Gendered Spaces: The World Columbian Exposition of 1893, The Woman's Building, and Mary Cassatt's Modern Woman

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GENDERED SPACES:
THE WORLD COLUMBIAN EXPOSITION OF 1893, THE WOMAN’S BUILDING,
AND MARY CASSATT’S MODERN WOMAN

by

Haelim Allen

A Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Major: Art History

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to Henry, Matthew, and to my sister, Hae Young, whose love for art influenced my pursuits.
ABSTRACT

Mary Cassatt is acknowledged as a painter of women and of their daily lives, depicting such subjects as mothers bathing or cuddling their children, young women playing instruments, picking fruit, or attending performances; and girls running or sitting and reading. Her mural for The World Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago of 1893, and entitled, Modern Woman, continues in the same vein as her overall body of work. And yet, Cassatt understood that this mural was decorative in nature with its own visual tradition. The mural is a composition, the largest that Cassatt ever painted, about women and, in this case, modern women. Modern Woman and women’s participation in world expositions in the United States near the turn of the century marked a pivotal point in history for women. Her painting embodies a progressive aspect seen not only in its subject matter, women’s work, but also in the manner in which it was painted. It shows the continued influence of Impressionism and her openness to experimentation. The two initial world expositions were held in the United States (each included a women’s pavilion), the World Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876, and the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. As such, Mary Cassatt’s mural and the world expositions housing a pavilion for women reflect the increasing desire by women to have their voices heard. This thesis will examine these exceptional and radical gender-specific spaces celebrating womanhood.
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23. Loie Fuller, cabinet photograph, ca. 1890-1910.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

…May we not believe that the brotherhood…is nearer for the recurrence of these international expositions, so happily introduced in 1851?¹

This utopian sentiment by the writer, Anetta M. Osborne, in her article regarding the Great Exhibition (World Fair) of 1851, echoes the generally positive attitude of 19th century Americans concerning world expositions. Osborne’s statement made in 1892 may also reflect the more favorable view of the U.S. in contrast to the numerous negative responses by Europeans against the U.S. exhibition, not only in 1851, but also regarding succeeding involvement a dozen years or so thereafter. ² Since the ‘First World Fair’ hosted by the British in 1851 at the Crystal Palace, World Fairs and Expositions continued to showcase not only the technological developments by the participants from various nations but also the arts, with the idea of (at least in the best possible and assumed motivations of the host countries and the fairs’ participants) ethnographical and anthropological understanding between an assembly of cultures from around the world.³ What Ms. Osborne may have implied but certainly did not explicitly express is the concept of sisterhood. Osborne’s usage of “brotherhood” at that time could be understood to include everyone including herself, and yet, the inclusion of a Woman’s


³ There have been expositions prior to 1851 in both France and in England highlighting industrial advancements from various countries, but for simplicity, and since generally The Great Exhibition is regarded as the first, I note it as such. See Sally Webster, Eve’s Daughter/Modern Woman: A Mural by Mary Cassatt, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 36.

These early expositions are indicative of their era – they are more reflective of colonialism and imperialism. The exhibitions showing nonwestern peoples were more exploitive and perpetuated stereotypes rather than inform viewers of their unique cultures. See Wanda M. Corn, Women Building History: Public Art at the 1893 Columbian Exposition, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 1. Robert W. Rydell’s All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
Pavilion in 1876, as well as the Woman’s Building in 1893, was met in some instances with not so brotherly love by the men in charge of the overall aspects of the expositions. If these fairs and expositions brought together men of all classes, with the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago having twenty-one million paying visitors, what better venue for women to voice their aims in celebrating sisterhood or womanhood? 4

The Columbian Exposition was only the second world fair to include a building solely dedicated to women, the first being the Centennial Exposition held in Philadelphia in 1876. The governing body of the Women’s Building for the Columbian Exposition sought out women architects, painters, sculptors, and artisans to bring their building to fruition. They commissioned Mary Cassatt, an American artist, who had been residing in France in the decades prior to the exposition, to help decorate the building with one of the six murals displayed in the upper stories of the Hall of Honor. The governing body envisioned the murals to celebrate the contributions of women and their work throughout History. The themes of these murals, in two sets of three, were either of “Primitive Woman” or “Modern Woman.” 5

Cassatt was asked to paint the mural on the south tympanum depicting the theme of modern women, while Mary MacMonnies, another American in France, painted the

