Mary Cassatt's Japonisme:
The Ten Color Print Series of 1891 and the Influence of Utamaro's Woodblock Prints

By

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On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unauthorized aid on this thesis.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 1891, Mary Cassatt completed a series of ten color prints after viewing the 1890 exhibition of Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock prints held in Paris. The literature on the series often focuses on the stylistic similarities between Cassatt's and Japanese prints as well as the parallel themes of women in domestic spaces and mothers with children. Through these similarities, it is easy to see why Cassatt would have been drawn to the Japanese prints. Moreover, at this time she was transitioning out of Impressionism towards a Post-Impressionist style characterized by solid blocks of color, strong lines, and decorative patterns in her own work. A revived interest in printmaking in France also allowed for experimentation in a medium which emphasized these new visual qualities. Cassatt's series took inspiration from Japanese prints, especially those by the eighteenth-century Japanese artist Utamaro, and translated the subject, style, and technique into her own work.

Mary Cassatt decided at a relatively young age that she wanted to become an artist. She was born in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania, in 1844 to an upper-middle class family. She lived and traveled abroad in Europe for five years in her childhood, including in Paris, where she would later make her permanent home. She was exposed at an early age to artworks done by the masters in museums, as well as the extensive international art section at the World's Fair in Paris in 1855. The massive event filled with art and discussions of Ingres and Delacroix must have made a striking impression on the young Cassatt. Once back in Pennsylvania, the teenage Mary Cassatt had decided to become an art student.

While her family was not averse to her interests in art, it was difficult for her father to comprehend her making a career out of painting.[1] It was exceptionally uncommon at the time for a young woman of means to go out into the world to become a professional artist. Nonetheless, she began her studies at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1860. She did not remain there very long, however, since she was dissatisfied with the restrictive teachings which did not allow women to study from live nude models. The instruction instead relied on extensive drawings from etchings and plaster casts before students could even pick up a paint brush. Cassatt saw the solution in studying abroad in Europe to learn from the masters. In 1866, with reluctant permission from her father, she moved to Paris and taught herself through copying paintings at the Louvre as well as traveling and studying in England, Italy, Spain, Holland, and Belgium. It was in Parma, Italy, in the 1870s that she studied the works of the Renaissance artist Correggio as well as traditional engraving techniques. She also learned in the studios of conservative French artists who exhibited in the Paris Salon.[2] Acceptance into the Salon functioned as the predominant standard for academic art, which included traditional classical styles with historic and religious subject matter. Cassatt's own work was first accepted and exhibited at the Salon in 1872. She continued to submit and exhibit pieces there consistently in her early career. In 1874 she settled permanently in Paris. In Paris, Cassatt was exposed to the avant-garde work of the Impressionists and the Japanese prints, which would be central influences in her work.

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[1] Frederick A. Sweet, *Miss Mary Cassatt: Impressionist from Pennsylvania* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1967), 17.
[2] Ibid., 26.

Cassatt remained dissatisfied however, this time with restrictions created by the system of juries and prizes when it came to exhibiting work at the Paris Salon. In 1877 the painter Edgar Degas provided a solution by inviting Cassatt to exhibit her work with the Impressionists instead. Degas and Cassatt would become close colleagues and friends, often working in collaboration with and critiquing each other. Now part of the Impressionist circle, she felt freed from the rigid academic standards of painting and the rules of the Salon. She later said to her biographer Achille Segard, "at last, I could work with absolute independence without considering the opinion of a jury. I had already recognized who were my true masters. I admired Manet, Courbet and Degas. I hated conventional art – I began to live."[3] Impressionism rejected the academic standards of style and subject matter, especially the themes of history, religion, and mythology. Impressionist art instead focused on painting observed contemporary life. For Cassatt that meant painting women in the private domestic sphere, which was the space she was familiar with. Her subjects were ordinary women doing everyday activities, such as reading in the garden, having tea with friends, or bathing children. An example of such a work, *Children in a Garden (The Nurse)* (fig. 1), shows the scene from a distance with indistinct definitions of figures and objects. While it may seem mundane, the ordinariness of this subject done in the Impressionist's sketchy and spontaneous style of brushwork captured the momentary effects of light and atmosphere and produced something quite radical for its time. Critics praised Cassatt's impressionist works for depicting her figures in the intimate private moments of their lives.

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[3] Adelyn D. Breeskin and Donald H. Karshan, *The Graphic Art of Mary Cassatt* (New York: The Museum of Graphic Art, 1967), 9.

By the mid 1880s, Cassatt's style, like that of other avant-garde artists, shifted towards Post-Impressionism. Her subjects remained women, families, and children, but her new work showed a greater emphasis on the solid shapes of strong colors outlined by the contours of the figures. This can be seen in paintings such as *The Boating Party* (fig. 2) that shows a scene of a mother and child with a boatman silhouetted in the foreground, depicted with flat surfaces and bold colors. The clearly defined outlines of the boat and figures show a stylistic change from her Impressionist works. The lines of the boat are cut off by the frame and the horizon line placed at the top of the painting creates an aerial view down into the composition.[4]

Her early prints in the 1880s further emphasize line. Cassatt, drawing from her exposure to printmaking in Parma, began to experiment with etching techniques which were becoming popular in France. By using softground, drypoint, and aquatint, she was able to focus on the characteristics of lines, shapes, and tones in exploration of a new medium. This can be seen in the print *In the Opera Box (No.3)* (fig. 3). The curved line of the fan is offset by the curved lines of the balconies to create a dynamic composition created only through line and tone.

This Post-Impressionist style culminated in an ultimate emphasis on flat forms and decorative patterns in her 1891 color print series. Prior to the creation of this series, Japanese art had entered the European marketplace and collections of Japanese woodblock ukiyo-e prints were exhibited in Paris. She was attracted to Japanese prints

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[4] Gabriel P. Weisberg, Phillip Dennis Cate, Gerald Needham, Martin Eidelberg, and William R. Johnston. *Japonisme: Japanese Influence on Western Art 1854-1918* (Jackson: Mississippi Museum of Art, 2011), 115.

because her stylistic direction paralleled the emphasis on flattened blocks of color and strong outlines present in the earlier woodblock prints. The eighteenth-century Japanese artist Kitagawa Utamaro's prints had similar iconography of women in the private domestic sphere, including women with children, which were Cassatt's established choice of subjects that remained consistent throughout her career. Nonetheless, despite the fact that Cassatt's ten color print series shows clear Japanese influence in style, subject, and technique, a close examination reveals some key differences which reflect her incomplete knowledge of the subtleties of meaning and style of many of the Japanese prints she encountered. Subsequently, while drawing from Japanese prints she created her own original version of a color print series.

This essay will examine the style, technique, and iconography of Mary Cassatt's 1891 prints in comparison with eighteenth-century Japanese woodblock prints by Utamaro that inspired her. The first section explores the context of the European fascination with Japanese art through "Japonisme" and the cross-cultural exchange between Europe and Japan in the nineteenth century, specifically on the nature of the Japanese prints and Cassatt's exposure to them. The next section compares Cassatt's prints to Utamaro's in terms of technique, style, and subject matter. Cassatt's techniques of etching and aquatint differ from those of Japanese woodblock prints, nevertheless, they share formal qualities. A third subsection compares the iconography of Cassatt's images of women to those of Utamaro. A final section examines the reception of the print series by Cassatt's contemporaries. Through these examinations I will demonstrate the extent to which Japanese prints influenced Cassatt's ten color print series.

