen times.

Cassatt preferred to use the same amateur models over and over again so that they became accustomed to posing and would not appear self-conscious.

Cassatt shared the Impressionists' fascination with painting what they saw and capturing the informal, spontaneous quality of contemporary life. Let's look at some of the ways Cassatt has made this painting so fresh and natural.

How is the child posing? Does she seem stiff and formal or relaxed and comfortable? Why?

She seems very relaxed and informal.

Her dress is slipping off her shoulder and her hands gather up its hem in an unselfconscious, childlike manner.



Where is Margot looking?

Away from the viewer.

She gazes away to our right and appears absorbed in her own thoughts. She is unaware of our presence.

Her gaze gives a dreamy feeling to the painting.

On what level are we, the viewer, in this picture? At eye level, above eye level (bird's eye view), or below eye level (worm's eye view)?

We are at eye level, which means that adults would have had to bend down to achieve this view. It brings us on the same level as the little girl and adds to the painting's feeling of intimacy.

Where do you think Cassatt placed her easel to paint this picture? Was she up close or far away?

The easel must have been placed up close because the child occupies a large area of the foreground.

Do we see all of Margot's body or only a part?

Only a part.

This is a three-quarters view.

The figure is cropped off at the knees by the edge of the canvas. This type of cropped or cut off view was very typical of Impressionist paintings and probably reflects the influence of Japanese prints that used the same technique.

What is the setting of this picture?

Outdoors, in a garden.

Do you think the background is painted as clearly as the foreground in this painting?

It is easier to see the contour lines in the figure of Margot than it is to see lines in the background, which is painted with looser brushstrokes. Like Degas, Cassatt paid more attention to drawing than some of the other Impressionists.

What two colors create a strong contrast here? Hint: where do you see two complementary colors placed next to one another?

The red of the sleeves of the girl's dress contrasts strongly with its complement, the green of the grass and trees. (Review complementary colors with your students if necessary. Remind them that when two complementary colors are placed side by side, the colors seem at their brightest.) The Impressionists frequently used complementary colors to create strong, high-toned color in their pictures.

Why do you think the artist titled this painting Spring and how is it similar in mood to Renoir's painting we just looked at?

Both are set in the springtime.

Both show children.

Both are paintings of youthful innocence.

Spring is the time when everything is new, and fresh and young, like children. It is a hopeful time of year.

To review, let's list how the artist has made Margot the center of attention in this picture?

She is the largest object.

She is in the foreground.

She is in the center.

The white of her pinafore catches our attention in contrast to the darker colors around it.

The red of her sleeves contrasts strongly with the green grass.

Her whole body is bathed in sunlight, as is the surrounding landscape.

What type of painting is it when the person is most important?

A portrait

What do you think is the most important part of a portrait and why?

Usually the face because it reveals emotions and character most directly.

What did the artist do to make Margot's face stand out?

She used a large black poke bonnet with a pink rose to create a frame around her face.

The color black is very dramatic and sets off the paleness of her face.

Do you think this was Margot's own hat?

Probably not. Cassatt often had her child models dress up, sometimes in oversized or adult clothing she provided for them. Nonetheless, around the time of this painting, 1900, children and adults both wore hats as part of being properly dressed.

Where do you find echoes of the color of the rose in the rest of this picture?

The shades of pink in the rose are midway between the brighter red of her dress and the paler pink of her skin.

It helps to tie the picture together and softens the harsh black of the hat.

## ACTIVITY: SELF-PORTRAIT WITH HAT

The day before teaching this class, ask your students to bring in a favorite hat of theirs. This is usually an easy assignment for boys because of the current rage for baseball caps. Bring in any hats you may have at home so that any students who don't have one may borrow your examples. A wide variety of styles, colors, and brim sizes makes for the most fun. Also have available one or several hand mirrors. Hand out sheets of paper, pencils and either crayons, markers or Craypas. The latter makes wonderful portraits but is not always readily available. Encourage students to look at themselves in the mirror before beginning to sketch. What colors do they see in their faces? Where are the shadows? Do the shadows change when you change your expression from smiling to frowning for example? What happens to the shape of your face when you make a variety

of expressions? What changes about your face when you put on a hat? (shadows, proportion, ears, hair?) Does the hat help frame your face? Do they find it easier or harder to paint their self-portraits with a hat on? Why? Mary Cassatt loved to paint her subjects wearing hats, which were considered an essential item of clothing in her time.