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Wanda M. Corn, *Women Building History: Public Art at the 1893 Columbian Exposition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 92. Corn not only reiterates Cassatt’s and MacMonnies’ thematic assignments but also of the four minor murals: “In line with MacMonnies’s subject of ‘primitive’ women, Sewell and Fairchild were to present the women in the distant past; Emmet and Sherwood were, like Cassatt, to portray modern women.”
one for the north tympanum in the theme of primitive women. These murals were not just decorations but also visualized markers of women’s contributions to society and three of the six murals represented modern or contemporary women in Western civilization. Cassatt clearly understood the significance of her mural in such a context. She must also have been aware of the influential nature of these world expositions as a repository of culture, technology, and other advancements of mankind, especially since she had participated in the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1878, and was in Paris when the Exposition Universelle was held there in 1889. The distinction of having a mural shown in a space of and for women, and as part of a venue where millions of people from around the world would attend and view her work, may have contributed to her accepting a project so different from her previous body of work. Even so, she challenged herself to take on the project because it contributed to the promoting of women, modern women, and their lives and work.

6 The other four smaller murals were painted by Amanda Brewster Sewell, Lucia Fairchild Fuller, Lydia Field Emmet, and Rosina Emmet Sherwood, in addition to the tympana painted by Mary MacMonnies and Mary Cassatt.

7 Erica E. Hirshler, “Helping ‘Fine Things Across the Atlantic’: Mary Cassatt and Art Collecting in the United States,” in Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman, ed. Judith A. Barter (New York: Art Institute of Chicago in association with H.N. Abrams, 1998), 200. Hirshler notes that Cassatt participated in the international show in 1878 without further comment. In the same monograph, a Chronology compiled by Wendy Bellion on page 334, notes that Cassatt’s Tête de femme (unidentified) was exhibited in the American Pavilion in the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1878. Cassatt’s Portrait of a Little Girl (Blue Chair) was refused by the jury. In the same Chronology, on page 340, Cassatt met the Havemeyers in August when they attended the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1889.
CHAPTER 2:

SPACES FOR WOMEN: WORLD FAIRS AND EXPOSITIONS

World Fairs and Expositions were ideal spaces for the exchange of technological advances, with representations from around the world exhibited alongside the benefits of fostering cultural understanding. Such was the basis for the World Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago that celebrated Columbus’ exploration of the Americas. It was the second world exposition hosted by the United States. The first was held in Philadelphia, aptly dubbed the Centennial Exposition, in 1876. Before then, the United States had participated in the various early fairs and expositions in London and Paris, and the organizers of those expositions understood the significance of such enterprises. Consequently, women from the United States rallied to organize the very first Woman’s Pavilion at an international exposition at the Centennial Exposition in 1876.¹ Their experience served as an impetus for the Woman’s Building of the Columbian Exposition seventeen years later, which would be conscientious of the gifts of women, including the talents of Mary Cassatt and the other noted contributors.

The Centennial Exhibition helped to solidify the United States’ cultural and industrial reputation around the world and document its growth since the 1851 exhibition.² This positive trend in American esteem, acknowledged especially by those in the established Old World, was even more noticeable with the 1893 Columbian


Exposition. Merle Curti notes how the United States’ participation in these international exhibitions helped to establish America as a new and emerging global power. It is within these circumstances and perceptions that the American women saw the opportunity to bring forth their desire to celebrate women and their lives in addition to women’s work.

But changing the patriarchal culture, including that which informed the 1876 Centennial Exposition, was more challenging to the Women’s Centennial Executive Committee (who were in charge of organizing their exhibition) than they had initially thought. They were appointed by the United States Centennial Board of Finance in 1873 for the 1876 exposition. By June 1875, after the women had reserved space in the Main Building for their exhibition, the Exposition Managers informed the women that the space was no longer available. If they wanted to display their exhibition on women, the women would have to fund a separate building themselves. The women quickly rallied to do so, and within four months, construction began on the Woman’s Building. The organizers sought to show the labors of women from all situations of life, from not only the United States but also from various nations.

This theme, celebrating labors of women, continued to be the focus for the second world exposition held in the United States, the World Columbian Exposition, which opened on May 1 and continued until October 30, 1893. This exposition also featured a women’s pavilion, planned since its inception, unlike the one in 1876, among many other