II. JAPONISME

Before Japan was reopened to international commerce in 1854, Europeans knew very little about Japanese art and culture. Once the American Commodore Matthew Perry forced Japan to trade with the west, an influx of kimonos, fans, and woodblock prints came to western markets and a wave of European fascination with all things Japan ensued. This attraction was called "Japonisme," a term coined and defined by the French collector Philippe Burty in 1872 as "a new field of study of artistic, historic, and ethnographic borrowings from the arts of Japan."[5] Paris became the center of Japonisme with a growing interest in Japanese aesthetics both from artists imitating Japanese art and from the growing middle class looking to buy affordable "exotic" decorative objects for the home.

Western artists were especially inspired by ukiyo-e woodblock prints from the so called "floating world" of Edo era Japan. From the early seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century, the Tokugawa shogunate enforced a strict isolationist foreign policy, which limited foreign trade relationships with Japan to eliminate colonial influences and maintain the feudal ruling system.[6] When the shogunate fell in 1867, rapid industrialization began to take place in Japan. Once Japan defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War in the early twentieth century, Japan's identity as a world power solidified, and the Japonisme craze in Europe faded, although its impact had lasting effects on western art.

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[5] Lionel Lambourne, *Japonisme: Cultural Crossings between Japan and the West* (New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 2005), 6.
[6] Jade Meurer, "Women in Ukiyo-e" (Thesis, Regis University, 2020), 5. https://epublications.regis.edu/theses/950.

Ukiyo-e woodblock prints became the center of Europe's fascination with Japanese art. The term ukiyo means "the floating world," a concept derived from the Buddhist notion of the transience of earthly existence, but later in the seventeenth century came to reference worldly hedonistic pleasures that came from such transience.[7] Artists depicted these pleasures in ukiyo-e "pictures of the floating world," a style that included brightly colored prints of portraits of courtesans in the pleasure quarters, kabuki theatre actors, landscapes, urban scenes, erotica, and genre scenes of everyday life. Ukiyo-e flourished throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, eventually declining in the nineteenth century. Woodblock prints were made for an audience of common people, presumably men, in the capital city of Edo, modern day Tokyo. Woodblock prints were easy to reproduce and therefore inexpensive and accessible to a lower-class audience.[8] These prints were not luxury goods made for the wealthy, but rather an art form made in large quantities for the masses.

By the nineteenth century, ukiyo-e prints had fallen out of popularity in Japan and were not considered valuable art. Many prints were exported as wrapping paper to protect lacquerware and porcelains. Europeans "discovered" this wrapping paper in shipments from Japan, and began to buy and sell the prints as art. Once Japanese prints made their way into French shops, it did not take long for them to become plentiful and well admired. The Goncourt brothers, Jules and Edmond, were among the first to collect and write about Japanese prints, and by 1868 they reported "The taste for things Chinese and

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[7] Yoko Chiba, "Japonisme: East-West Renaissance in the Late 19th Century," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 31, no.2 (1998): 4, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44029769.
[8] Tadashi Kobayashi, *Ukiyo-e: An Introduction to Japanese Woodblock Prints*, trans. by Mark A. Harbison (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2000), 67.

Japanese! We were among the first to have this taste. It is now spreading to everything and everyone, even to idiots and middle-class women."[9]

Woodblock prints entered Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a time of artistic exploration. They were received by artists in three separate phases: exoticism, imitation, and finally absorption.[10] When Japanese prints first came into Europe, artists collected them as exotic objects. Artists in the earlier wave of Japonisme created works that focused on the popularity and exotic appeal of Japanese art.[11] Like kimonos and fans with their decorative patterns, prints were placed as decorative items in the background of paintings, as seen in the pre-impressionist work *Portrait of Emile Zola* (fig. 4) by Édouard Manet. In this painting the Japanese influence is shown in a screen and prints in the background, representing the sort of objects both the sitter and the artist would have owned.

The Impressionists also admired Japanese prints but did not necessarily incorporate them into their sketchier perceptual style. Artists found in ukiyo-e the same celebration of the ordinary that Impressionism aimed to capture in scenes of everyday life. They also adopted off center, radically cropped compositions, as seen in the print by Degas *At the Louvre: Mary Cassatt in the Paintings Gallery* (fig. 5).[12] This striking, narrow vertical composition derives from Japanese prints designed to be placed on pillars, such as *Visiting* (fig. 6) by Harunobu.[13] Degas uses the line of the doorway to

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[9] Colta Feller Ives, *The Great Wave: The Influence of Japanese Woodcuts on French Print*s (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1974), 12.
[10] Chiba, "Japonisme," 3.
[11] Gabriel P. Weisberg, "Aspects of Japonisme," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 62, no. 4 (1975): 129. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25152585.
[12] Ives, *The Great Wave*, 37.
[13] Ibid.

frame the figures in a small vertical space. The sitter, identified as Cassatt's sister Lydia sits partially hidden with a guidebook, while Cassatt stands behind with her arm and umbrella creating a strong diagonal across the image. While the composition is striking, the overlapping figures, walls and floor of the scene are not the same flat blocks of color as in Harunobu's print, but instead contain a multitude of lines which create texture and tonal variation. This shows a selective imitation of Japanese elements in western art.

Another example of elements borrowed from Japanese prints can be found in the work *Japanese Footbridge and the Water Lily Pool, Giverny* (fig. 7) by the Impressionist artist Claude Monet, especially when shown alongside Hokusai's *Under Mannen Bridge at Fukagawa* (fig. 8). Monet's painting does not strictly incorporate the style of Japanese prints as it retains the loose brushwork style of Impressionism. Monet designed his garden of bamboo, water lilies, and a wisteria covered trellis with Japanese aesthetics in mind, and the curve of Monet's taiko bridge mimics the line of Hokusai's bridge which bisects the composition.

It was in Post-Impressionism that the style and concepts from Japanese prints were more fully assimilated into a western vocabulary. Post-Impressionist artists rejected naturalism and depicted exaggerated forms with arbitrary colors for symbolic value.[14] Ukiyo-e prints influenced these artists in their development of style and composition, which was dominated by decorative patterns, simplified flattened forms, and strong outlines. Van Gogh is well known for his large collection of Japanese prints and his copies of Hiroshige, but he also shows the influence and assimilation of Japanese style in

[14] Weisberg et al., *Japonisme*, 124.

his portrait *La Berceuse* (fig. 9). He combines western and Japanese aesthetics in the flat shapes of color and black outlines with agitated brushstrokes in the patterned background. Finally for the Post-Impressionist generation the interest in defined forms led to a renewed interest in drawing and printmaking, further accentuating the appeal of the Japanese prints which encouraged experimentations in a new medium.

In 1890 the École des Beaux Arts in Paris held a major exhibition of Japanese prints. It was the first historical retrospective of ukiyo-e and contained over 700 woodblock prints and illustrated books. The exhibition was put together by Siegfried Bing, a German-born French art dealer who was a pivotal figure in promoting a broader understanding of Japanese art through his exhibitions and writings. The exhibition featured Japanese prints by prominent ukiyo-e artists such as Utamaro, Harunobu, Hiroshige, and Hokusai assembled from various private collections.[15] The exhibition was a climactic response to the popularity of Japanese prints and many artists in France visited it during its brief showing from April to May.