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3 Curti, “America at the World Fairs,” 855, 856.
4 Curti, “America at the World Fairs,” 856.
5 Cordato, “Toward a New Century,” 117.
venues highlighting countries from around the world and from the states and territories of the United States of America. Regina Palm conveys the significance of the Women’s Building and the women who painted its numerous murals (not just the six in the Hall of Honors that are addressed in this paper) by noting it as being the first such exposition on an international level with women’s participation. American women saw the World’s Fair as an opportunity to advance women’s causes. Those causes were numerous and ranged across the political spectrum from progressivism to conservatism. These issues, as well as the pragmatic organization of such a venture in coordinating an entire building for their cause, necessitated a managerial entity to oversee the project. In 1890, by an Act of Congress (Section 6), the World’s Columbian Commission authorized and required the appointment of a Board of Lady Managers to oversee women’s representation at the exposition and to manage all the funds and details related to the endeavors associated with the Woman’s Building. The Board of Lady Managers was formally organized on October 21, 1890, and they elected Mrs. Bertha Honoré Palmer as the President. It was Palmer with the governing body of the Board of Lady Managers who envisioned the murals for the Hall of Honors in the Woman’s Building.

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Corn, *Women Building History*, 68.

Palmer and The Board of Lady Managers had to reconcile the interests of a variety of women’s groups and promote a united message from the wide-range of women’s issues and agendas of the day. For instance, the members of the suffragette movement had been critical of the 1876 Centennial Exhibition for its undistinguished Woman’s Building, which had been designed by a male architect and had featured few works by professional women artists.\(^\text{10}\) They now had become frustrated with the Columbian Exposition for not placing sufficient emphasis on progressive issues, such as women’s right to vote.\(^\text{11}\) The Board of Lady Managers quieted those voices that were more progressive than the conservative to moderate establishment of the Board.\(^\text{12}\) The board consisted of 117 members with the same number of alternates, with 2 from every state, the District of Columbia, and the territories, 8 members-at-large, and 9 resident women from Chicago. It was comprised of all women from the middle and upper classes who were prominent in their communities, either by relation to their husbands or from their own interests and work.\(^\text{13}\) Despite their differences, what these women, the various women’s groups they represented, agreed on was the significance of the work of women and their contributions throughout history.\(^\text{14}\) This theme, the work of women, thus became the overall vision for the Woman’s Building.

\(^{10}\) Corn, *Women Building History*, 66.

\(^{11}\) Gullett, “Our Great Opportunity,” 261, 263.

\(^{12}\) Gullett, “Our Great Opportunity,” 263. The male administrators along with Bertha Palmer, a nonsuffragist, sought to distance themselves from such political agendas as promoted by the suffragists.

\(^{13}\) Corn, *Women Building History*, 69.

**Woman’s Building**

Stepping back into the nineteenth century from what seems a confused dream of the past, we see before us the graceful and classic outlines of the Woman’s building, that monument of the best the world has to show of human progress, since it signalizes the emancipation of woman, who from her ancient condition of disgraceful servitude, has risen to be the equal and co-laborer of her former master.  

This sentiment, as expressed by Marian Shaw in *The Argus* newspaper, emphasizes the desired equality and co-laborer status of women at the end of the 19th century. Unlike at the Centennial Exposition, the architect of the Woman’s Building for the Columbian Exposition was a woman, Miss Sophia Hayden, a graduate of the Massachusetts School of Technology’s class of 1890, who designed the structure in an Italian Renaissance style (fig. 1). Maud Howe Elliott, in her description of the building states, “[Building] is essentially feminine in character; it has the qualities of reserve, delicacy, and refinement. Its strength is veiled in grace; its beauty is gently impressive.” These adjectives of the Woman’s Building are not incidental in that they relate more to the qualities of the feminine than to the masculine. Elliott later writes in the same monograph that at one time, the criterion of good work was its being mistaken for having been made by a man; now, however, the more “womanly a woman’s work is the stronger it is.”

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In addition to Elliot’s feminine attributes of the building, Hayden’s design accommodated wonders from all around the world, all relating to women and women’s work. These exhibitions reflected an encyclopedic type of display.\textsuperscript{19} Marian Shaw highlights in her article everything about the building and its contents that represent the progress and advancement made by women in disciplines and interests. In addition to noting Miss Sophia G. Hayden, she mentions the Californian and English women whose works in iron are displayed, a copy of the Bayeux tapestry of William the Conqueror, needle and brush work by Queen Victoria and her daughters; artworks in various media in the Hall of Honor Art Exhibit, and the women’s library holding volumes by George Eliot, Jane Austen, and a 1450 book by Dame Julian Barnes. To Shaw, all of these items were evidence of the progress of women’s intellectual development that showed a woman’s ability to also excel in any work outside the leisure and domestic spheres throughout history.\textsuperscript{20}

Bertha Palmer, in her address during the opening of the Woman’s Building on May 1, 1893, related the variety of circumstances that would force women to work rather than starve, such as widowhood or an incapable husband.\textsuperscript{21} Since this is the reality for these women rather than the ideal situation, Palmer advocated for “thorough education and training” so that they are prepared to meet and excel in any of these circumstances,

\textsuperscript{19} Corn, \textit{Women Building History}, 76. This manner of display was common throughout the Columbian Exposition.

\textsuperscript{20} Shaw, \textit{World’s Fair}, 61.

including being a wife and mother. Palmer also commented on the reason for the exhibition of women’s work at the Exposition:

Realizing that woman can never hope to receive the proper recompense for her services until her usefulness and success are not only demonstrated but fully understood and acknowledged, we have taken advantage of the opportunity presented by the Exposition to bring together such evidences of her skill in the various industries, arts and professions, as may convince the world that ability is not a matter of sex. Urged by necessity, she has shown that her powers are the same as her brothers’, and that like encouragement and fostering care may develop her to an equal point of usefulness.

The Hall of Honors in the main hall of the Woman’s Building displayed works of art along with numerous examples of patents, research, and other professional work done by women. These, along with the special exhibitions from around the world, were evidence of women’s abilities, and in turn, a call for proper compensation.

**Murals in the Hall of Honors**

In the Hall of Honors, six murals were mounted in the upper stories of the three-story-high building (fig. 2). Four of the murals, aside from those housed at the north and south tympana, were hung as a set of two across from one another, in between colonnaded arches of the second floor. All six murals were done in the ‘new style’ (modern murals), very much popularized by the work of the French artist Puvis de Chavannes, in which murals were painted in oil on canvas instead of in the traditional

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22 Palmer and Eagle, 28.

23 Palmer and Eagle, 28.

24 Corn, *Women Building History*, 113. The interior space only show two stories unless one counts for the tympana roof line just above the ceiling of the second story. On the exterior, there were rooftop observatories on both sides of the building just above the second story, along with a central roof top housing the tympana. I mention only six murals in the Hall of Honors. There were other “murals” painted by women in other spaces within the Exposition. Regina Megan Palm notes in her article that the names of the other women muralists are known but their murals have not been visually documented. See Palm, “Women Muralists,” 128.
technique of fresco. The Board of Lady Managers determined the overall theme of the works: women of the past and women of the modern age. The theme was to reinforce their overall objective: to show how far women have come in every facet of life and industry.

After soliciting suggestions from those around her, including Sarah Hallowell, Bertha Palmer sought out Elizabeth Jane Gardner (later Bouguereau) for one or both tympana murals on the north and south sides above the second story of the building. Elizabeth Gardner had established herself both in American and French art circles. Gardner was sought after for her academic style and its associations not only with her husband, William Adolphe Bouguereau, but also with Pierre Puvis de Chavannes. However, Gardner declined the invitation by stating in a letter addressed to Hallowell on March 14, 1892 that, even though it is an honor and an important commission in doing such a work, the fact that the scale would require her to paint high on a ladder, and due to a concern for her health, she declined the commission. Palmer and Hallowell then had to seek other American women painters. Sarah Hallowell suggested Mary MacMonnies,

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26 Jeanne Madeline Weimann, The Fair Women (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1981), 393. From the Board of Lady Manager’s “Preliminary Prospectus”: “It will be shown that women, among all the primitive peoples, were the originators of most of the industrial arts, and that it was not until these became lucrative that they were appropriated by men, and women pushed aside.”

27 Garfinkle, “Women at Work,” 133. Sara Hallowell, the secretary to the director of fine arts for the Exposition and Walter McEwan were also consulted.

28 Corn, Women Building History, 89-90.

29 Elizabeth Gardner, Elizabeth Gardner to Sara Hallowell, March, 14, 1892. Letter. From the Ryerson and Burnham Archives at the Art Institute of Chicago. The Bertha Honore Palmer (1849-1918) Correspondence Collection, 1883-1899. Gardner writes, “I find that … I should not be equal to the physical fatigue necessary in painting on a high ladder.” Gardner also states even if the project appealed to her, her concern for her health would deter her participation.
who was also an expatriate like Gardner, and whose husband had already been commissioned to create a monumental sculpture for the exposition. MacMonnies agreed to paint the mural, *Primitive Woman*, for the north tympanum. For Palmer and Hallowell, MacMonnies, like Gardner, worked in the academic style, and therefore was a logical choice. As for Palmer and the Board, it was imperative to have American women decorate the murals rather than women painters from other nationalities.