One prominent artist whose ukiyo-e prints were at the 1890 exhibition was Kitagawa Utamaro (c.1753-1806). Utamaro worked in the golden age of ukiyo-e printmaking during the late eighteenth century. Utamaro is best known for his creation of the genre of *bijin ōkubi-e*, which were half-length portraits of beautiful women that emphasized facial expressions.[16] Popular subjects of women and actors were depicted idealistically with distinguishable features. His subject matter ranged widely in his

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[15] Ives, *The Great Wave*, 14.
[16] Tadashi Kobayashi, *Utamaro: Portraits from the Floating World*, trans. by Mark A. Harbison (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2000), 7.

various print series, which included everyday depictions of mothers and children, erotic displays of lovers, nature studies, scenes of women in private spaces, and different types of courtesans from the pleasure quarters in Edo. Around eighty prints of his were cataloged in the exhibition. Many of them depicted women in ordinary circumstances including breastfeeding children, looking in mirrors, and walking with other women.[17] There were none of Utamaro's erotic prints on display at the 1890 exhibition, although many of his images of women were geishas and courtesans. Utamaro's prints had a profound impact on Cassatt. If she recognized some of the subjects as prostitutes or was aware of the erotic prints, she was not publicly critical of them.[18]

Cassatt visited the exhibition at least twice, once with Degas and once with the Impressionist artist Berthe Morisot. Cassatt wrote to Morisot with enthusiasm,

> I think that for the time being I am not able to go and have lunch at Mezy, but if you would like, you could come and dine here with us and afterwards we could go see the Japanese prints at the Beaux-Arts. Seriously, *you must not* miss that. You who want to make color prints you couldn't dream of anything more beautiful. I dream of it and don't think of anything else but color on copper.[19]

It was not Cassatt's first introduction to Japanese prints, but this show and the prints she saw made a lasting impressionism on her. She purchased some prints, namely ones by Utamaro, whose subject matter mirrored her own.

Not long after the exhibit ended Cassatt began her own print series made with her stated "intention of attempting an imitation of Japanese methods."[20] She had already

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[17] Haelim Allen, "Mary Cassatt: Women as Subject Matter," *Journal of the Union Faculty Forum* 34, (2014-2015): 3.
[18] Ibid., 5.
[19] Mary Cassatt to Berthe Morisot, April 1890, in *Cassatt and her Circle: Selected Letters* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 214.
[20] Sweet, *Miss Mary Cassatt*, 122.

experimented with drypoint and softground etching to create lines alongside aquatint grayscale tones in earlier prints of the 1880s.[21] However, it was not until the series of ten prints in 1891 that she utilized color and sought to achieve the same flat, bold areas of color, two-dimensional shapes, decorative patterns, and strong lines present in the Japanese prints. Her figures are defined through expressive line alone, and upon viewing them, Degas admiringly remarked "I do not admit that a woman can draw like that."[22] Cassatt created her precisely drawn and patterned color images of women using the print medium in combination with what she observed in Japanese prints.

[21] "Explore Inside Out: The Prints of Mary Cassatt," Colby Museum of Art, Exhibitions, July 2021, https://museum-exhibitions.colby.edu/explore-inside-out-the-prints-of-mary-cassatt/#:~:text=Mary%20Cassatt%20favored%20two%20printmaking,surface%20to%20reach%20the%20metal.

[22] Ives, *The Great Wave*, 53.

III. COMPARISONS OF MARY CASSATT TO UTAMARO

A. TECHNIQUE: WOODBLOCK PRINTS VS. COPPER PLATES

Mary Cassatt utilized softground, drypoint, and aquatint in order to imitate Japanese prints; however, these techniques differ greatly from the woodblock technique. Cassatt's choice of printmaking methods was gaining popularity in Europe, particularly among the circle of artists around her by the time she created her color print series. Japanese woodblock prints required several separate stages in the creation and selling of prints, with the artist only creating the design and not interacting directly with the printing method. The drawing was translated into a series of carved wood blocks, inked, and printed by a printer. Cassatt worked more directly in creating her prints, meticulously drawing on copper plates, applying the colors, and producing the piece with the help of a printer. Cassatt would do the etching and the printer would assist with application of aquatint and ink to create Cassatt's vision for the final piece. Although Cassatt didn't use the woodblock technique in her ten color print series, she recreated the look of Japanese prints with her own method derived from working with copper plates and allowed more freedom in her original design and production of each piece.

The process of woodblock printmaking in eighteenth-century Japan was quite different from Cassatt's technique both in production and publishing of the ukiyo-e prints. The production of full-color woodblock prints involved the work of artists, engravers, printers, and publishers. The process is illustrated in two triptych prints *The Cultivation and Harvest of Edo's Famous Produce, the Brocade Woodblock Print (Edo meibutsu nishiki-e kōsaku)* (figs. 10-11) by Utamaro. These prints about printmaking

illustrate the steps from the printer soaking paper, the engraver carving blocks, the artist checking the design, the printer making the prints, and the prints being sold in a store. Utamaro depicts the figures working in one room together dressed in the clothing of popular geishas and courtesans, which is an inaccurate depiction, but it highlights how many people were involved in the process of creating a woodblock print.[23] The technique of ukiyo-e prints allowed for mass production for the wide audience of working-class townspeople in Edo.

The publisher *(hanmoto*) was an important role in that he was the one who produced the prints, but there were several artisans involved in creating the prints. The artist (*e-shi*) drew a preliminary design in black ink, which was then inspected by the publisher's association. Once approved, the engraver *(hori-shi*) traced and carved the design on a woodblock of hard cherry. Engraving was a skill that required great craftsmanship, and the quality of engraving could also play a major role in successful sales. A monochromatic print was made by the printer (*suri-shi*) so the artist could indicate the desired colors. A separate piece of wood was carved for each color, the more colors in a print meant the more expensive it was to produce. The printer made the first samples for the artist to make any corrections, and then printed as many copies as the publisher had commissioned.[24] The publisher sold the finished product in his store.

Utamaro's fame and popularity during his lifetime was partially due to Tsutaya Jūzaburō, who published the majority of his prints throughout his career.[25] The publisher

[23] Kobayashi, *Ukiyo-e,* 62-63.
[24] Ibid., 64.
[25] Ibid., 87-88.

played a major role in the production of the print from start to finish, and therefore could have a major impact in the sale of the final print. By 1789 the shogunate required prints to have approval stamps from publisher's associations, further emphasizing the importance of the role they played.[26] Once this great patron died Utamaro's work fell out of popularity later in his career. However, at the height of his fame Utamaro was famous for his experimentation in techniques for his images of women. To create a soft flesh tone as well as bright backgrounds mica dust was sprinkled onto the paper. He is also known for his experimentation in compositions, as seen through his invented style of "large-head pictures of beautiful women" (*bijin ōkubi-e*), which he used to depict feminine beauty of all women, but his most popular were courtesans from the pleasure district [27]

Utamaro worked as an artist in the golden age of ukiyo-e that took place in the late eighteenth century. By this time, woodblock prints had undergone several changes since their beginnings in the seventeenth century, but the technique of preliminary planning and division of labor allowed for a final mass-produced product that was accessible to a wide audience. Ukiyo-e provided large quantities of work at moderate prices, making art accessible to a large audience in Edo.

Before ever setting eyes on Japanese prints, Cassatt had learned about printmaking techniques. In her early training at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Cassatt studied under John Saratin, a successful engraver who created the Academy's curriculum, in which students mastered drawing through copying engravings and plaster casts before

[26] Ibid., 63
[27] Ibid., 88.

moving on to painting.[28] It was with Saratin's daughter Emily that Cassatt traveled to Parma, Italy, where the two had studio spaces in the School of Engraving at Parma Academy.[29] While it seems that her time in Parma was more dedicated to painting copies of Correggio, Cassatt and Emily Saratin had discussions with the Engraving Academy's director about various print processes, which provided a basic understanding of printing methods.