If the overall vision of Palmer and the Board for the murals was more of an academic style (since they solicited Gardner for both the primitive and modern murals), it is in some ways surprising that they sought the services of Mary Cassatt for the south tympanum mural, *Modern Woman*. Cassatt had initially established herself in the French academic art scene, showing at various Salons during the earlier part of her career. However, by the 1890s, she was well associated with the avant-garde movement of Impressionism. Even with her established art career, Mary Cassatt was not as well known in the States. Cassatt was so unknown that *The Scientific American* in its publication regarding the Exposition on February 25, 1893, even misspelled her name as “Miss Casset.”

However, Palmer and others like Hallowell were aware of the American expatriate in France. Nancy Mowll Mathews, in her biography of Cassatt, states that Cassatt was not even under consideration at first, since she did not fit with their notion of

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31 Palmer would have settled for an European woman painter if there were not enough American women painters to accept the mural commissions. See Garfinkle, “Woman at Work,” 133.

32 “Progress of the World’s Columbian Exposition,” 115. There are other instances where her name is misspelled, but none by those who knew her or of her.
a muralist. After Elizabeth Gardner declined the invitation, Bertha Palmer, perhaps at the suggestion of Sara Hallowell, considered Mary Cassatt to paint the south tympanum. Palmer and Hallowell then visited Cassatt at her residence in Paris to present their proposal. Cassatt acknowledged the decorative nature of the work, expressed some initial reservations on the matter, but in the end, she felt it would be fun to do. In addition, Nancy Mowll Mathews relates how Degas’ negative reaction to the notion may have actually rallied Cassatt to take on the project. Perhaps this contributed to her decision, but after agreeing to paint the mural, Cassatt began planning all aspects of completing the work: its layout and composition in her studio space out at Bachivillers. Cassatt began to work on her mural by June 17, 1892, even before her contract was issued on July 16th of the same year.

33 Mathews, *Mary Cassatt: A Life*, 204.


35 Nancy Mowll Mathews, ed. *Cassatt and Her Circle, Selected Letters* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 229. Cassatt not only writes to Camille Pissaro, but also to Louise(ine) Havemeyer relating Degas’ objection to such decorative work, as well as to Louise about her initial thoughts in considering such a work. She notes how it might be “great fun” and something new to do. See also, Louise Havemeyer, *Sixteen to Sixty: Memoirs of a Collector*, ed. Susan A. Stein (New York: Ursus Press, 1993), 288.

36 Mathews, *Mary Cassatt: A Life*, 204. I speculate that Cassatt may have been desiring to paint on a larger scale even a full year earlier as noted in her mother’s letter to her brother, Aleck on July 23, 1891. “…happily for her she is immensely interested in her painting & bent on doing something on a larger canvas as good as her pictures of last summer…” (Mathews, *Cassatt and Her Circle*, 222).

37 Sally Webster, *Eve’s Daughter*, 66. Webster cites Mrs. Palmer Potter, *Addresses and Reports* (Chicago: Rand, McNally, 1894), 125, regarding the addition to Cassatt’s studio at Bachivillers: “an immense glass-roofed building at her summer home, where, rather than work on a ladder, she arranged to have the canvas lowered into an excavation in the ground when she wished to work on the upper part of its surface.” After checking an online version of this source, there was no mention of Cassatt or her studio.

The other American artists selected to paint the remaining murals in the Hall of Honors included Amanda Brewster Sewell, Lucia Fairchild Fuller, Lydia Field Emmet, and Rosina Emmet Sherwood (Lydia’s sister). They, too, were tasked with relating their paintings to the overall themes of primitive woman and modern woman. Sewell, and Fairchild Fuller, along with MacMonnies, were to paint scenes relating to woman in the past (Primitive Woman), while Emmet and Emmet Sherwood joined Cassatt to depict woman of the present (Modern Woman). The seemingly separate time periods were perhaps not meant to pit the modern woman against the primitive woman, but rather were meant to show a continuity of women’s work and progress throughout all periods of history since early times. These murals were the largest images displayed in the Hall of Honors in the Woman’s Building. They may have been intended as mural decorations for such a large space, but for Cassatt, her mural, Modern Woman, may not have been intended solely as such, since she writes to MacMonnies in 1892 that the border of her mural is the only attempt at decoration. Therefore, her images of girls and young women who occupy the three panels of Cassatt’s mural must be examined not as decoration but rather as promoting a particular message of celebrating women’s work.