While Cassatt's early career was focused on painting, she understood how drawing and printmaking correlated to each other and found a new appreciation for graphic media starting in the 1880s. Cassatt began producing refined drawings and pastels while she was working in an Impressionist style. The appeal of a new medium was found in the unprecedented freedom in the use of line and color. Cassatt's artistic circle was experimenting with prints. Edgar Degas, Camille Pissarro, and Félix Bracquemond invited Cassatt to collaborate on a proposed journal of original prints titled *Le Jour et la nuit*. Cassatt delighted in the medium and created final softground etching and aquatint prints for publication, but the journal never came to fruition.

Many of her early prints are works based on her Impressionist oil paintings, including *In the Opera Box (No.3)* (fig. 3), which uses aquatint to create the hazy tone of the theatre. It was not until 1891 that she experimented with color, so these earlier black and white prints focus more on draftsmanship, qualities of line and tone, and composition. Her early experimentations in etching illustrate a range of expressions, tones, and textures

[28] Nancy Mowell Mathews and Barbara Stern Shapiro, *Mary Cassatt: The Color Prints* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 21.
[29] Ibid., 23.

from manipulating the plates that would become the basis of her technique when she began to create her vision of a Japanese style.

In her color print series, Cassatt combined softground etching, drypoint, and aquatint. For softground etching, she applied a wax ground to a copper plate and placed a pencil drawing on top of the plate. She then traced the drawing with a hard stylus or needle that punctured through the wax to scratch the metal. The drawing would be taken off and the plate would be soaked in acid, which would bite at the impressions made through the wax. The wax would then be melted off and ink would be applied to the incisions made in the plate. The plate would be run through a press and the image would be transferred to paper.[30] Often she combined softground with aquatint, creating watercolor-like effects within the etching lines. Aquatint was applied to the plate as a fine powder resin that was melted and cooled. The microscopic texture from the hardened powder then held different amounts of ink depending on how long the plate was left in acid, creating a range of light to dark tones. The plate could be soaked in acid several times with certain parts of the image blocked, creating the variation of tones. Another way she created lines was through drypoint, an etching technique from the intaglio family of printing in which the lines were scratched directly onto the plate, with a deeper mark creating a darker tone. Ink was applied directly onto the plate and printed.[31] Drypoint lines appear dark at first but become pale and fuzzy upon repeated printing, causing a unique look to each individual print. Unlike the mass production of ukiyo-e, Cassatt only created twenty-five

[30] "Explore Inside Out: The Prints of Mary Cassatt," Colby Museum of Art.
[31] Colta Ives, "The Printed Image in the West: Aquatint," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000).

final impressions of each print in the series, indicating that they were intended to be admired by a smaller group of people.

Cassatt refined these three techniques in executing the ten color prints. She used two to three plates for each image – one for line work and some aquatint and others for more colors and patterns.[32] Similar to Japanese woodblock technique, the outline plate was printed last and the final editions of Cassatt's color prints were marked with Cassatt's name and that of her collaborator, M. Leroy, similar to the Japanese stamps that indicated the name of the woodcut printer.[33] Leroy had expertise in many printmaking processes and assisted in enabling Cassatt's vision to come to fruition through preparing the plates, laying aquatint grains, and running the prints through the press. Leroy's skilled hand combined with Cassatt's artistic exploration made possible the refined technical qualities in the prints as they grew more complex. In 1891, Cassatt's ten color print series was exhibited and Pissarro in admiration of his peer's technique, wrote to his son:

> You remember the effects that you strove for at Eragny? Well, Miss Cassatt has realized such effects, and admirably: the mat tone, subtle, delicate, without stains or smudges: adorable blues, fresh rose, etc. … [One must] have some copper plates, a *boîte à grain* [dust box], this is a nuisance but absolutely necessary to have uniform and imperceptible grains, and a good printer. But the result is admirable, as beautiful as Japanese work, and it's done with colored printer's ink.[34]

There is no definite order of the ten prints of her series; however, *The Bath* (fig. 12) is often regarded as be the first one. The catalogue of the first exhibition of the ten prints describes this print as "*essai d'imitation de l'estampe japonaise*" *("Trial Imitation*

[32] Mathews and Shapiro, *The Color Prints*, 68.
[33] Ibid., 69.
[34] Camille Pissarro to Lucien Pissarro, April 1891, in *Cassatt and her Circle*, 219.

of a Japanese Print").[35] When compared to Utamaro's *Bathtime (Gyõzui)* (fig. 13) Cassatt's intentions of imitating the Japanese style using her own techniques is clear.

Similar to the woodblock technique, Cassatt used multiple plates for this print. In her earlier monochromatic prints of the 1880s she placed all the ink on one plate, but she moved towards the more complex method of using two plates, one for lines and one for tonal variations.[36] Cassatt used red and black outlines to distinguish between flesh tones and other outlines. The colors were printed first followed by the outlines, similar to Utamaro. The textures of the background also help to distinguish the flesh tones from the background. Utamaro used mica powder to create a soft textured background while Cassatt used light aquatint on the background to create a similar look of textured spots. Both artists used these methods for the entire background, so the figures appear floating with no determined ground.

Cassatt's technique changed and became more complex after this initial print. More tonal qualities and watercolor-like patterns reveal her skill in using aquatint. Her technique is less clearly an imitation of woodblock prints, but the stylistic qualities between the two remain. A more developed print by Cassatt is *The Letter* (fig. 14), which is regarded as the last one done in the series due to the confidence in the composition and use of the medium.[37] The figure is shown in the same positioning as the half-length portraits by Utamaro, such as *Hinazuru of the Keizetsuro* (fig. 15). Cassatt adds additional elements to her portrait, however, with the desk that cuts off the composition

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[35] Deborah Johnston, "Cassatt's Color Prints of 1891: The Unique Evolution of a Palette," *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 9, no. 3 (1990): 31. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23202649.
[36] Mathews and Shapiro, *The Color Prints*, 104.
[37] Ibid., 121.

and the patterns on the wallpaper that mimic the dress patterns. The outlines in Cassatt's figure's hair and facial features reflect the same wispy qualities of the Japanese woman's hair. She used three plates in this print, far fewer trial plates than the earlier print *The Bath*, showing her competency in the design and medium. The floral patterns in the background along with the details of the desk show a departure from the empty background characteristic of Utamaro. The figure still sits in an abstracted space, but now the filled background shows Cassatt's confidence in her use of aquatint. Since Cassatt worked directly with the metal plates, the lines and color placement often reflect the hand of the artist. The color does not always align perfectly within the outlines, which leaves small blank gaps or overlaps between shapes. Sketchy lines are left untouched, such as the lines on the desk that extend beyond the white of the paper. It is less an imitation of Japanese prints and more an exploration in the atmospheric qualities that come from printmaking techniques.

The woodblock technique and Cassatt's techniques for creating prints differed greatly in terms of production; however, Cassatt made an effort to achieve the same artistic effects. Cassatt's technique began with a clear imitation of woodblock prints but evolved over the course of the series to later embrace softground, aquatint, and drypoint. Her process was more experimental and hands-on, working directly with the plates and etching materials as opposed to Utamaro, who lived in a more rigid culture of printmaking which was a collaborative effort between the publisher and the artisans. Cassatt worked only in collaboration with a printer instead of a large variety of artisans,

and because of this she found more individual freedom and artistic expression in how her prints were made.