The other murals may have conveyed such work and progress for women, but for Mary Cassatt her mural goes beyond the traditional, allegorical modes of representing

39 Corn, Women Building, 114. Corn uses the phrase, “woman’s bondage to the past,” and “woman’s emancipation in the present,” to describe the two themes of primitive woman and modern woman. I am not certain that those words, in particular, the word ‘bondage’ (more so than emancipation) is one that the Bertha Palmer or the Board of Lady Managers would have used to describe their themes.

40 Weimann, Fair Women, 393.

41 Mary Cassatt to Mary MacMonnies, Wednesday, 1892. Letter. From Ryerson and Burnham Archives at the Art Institute of Chicago, The Bertha Honoré Palmer (1849-1918) Correspondence Collection, 1883-1899. The Finding Aid notes this letter to Sara Hallowell when it should be to MacMonnies. See Box FF 1.19. The letter only notes the day of the week and year although, Matthews notes Dec. 1892. See Matthews, Letters of Cassatt, 243.
women. Cassatt’s mural depicts scenes of girls and young women pursuing fame, engaging in artistic activities, and picking the fruit. These subjects will be discussed more fully in Chapter 4. But before we can understand how Cassatt generated her visualization of modern woman, we will need to compare her work to murals painted by other artists, which include the three depicting Primitive Woman and the two other smaller murals also visualizing Modern Woman. Thus, the next chapter will present the background and development of these other artists’ murals more closely, as well as that of Cassatt’s *Modern Woman*. 
CHAPTER 3: WOMEN’S WORK: PRIMITIVE WOMAN AND MODERN WOMAN MURALS

In their 1892 book, *La Femme du vingtième siècle*, the authors Jules Simon, a contemporary philosopher and politician, and his son Gustave Simon, a journalist, advocate that women should remain indoors raising children, organizing the house, and promoting happiness.\(^1\) As much as this may have been the ideal situation for women of the 19\(^{th}\) century as prescribed by men such as Jules and Gustave Simon, the reality for many women was very harsh and unequal to that of men, especially for those women who for various reasons had to work outside the home. Residing in Europe, and in particular France, during most of her professional career as an artist, Mary Cassatt would have been familiar with such sentiments, even if she felt France gave her more opportunities as a woman artist than the United States would have done.\(^2\) Even in France, Cassatt and the other women painters were not generally viewed favorably or equally with that of male artists. Auguste Renoir, part of the Impressionist circle, once related how ridiculous the notion of a woman artist is, let alone women being in any profession, since he favored them rather to be dancers and singers.\(^3\) Despite Renoir’s

\(^1\) Jules Simon and Gustave Simon, *La femme du vingtième siècle* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1892), 67: “Et de la femme? D’être une bonne épouse et une bonne mère...rentenue au dedans...la femme pour élever les enfants, pour faire régner l’ordre dans la maison et pour y organiser le bonheur.”

\(^2\) Sara Hallowell to Mrs. Palmer, February 6, *1894*. Letter. From Ryerson and Burnham Archives at the Art Institute of Chicago, The Bertha Honoré Palmer (1849-1918) Correspondence Collection, 1883-1899. *The Finding Aid notes February 8\(^{th}\) but it should be February 6\(^{th}\) (Hallowell’s inclusion of “8” in her address of the same header shows the difference). Hallowell quotes Cassatt: “After all give me France, do not have to fight for recognition here if they do serious work.”

prejudice, as Nancy Mowll Mathews points out, Cassatt should be identified as a feminist when it came to the rights of women in the arts, since she countered her male cohorts at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts who had been patronizing and skeptical of women pursuing careers in art.4

Unlike male artists who could have had both a profession and a family, Cassatt pursued a career rather than settling down with family and marriage. This life course as a working woman may have informed her approach to the mural for the Exposition. Mary Cassatt’s mural, begun in the summer of the same year as La Femme’s publication, shows a different image of women - different than the domestic and maternal roles insisted on by the Simons. Modern Woman shows girls and young women pursuing fame, knowledge or science, involved in the arts, and in pursuit of all these literally outside (fig. 3) the interior domestic sphere. The radical nature of Cassatt’s work must be understood in the context of her time.5

In her address delivered on May 1, 1893, Bertha Palmer, the President of the Board of Lady Managers overseeing all aspects of the Woman’s Building, noted on the opening day of the Exposition that women’s work is disparaged and not compensated justly. Palmer pointed out the “hypocrisy” of those who think it monstrous for women to work outside the home, even though men (in industry) absconded with women’s work through industrialization (i.e. textiles) and instituted an economy based on pragmatism and unrestrained capitalism, so much so that women who must work should be treated