B. STYLE: NEW DIRECTIONS IN CASSATT'S WORK

The stylistic similarities between Cassatt's and Utamaro's prints are pertinent. Cassatt's post-impressionist style was exemplified in the 1891 print series. The characteristics of flatness and decorative patterns show clear influence from Utamaro's style of ukiyo-e prints. While Cassatt knew Utamaro's prints and was certainly inspired, she observed prints that were nearly a century old, and faded from their original bright hues. The intentions differed as well, Utamaro's compositions centered around the face emphasizing female beauty while Cassatt dignified her women by showing them in unglorified positions in private domestic scenes. While both artists feature matching colors and compositional structures, Cassatt had an incomplete knowledge of the original appearance and intention of Utamaro's prints. Therefore, the differences between the two reveal how Cassatt interpreted what she saw to create her own style with different meanings.

In his lifetime from c.1753 to 1806, Utamaro was known as the painter of beautiful women in ukiyo-e. His bust portraits were a radical shift from the full-length portraits that had previously dominated the genre. He sought to excite his viewers through a composition that emphasized the face, expressions, and breasts against a pale mica dust background.[38] The bright colors and patterns on his elaborately dressed

[38] Kobayashi, *Utamaro*, 7.

courtesans also created visual excitement for his predominantly male audience. Utamaro would not have been engaged in these private spaces for women, and so his intimate depictions of women all come from an imaginative space. His emphasis on beauty in the face and clothing of his courtesans, mothers, and women of all classes speak to the imagination of a male audience.

Another difference between Cassatt and Utamaro's prints was that Cassatt's use of color in her print series was an inaccurate interpretation of Utamaro's originals. Her color palette for the ten prints is full of muted dusty tones of blue, green, and mauve which are unprecedented in her earlier painted and graphic works.[39] These color schemes are paralleled in Utamaro's prints, which had faded from exposure to light by the time Cassatt saw them in the nineteenth century. Still today many ukiyo-e prints do not retain their original bright hues. An Utamaro print in the 1790s would have appeared with bright reds, blues, and purples.[40] By the late nineteenth century these colors faded into pinks, grays, and browns that resemble Cassatt's color palette for the print series. The blank white of the background and skin tones, as well as the black outlines would not have experienced much fading, so Cassatt's use of these elements remains a true imitation. Although her use of color is an inaccurate imitation of original Japanese prints, the muted tones lend a contemplative mood that fits her private interior scenes of Victorian women.

A clear imitation of an Utamaro print in subject, composition, and style is seen between Cassatt's earliest print *The Bath* (fig. 12) and *Bathtime* (*Gyõzui)* (fig. 13).

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[39] Johnston, "The Unique Evolution of a Palette," 34.
[40] Ibid., 36.

Cassatt positions her figures and uses flattened space conveying a clear sense of Japanese style. The tub is cropped to the left in both prints, and both compositions are reduced to the essential elements: the tub, the mother, and the child. Cassatt simplifies the image further by omitting a hanging piece of fabric present in the upper right corner and the Japanese inscription. Cassatt's colors show no tonal variation, and most of the patterns do not appear to adapt into the folds of the dress fabric, which creates a dramatic flattening of shapes. The woman's arm holding the baby does not interrupt the outline of the dress, creating a large continual triangular shape of yellow which takes up most of the composition. The body of the baby and the figure's faces are subtly foreshortened, yet the dress, basin, and background are nearly completely flat. The water basin is tilted as to see the water inside from above. This simplification of tone, shapes, and use of multiple perspectives all show the influence of Japanese style on Cassatt's print through a direct imitation of an Utamaro.

In another comparison are two portraits of women with the attention drawn to their mouths. Utamaro's *Hinazura of the Kiezetsuro* (fig. 15) holds a towel to her mouth suggesting a sexual undertone as the woman is a courtesan perhaps wiping her mouth in a postcoital situation.[41] *The Letter* (fig. 14) draws the same attention to the mouth of the woman sealing an envelope. Cassatt adopted the details of an up-close figure with a downcast gaze and thin lines of dark wispy hair from Utamaro. She imitates the Japanese facial expressions in combination with Victorian style clothing, furniture, and decorative wallpaper. The back of the desk crops and frames the composition, with the shelf of the

[41] Ibid., 31.

desk projecting towards the figure. The lines of the shelf do not run parallel as would be expected with linear perspective, but the back line runs at an angle. This effect compresses the patterned back wall, bringing the viewer closer into the plane where the figure sits.[42] Through these unique features Cassatt created a new style that showed Japanese influence but was not a direct copy. The figure is not just a face, but a woman in thought with a letter, an act of correspondence, a mundane private task. Cassatt's selective use of stylistic aspects of Japanese prints creates an atmospheric portrayal of intimacy for Cassatt's subjects that is not fully present in Utamaro's prints.

Cassatt adapts new perspectives and spatial effects in her print series. Utamaro's prints almost always emphasize the woman as the subject over the space, and we see this in *A Courtesan* (fig. 16), another portrait of a woman emphasizing the face and breasts. There is no question on how the viewer is meant engage with the image since the focus on the figure with exposed breasts against a blank background is so direct. In *The Lamp* (fig. 17) Cassatt portrays her figure from behind, showing the exposed neck and back with a profile view of the face. The perspective in this print makes it appear as if we are looking at the woman from above, but the objects on the table, the lamp and the lamp's reflection in the mirror are all flattened and viewed straight on. The top of the table is shown from above, and the lines between the wall and the mirror indicate a recession back into space. The title of this piece, *The Lamp*, suggests that the focus of this image is not the woman but instead the space she inhabits. This space is unclear as only a fraction of the room is seen, and the reflection does not suggest to the viewer what lies beyond

[42] Frank Getlein, *Mary Cassatt: Paintings and Prints*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1980), 82.

this perception. The woman looks as if she is engaged with someone or something that is beyond the viewer, which provides a sense of unease as the space gives no other hints as to what the scenario could be. The figure's turned back and use of multiple complex perspectives highlights how Cassatt uses space to show the woman, unengaged with our presence, in her own private moment.

Three of the ten prints in Cassatt's series use a mirror to portray her subjects in a double perspective, a motif that Utamaro used frequently.[43] Utamaro's *Naniwa Okita Admiring Herself in a Mirror* (fig. 18) shows the back of a woman's head as well as her full face in the reflection. The blank background matches that of the background of the reflection, leaving the figure inside an indefinite space. *Woman Bathing* (fig. 19) makes use of a similar flattened empty space in two perspectives. The reflection does not show the full face of the subject but instead shows only a partial view with her face obscured. Cassatt's figure has her back turned and this anonymity in the scene allows for an intimate glimpse at an ordinary task. The dark blue back wall runs continuous with the blue in the reflection. The patterns on the floor are flattened and the only indication between the floor and the back wall is a stripe of gray on the right side. This line does not match where the table lies, and on the left side the patterns continue further up the image. The the accurate perspective of the table with lines receding into back into space contradicts the flatness of the wall and floor patterns. This combination of eastern and western artistic modes shows Cassatt's development beyond imitation into her own style.

[43] Ives, *The Great Wave*, 53.

Utamaro also makes use of the mirror with multiple figures in *Mother and Child* (fig. 20). He depicted one perspective of the back of the mother's head and another in the reflection and angled view of her face with her tongue playfully sticking out. The image in the mirror shows us the perspective from the eyes of the child without altering the arrangement of the figures. *The Fitting* (fig. 21) also makes use of a mirror and arrangement of figures, showing the figure and her reflection in full length and in such details as if two women are standing next to each other. Her gaze goes in two separate directions, one of the reflection and one of the reality in which she gazes at the seamstress. The seamstress is hidden from the reflection, causing it to appear as if the woman is gazing at an empty space. The background in the reflection is not continuous with the wallpapered wall, which shows the viewer an expansion of the space.