4 Mathews, Mary Cassatt: A Life, 20.

5 Cassatt’s work may not seem radical to us in the 21st century especially since she represents the middle to upper white class. However, her advocacy of pursuing of knowledge or science along with fame and also enjoying the arts during a time where women were not encouraged to do so, makes her and her work much more radical than initially thought.
fairly but are not. Palmer and the Board of Lady Managers also desired to celebrate modern woman. The modern woman is one who is viewed as a “heroine” in that the contemporary working woman is steadfast with principle, even if she is taken advantage of by the patriarchal industry that disparages women’s work. In light of the circumstances for women, and the unequal treatment and compensation for women’s work at this time, the subject matter for all six murals in the Woman’s Building dealt with women’s work from primitive to modern times. The remainder of this chapter will provide a brief and general overview of the history of murals, in addition to the introduction of the other five murals in the Hall of Honors. They will be examined in order to compare them with Cassatt’s vision of modern women in her mural, addressed more fully in the next chapter.

**Brief History of Murals**

According to Ralph Mayer, in his *The Artist’s Handbook of Materials and Techniques*, mural paintings must exhibit the following traits or conditions: 1.) Permanence in conjunction with the life of the building; 2.) Flat finish to be viewed, without glare, at varied angles and positions; 3.) Design must factor in the various positions or points of view of the spectator; and 4.) Must reflect a mural quality – appropriateness to the architecture and function of the room. Traditionally, murals or frescoes are paintings in which pigments are directly applied onto the wall, whether in

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6 Palmer, and Eagle, ed., 26. Palmer is not advocating for women to work outside the home; by no means, but rather if women do have to work, they should be compensated.

7 Palmer, and Eagle, ed., 26. These sentiments were expressed by Mrs. Bertha Palmer in her speech at the opening of the Woman’s Building on May 1st, 1893.

buon fresco (wet plaster) and or secco fresco (dry plaster) manner. Early examples of frescoes survive from western civilizations, such as the Minoans and the Romans. Traditional frescoes continued to be practiced throughout the Renaissance into contemporary times. However, at the time of the World Columbian Exposition, an alternative process was favored by the six women muralists for the Woman’s Building. Their paintings were done on canvas and were either stretched onto a frame and hung on the wall, or directly mounted on the wall with a removable paste. Murals done in oil painting could not be done directly on the wall in the same manner as frescoes. The walls had to be prepared (gessoed) in order to receive oil paint or to be painted on canvas as done by the six muralists for the Woman’s Building.

The latter “mural” approach, which had existed since the 16th century, was favored in the 19th century by such muralists as Puvis de Chavannes. As one of the leading French muralists during the Third Republic, Puvis’ style became identifiable and desired by patrons from the 1870s onwards. From this ongoing visual program funded by the French government, Puvis’ reputation as one of the leading muralists in his time was established. His murals embodied the traditions of the French Academy in classicism and idealism (fig.4). In America, the decorative mural, influenced by trends in Europe, grew in popularity in the late 1870s, and then “burgeoned throughout the 1880s and

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9 Mary MacMonnies to Mrs. Palmer, January 23, 1893. Letter. From Chicago History Museum, World’s Columbian Exposition records, 1890-1904. MacMonnies conveys two options for hanging the paintings to Mrs. Palmer - a direct application of the murals (hers and Cassatt’s) to the wall with “white lead or rye,” or to be stretched then mounted on the wall. Mary Cassatt to Mary MacMonnies, Wednesday, 1892. Letter. From Ryerson and Burnham Archives at the Art Institute of Chicago, The Bertha Honoré Palmer (1849-1918) Correspondence Collection, 1883-1899. As for Cassatt, she even had the “rentoileur” from the Louvre assess how best to mount her mural to which he stated that it should be stretched then hung. [“I had the “rentorleur” of the Musee du Louvre here the other day, he thinks it will be impossible to place the decorations otherwise than on stretchers on account of the rounding top which would make it impossible to stretch properly on a flat wall.”]

10 Corn, Women Building History, 46-50.
1890s, culminating in the panoply of murals with which artists embellished the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.¹¹ For those in charge of the Woman’s Building, Bertha Palmer and the Board of Lady Managers, mural decoration was inevitably expected for the building, and Puvis’ classical style as associated with his murals was also given favorable reception.¹²

“Primitive” Woman Murals

Amanda Brewster Sewell and Lucia Fairchild Fuller, who like MacMonnies depicted Primitive Woman, and the other women artists who depicted Modern Woman, were assigned these eras to reflect the overall theme of celebrating women’s work. However, it was up to the individual artists to articulate the particulars for their paintings.¹³ Sewell’s painting, *Women in Arcadia* (fig. 5), shows an idyllic outdoors with two women in the foreground, with others further back into the landscape carrying the bounties of gathered food.¹⁴ Maud Howe Elliott describes the women as depicted with “pagan loveliness,” while the group in the back, gathering oranges, is “fair as dream-