This use of multiple perspectives continues in *The Coiffure* (fig. 22), which exemplifies Cassatt's complex use of decorative patterns. Cassatt's exploration into patterns in her print series also shows influence from Japanese prints, which often explored patterning in kimono fabrics. Such patterns are shown in the overlapping flowers and decorative lines in Utamaro's *Beauty Wearing a Summer Kimono* (fig. 23). Utamaro often utilized pattern in kimonos as a decorative element to highlight the elegance and beauty of the figures. The more complex a pattern, the more complex the print making process would have been. The flower pattern is outlined in a light color which makes it appear to be floating among the dark negative space in the background color of the fabric. Cassatt also makes use of strong patterns which appear to be floating in *The Coiffure.* Floral motifs in the wallpaper and flooring contrast the strong vertical

stripes in the chair. These patterns are then reflected in slightly lighter tones in the mirror, floating freely without strong outlines to connect them to an object.[44] The reflection shows Cassatt's figure from a higher perspective as if the mirror is tilted, so we are looking down into her seated position. The blank white of the skirt is another stark contrast to the colorful patterns; its shape only suggested through a few lines representing folds of fabrics. At once we see two entirely different angles of the figure surrounded by complex patterning.

The 1891 prints are depicted without shadows or shading causing the figures to appear flat in an empty space.[45] Cassatt combines these flat planes with objects placed in linear perspective, such as the desk in *The Letter* (fig. 14) or the basin in *Woman Bathing* (fig.19). She used decorative patterning as seen in the elaborate kimonos in Utamaro's prints. However, she depicts her patterns as Victorian style dresses and wallpapers with stripes and floral motifs in her own style. Cassatt observed and imitated the flat shapes of colors, perspective in compositional structures, and decorative patterns from Japanese prints while combining them with the styles of European dress and interiors. The use of muted colors, unique perspectives, and decorative patterns are similar to Utamaro's style, but Utamaro used style to emphasize the beauty of his figures, while Cassatt explored flattened shapes and patterns to show unglorified and intimate domestic interior scenes.

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[44] Getlein, *Mary Cassatt*, 94.
[45] Allen, "Women as Subject Matter," 7.

C. ICONOGRAPHY: IMAGES OF WOMEN, MOTHERS, AND CHILDREN

Cassatt must have felt a connection to Utamaro, not only in their shared interest in printmaking and visual qualities, but also in their depictions of the worlds of women around them. Cassatt is known as *Un Peintre des Enfants et des Mères* (a painter of children and of mothers), as Achille Segard titled her biography in 1913.[46] Her style developed and changed, but her affinity for the subject of motherhood and women in private domestic spaces remained consistent throughout her career. Utamaro was also well known for his genre pieces that showed intimacy in the daily interactions between mothers and children. Cassatt was drawn to this aspect of Utamaro's work as she saw her own choice of subject matter reflected in a new medium and style.

The differences between Utamaro and Cassatt's subjects, however, lie in that many of Utamaro's women were courtesans in the private interiors of the "green houses" in the Yoshiwara pleasure district. The Japanese courtesan was always a popular subject matter for ukiyo-e woodblock prints, as they were depicted in elaborate fashions and showed the audience a glimpse of a life few were truly exposed to.[47] These prints of women were idealized, emphasizing form and beauty in the private moments of a courtesan preparing for a client, rather than the ugly realities of these women who had likely been born or sold into the role of prostitution at a young age.[48] Utamaro's women were praised by his contemporaries for their elongated bodies and faces; however,

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[46] Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1998), 15.
[47] J. Hillier, *Utamaro: Colour Prints and Painting*s, (Oxford: Paidon, 1979), 50.
[48] Ibid., 55.

Utamaro was not present in these private scenes in the green houses, so his depictions of courtesans are based in imagination rather than the world around him.

Utamaro also created erotic albums (*shungas*) filled with color prints. These explicit depictions of pleasure had been popular among the growing merchant class in Edo, primarily men who were not able to visit the pleasure district in person. These displays of sex with a typical portrayal of exaggerated genitals, fit into the important expression of pleasure in the floating world. Utamaro's most famous erotic album was *The Poem of the Pillow* (fig. 24), where Utamaro portrayed himself partially hidden and entangled with a woman seen from behind. Utamaro's erotic prints show the same mastery of line, composition, and patterns as his images of individual women, however because of the more conservative nature of European society in the nineteenth century, they were not shown to the public. Of course, prostitution and brothel scenes were subjects of art in nineteenth century France as well.

Although Utamaro's erotic prints were not shown at the 1890 Japanese print exhibition, Cassatt must have been aware of their existence. Cassatt's contemporary, the Japonisme enthusiast and writer Edmond de Goncourt wrote the book *Outamaro: Le Pientre des Maisons Vertes*, which was published in 1891. While the book did not include illustrations, Goncourt was specific in describing Utamaro's subject matter, including prostitution and eroticism. The title itself refers to the green houses occupied by courtesans in the Yoshiwara pleasure district.[49] Cassatt read his book and in a letter from the spring of 1891 to Berthe Morisot wrote "Have you read Goncourt's book on

[49] Laure Katsaros, "The Goncourt Brothers: Reflected in the Magic Mirror of Japan," *Massachusetts Review* 57, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 72.

Utamaro? – Hyiashi is almost as indignant about it as me – You can only conclude that Goncourt is sick in some way."[50] Perhaps she was upset with Goncourt, who did not receive her art well, or she did not appreciate the emphasis on eroticism that he put on Utamaro. This shows that since her contemporaries were aware that some of the women were courtesans, Cassatt was likely at least somewhat aware of Utamaro's subject matter.

Certainly, there is no explicit presence of eroticism in Cassatt's prints. This may be reason enough to assume she did not see any erotic content or otherwise misunderstood or ignored the erotic undertones in Utamaro's work. However, it was likely since she was inspired by Utamaro's prints and read Goncourt's book about him that she was aware of his erotic work and knowledgeable that some, if not all, of the women he depicted were courtesans in the pleasure quarters.

Whether she saw the erotic prints and understood which images of women were courtesans or not, she still created the 1891 color print series in imitation of Japanese prints. Cassatt's iconography was not created for a mass market as ukiyo-e prints were. She created what she wanted to create and depicted what she saw around her. Her women are not copies of Utamaro's eighteenth-century Japanese women; they are the women who surrounded her in daily life as a woman in nineteenth-century France.

Utamaro's print *Mother Nursing Baby Under Mosquito Net* (fig. 25) shows the patriarchal values of Edo era Japan through the imagery of a mother breastfeeding her child with an attendant watching over them. Japan under the Tokugawa shogunate was a hierarchical society with Neo-Confucian values that stressed the role of women as the

[50] Mary Cassatt to Berthe Morisot, Spring 1891, in *Women Impressionists* (Frankfurt am Main: Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, 2008), 125.

reproductive organ in a family. While women were tasked with having babies, the education of children was left more in the hands of the men.[51] Utamaro's babies are almost always male, because his images come from a male artist for a predominantly male audience and appear to appeal to a male gaze. The baby is playfully in motion, pinching at the mother's nipple and kicking its feet onto the mother's body. The image of breastfeeding allows for potential gratification from both the viewpoint of an adult male and "from that of memory of the complete possession of the mothers body as a child."[52] Utamaro's children are often rowdy. Although he shows the images of mothers and children in plausible situations, there is still a hint of imaginative exploration from the eyes of the male gaze onto a scene of motherhood. Utamaro also shows multiple sides to the relationships between mothers and children as exemplified in *Midnight: Mother and Sleepy Child* (fig. 26). The scene is more private and intimate as the passive, sleepy child is held by the attentive mother as she emerges from a mosquito net. The attention to the woman is not glorifying or sexualizing, but instead is a portrayal of daily life for a mother. This print was part of a series that showed the daily life of ordinary women and is an example of Utamaro using the half-bust portrait of beautiful women on a figure who was not a courtesan. He also used the theme of motherhood alongside the mirror motif in *Mother and Child* (fig. 27) as a mother holds her child on her back and they gaze down at their reflection in a pool of water. There are two perspectives that show of the back of the figures and an enclosed view of their faces. This print was on display at the 1890

[51] Julie Nelson Davis, *Utamaro and the Spectacle of Beauty*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 172.
[52] Ibid., 195.

exhibition of Japanese prints, and so it is likely one that Cassatt would have seen and taken inspiration from it.[53]

The images of mothers and children by Cassatt and Utamaro while similar subjects show the differences in cultures. Cassatt's *Maternal Caress* (fig. 28) does not invoke the erotic male gaze but does invoke the affection between the ideal mother and child. Patriarchal hierarchies were also present in the west as the nineteenth century was largely defined by the values of the Victorian Age. Increased industrialization and a growing middle-class led to a set of standards for women characterized by the cult of domesticity. The cult of domesticity defined women's role as ultimate caretakers and nurturers tasked to raise children with pure and pious morals to maintain a pure and pious society. Maternal relationships were often idealized and glorified so that images of mothers and children were overly sentimental. The well-behaved child and the centrally seated mother in an embrace with expressions of calm joy seem to suggest the serenity and peace of religious imagery of the Madonna and Child. In *Mother's Kiss* (fig. 29) Cassatt creates a simple composition with the two figures in an empty space that focuses on a more ordinary view of a mother embracing her child. In avoiding the sentimental effusions that were so typical of her contemporaries she was able to portray a realistic relationship with a loving downward gaze of the mother onto the squirming child held in an embrace.

Utamaro also often depicted women together in pairs, a subject which Cassatt also felt drawn to as it resembled her own portrayals of women together. Another print by

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[53] Megumi Soda, "Exposition de la gravure japonaise, 1890: The Complete List of Identified Works with full Illustrations and Notes," *Journal of Japonisme* 2, no.1 (2017): 19.

Utamaro entitled *Mother and Child* (fig. 30) shows the mother breastfeeding the child while both figures are engaged in other activities. The mother adjusts her hair in a mirror while the baby nurses and reaches out for a toy held by the other woman. This busy scene again shows the rowdy nature of Utamaro's babies and the subtle sexualization of the breasts as the woman, with her attention drawn to her appearance, sits exposed while the baby pinches her nipple.

Cassatt parallels this combination of two women and a baby in *In the Omnibus* (fig. 31). The women are in an enclosed public space, a unique place for Cassatt to portray. While Cassatt rarely portrayed strangers so close, the omnibus could mean that the figures are individuals separately engaged in transportation, although this is unlikely because of their proximity and lack of other figures. In preliminary sketches for this print there was a fourth male figure, another rarity in Cassatt's work, but he was omitted from the final design.[54] Instead we are left with three figures that exemplify the upper-middle class Victorian style in the large hats and the ornate white clothing of the baby. It is a depiction of a public space that Cassatt rarely represented in her work, but the composition still presents the figures as isolated in privacy in the space.

Another print by Cassatt which portrays the upper-middle class lifestyle is *Afternoon Tea Party* (fig. 32). The two female friends are engaged in taking tea together in a private domestic ceremony complete with ornate gold-rimmed ceramics and a screen in the background, all of which possibly draw reference to the Japanese tea ceremony.[55]

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[54] Debra M. Mancoff, *Mary Cassatt: Reflections of Women's Lives*, (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Change, 1998), 73.
[55] Getlein, *Mary Cassatt*, 92.

Utamaro created a similar scene of two women in *The Upper Class* (fig. 33) from the series *Manners of Young Women of Three Classes*. The two women are engaged in a music lesson with a koto in the background as well as an ornate box for fingerpicks and a small cage for insects in the foreground. This similarly shows two women engaged in a private activity together with elaborate fashion and objects that match their class in that era. Utamaro's series also includes a print of *The Lower Class* (fig. 34), which shows two women in a relaxed and unpretentious lifestyle with plain loosened clothing. Cassatt, unlike Utamaro, only depicted the class she was a part of, however, her depictions of private scenes between women were based on her own experiences of taking tea with other women as she did countless times. Utamaro would have imagined the scenario of two women playing music, as well as in all his scenes which portray private spaces for women.

The Letter (fig.14) displays the intimacy of doing an ordinary task in privacy and ironically the same intimacy is shown in Utamaro's depictions of a high class and a low-class prostitute. The *High-Ranking Courtesan (Oiran)* (fig. 35) is shown with her hair clean and let down as she puts a brush to her mouth in preparation of writing a letter to her lover. The *Low-Ranking Courtesan (Teppō)* (fig. 36) is shown in disheveled clothing and hair with her breasts exposed and a towel in her mouth. Similar to Cassatt's woman, both the courtesans have attention drawn to the mouth, and the refined Oiran is also engaged in an act of correspondence. Cassatt was possibly aware of the sexual allusions from the Japanese figures. She could have purposefully mimicked the attention towards

the lips paired with a contemplative gaze in a display of romantic undertones disguised in a private and mundane activity.

Cassatt's image of a draped nude is in *The Coiffure* (fig. 22). This print could be related to *Takashima Ohisa Using Two Mirrors to Observe Her Coiffure* (fig. 37), another Utamaro that had been displayed at the École des Beaux Arts.[56] Both images make use of mirrors to show the faces of the women as they adjust their hair. Utamaro's figure is shown from the back with her face only revealed through the reflection of one mirror while the image that she sees in the other mirror is hidden. We can see the figure in Cassatt's *The Coiffure* straight on, this frontal nude is merely a reflection of the figure rather than the figure that would inhabit the same space as the audience, which brings distance to any potential eroticism. The portrayal of the behind the scenes of women's lives, whether accurate or not, was explored by Cassatt after studying the same theme in Utamaro's prints.

[56] Soda, "Exposition de la gravure japonaise, 1890," 19.

IV. RECEPTION

Cassatt's completed color print series was planned to be shown at an exhibition with the *Société des Peintres-Graveurs Français* (The Society of French Painter-Printmakers) in 1891 but Cassatt and her peer Camille Pissarro, from the Danish West Indies, were denied entry because they were born outside of France.[57] Cassatt was furious at her exclusion, and as a compromise Durand-Ruel provided Cassatt and Pissarro with two separate rooms adjacent to the *Société* group exhibition. The separation, however, provided Cassatt with special attention from both critics and spectators.[58]

The ten color print series, along with two oil paintings and two pastels, was shown at Cassatt's first one-women exhibition at the Galerie Durand-Ruel in April of 1891.[59] Critics gave generally positive reviews and often made note of her imitation of Japanese prints and specifically Utamaro. George Lecomte wrote succinctly in a review for *L'Art modern*

> Mlle Cassatt innovates. Intimate and worldy scenes, these [prints] in the manner of the Japanese are printed in colors. If the first, *The Bath*, is for the study of the process, a deliberate European translation of Outamaro (and the artists entitles it: *Essai d'imitation de l'estampe japonaise*), *The Letter*, the *Young Woman trying on a Dress* exemplify the work of a new art that is both charming and perfectly personal.[60]

Sales for Cassatt's color prints were moderate with a few sets sold in Paris and New York. By 1893 the sets were broken up and individual prints were sold, making a complete set of all ten that were signed and printed at the same time difficult to find

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[57] Getlein, *Mary Cassatt*, 76.
[58] Gerhard Gruitrooy, *Mary Cassatt: An American Impressionist*, (Broomall: Mason Crest, 2019), 53-54.
[59] Mathews and Shapiro, *The Color Prints*, 71.
[60] Ibid.

today. Since she created only twenty-five final impressions of the series, she must have intended that they be kept and appreciated by a few collectors. While she did not intend for her prints to be mass-produced, she did hope that making multiple prints would allow her art to be reached by a wider audience and said about her color prints in a quote to her friend Louisine Havemeyer, "I hope the Durand-Ruel will put mine on the market at reasonable prices for nothing, I believe, will inspire a taste for art more than the possibility of having it in the home."[61]

Her second exhibition at Durand-Ruel in 1893, which featured the prints, sold well; Degas and Bing purchased prints.[62] The reception in America was less enthusiastic than the Parisian marketplace, and in an 1892 letter to Joseph Durand-Ruel Cassatt stated, "I am very glad you have any sale for them in Paris. Of course it is more flattering from an Art point of view than if they sold in America, but I am still very much disappointed that my compatriots have so little liking for any of my work."[63] While reception for the prints was mixed at the time she exhibited them, today they are celebrated for their refined technique and intimate scenes of women's lives.

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[61] Ibid., 39.
[62] Ibid., 81-82.
[63] Mary Cassatt to Joseph Durand-Ruel, February 1892, in *Cassatt and her Circle*, 228.

V. CONCLUSION

Cassatt's 1891 ten color print series was a significant turning point in her artistic development. After the conservative Salon and Impressionist paintings of her early career, Cassatt created an entirely new and original style through her experimentation with printmaking techniques. This new direction began when she visited the large-scale exhibition of Japanese ukiyo-e prints at the École des Beaux Arts in 1890 and found inspiration in the eighteenth-century Japanese artist Utamaro. After this exhibition, Cassatt set to work on the set of ten color prints as an imitation of Japanese methods. She replaced the eighteenth-century Japanese setting with a nineteenth-century European one and conveyed the features of woodblock prints by using metal plates. The result was a blend of Japanese and European aesthetics with oblique compositional qualities, an emphasis on line, and flattened shapes of colors and patterns. Utamaro's style liberated Cassatt to approach her own work in a bold manner resulting in ten color prints that comprise some of her finest work.

Cassatt's ten color prints influenced her Post-Impressionist style. Comparing *In the Opera Box (No.3)* (fig. 3), a softground etching and aquatint print made in the 1880s, and the painting *The Boating Party* (fig. 2) from 1893-94 illustrates Cassatt's style before and after the ten color print series. *In the Opera Box (No.3)* has a more conventional composition compared to the print series with the figure and the background in the same perspective. The aquatint creates shadows and tones that show a realistic recession back into space. The later experimentation in printmaking methods for the 1891 series allowed her to explore new stylistic approaches. These changes were then translated into her later

paintings in the 1890s. *The Boating Party* omits shadows and has three overlapping figures in a cropped composition which cuts off the outlines of the boat. The white of the sail and the curved yellow forms create flat shapes of color juxtaposed to the diagonal of the oar and the background of blue that takes up almost the entirety of the composition. This use of an emboldened style with flattened perspectives and shapes on a large-scale oil painting shows the influence from Japanese style realized in Cassatt's color prints.

Though the color print series certainly evokes Utamaro's style, they are distinguishable in their delicacy and depictions of European women. Cassatt did not intend to copy Utamaro's prints, although their subject matter both focused on women, mothers, and children. The differences in context and intended audiences convey different meanings to similar subjects. Utamaro's prints catered to a working-class male audience. The depictions of women, often courtesans in the pleasure quarters, were meant to portray the "floating world" and the pleasure-seeking aspects of Edo era Japan. Whether Cassatt misunderstood the context of Utamaro's prints or not, she observed the qualities of prints she had access to and created her own series that incorporated her own style and subjects. It is possible that she was aware of the erotic undertones of Utamaro's work but simply observed and adapted the formal qualities and incorporated them onto on her own figures in a late-nineteenth-century European context.

Cassatt's prints were not mass produced for a wide audience. Her figures and interiors were depictions of the upper-middle class which she was a part of. She created images of women and children not only because she was limited to the domestic interiors she so often depicted, but because she understood and wanted to convey the importance

and dignity in women and mothers in everyday life. The ten color print series celebrates these subjects in the simple yet conscious depictions of commonplace scenes with women at their center. Although she never married or had children of her own, she created art for a lifetime cut short by her failing eyesight. As an American woman living in Paris, leading an unconventional life as a single woman, and making her living as a professional artist against the norms of the art world and her own family, Cassatt consistently prevailed in creating art that transports the viewer into the intimate and celebrated lives of the women she painted.

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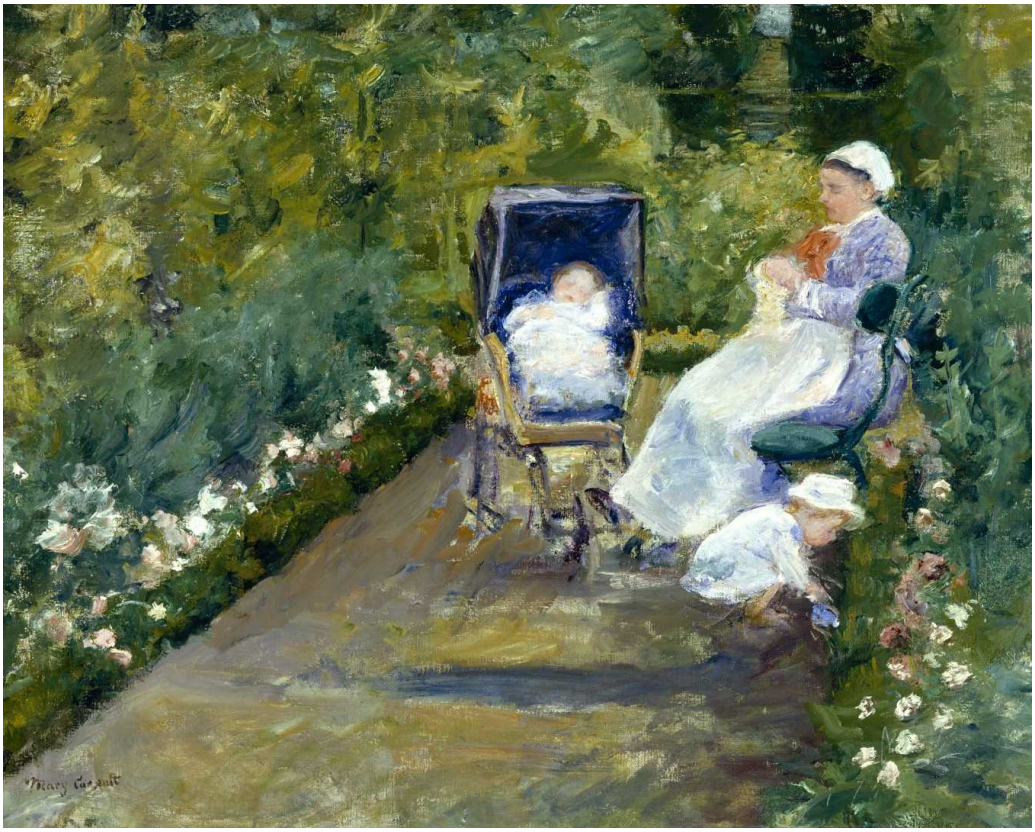

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