¹² Garfinkle, “Women at Work,” 145. Garfinkle notes Palmer’s pleasure and satisfaction of MacMonnies’ photograph documentation and sketch of her mural in progress: “(t) the water in the distance, the landscape and the figures, are all delightful. It carries quite a suggestion of Puvis and I can fancy an approach to his delightful grays and blues in the coloring…”

There are two typed versions of the letter: one in the AIC collection (Palmer collection Box FF 1.14 but with an incorrect date of 1893 on the finding aid) and the other at the Chicago Historical Museum (Series 1, Subseries 1. Volumes of the BLM incoming letters, volume 12). AIC: is typed on a letterhead while the CHM is not. There is a discrepancy on the date. AIC is dated January 4th while the CHM has, what seems to be, January 5th. Both typed letters originating from Mrs. Palmer from Chicago, IL to Mrs. MacMonnies states the following, “The water in the distance, the landscape and the figures, are all delightful. It carries quite a suggestion of Puvis and I can fancy an approach to his delightful grays and blues in the coloring…”


¹⁴ Arcadia is an interesting choice as a subject matter for “Primitive Woman” since it conveys not only a utopian world commonly depicted in Western art, but it would also seem to be counter-intuitive for displaying women at work.
women.” The painting certainly is not of the present, and it is dream-like more than actual reality. The female figure standing near the foreground is picking or about to a pick fruit, while another female, half-nude, sits and reaches out her hand toward a goat nearby. Wanda Corn describes Sewell’s women as youthful maidens within an Edenic scenery. The scene seems to be less about work and more about a tranquil place of leisure. Corn attributes this to Sewell’s adaptation of Puvis de Chavannes’ recurring Arcadian compositions in his murals. Out of the six murals, those of Sewell and MacMonnies overtly display the influence of Puvis’ style in composition and subject matter, more so than the other women muralists. Corn even recounts MacMonnies telling a reporter that Puvis had given approval of her mural in her Paris studio.

For the other smaller mural dealing with Primitive Woman, Lucia Fairchild Fuller chose the subject of domestic labor within the early settlement of the New World to depict in her work titled, *The Women of Plymouth* (fig. 6). Here, she shows women washing, spinning, and in the background, a teacher giving lessons to school children. Maud Howe Elliott, the editor and contributor to the 1894 publication, *Art and Handicraft in the Woman’s Building of the World’s Columbian Exposition Chicago 1893*, articulates in her chapter concerning the building and its contents the following on Fuller’s mural: “The thought behind the picture needs no criticism, it is an assertion of the prime duties of woman, the home-maker and care-taker; it is a hint full of significance to our day and generation, reminding us that unless the higher education now open to our

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15 Elliott, *Art and Handicraft*, 47.
18 Corn, *Women Building History*, 116. Corn does not include a citation for this statement in her book.
sex makes women better and wiser wives and mothers, it is a failure.”

Elliott describes the painting as showing the duties of woman as homemaker and caretaker, and how these aspects remind the women of her present time of the need for higher education, even if it is in the context of being better wives and mothers.

From a different perspective, Wanda Corn interprets Fuller’s painting as one visualizing histories of women of the Dark Ages when they were indentured to domestic service. I note Corn’s interpretation here, since she makes other distinct and interesting statements regarding these murals, thereby offering other possible interpretations for these murals. However, if we regard the vision of the Board of Lady Managers for these murals as portraying women’s work, including women of primitive or pre-modern times, then Corn’s revisionist interpretation must be tempered not only by the intention of the Board but also by the artists’ intentions.

How does Arcadia as reflected in Sewell’s composition relate to the Puritans of New England as found in Fairchild Fuller’s mural painting? These murals need not correlate directly with one another, other than that they each show aspects of the lives and work of primitive or early women.

19 Elliott, Art and Handicraft, 47.
20 Corn, Women Building History, 120.
21 Corn, Women Building History, 114: “Mary Cassatt as a founding member of the impressionist group” and other statements by Corn are unfortunately not cited. Corn’s interpretations and statements lead her to deduce that MacMonnies’ mural was accepted by the audience due to its appropriate femaleness versus the criticisms for Cassatt’s as being not feminine enough. I contend that perhaps it is due to Cassatt’s modern mode of painting, rather than not being feminine enough.

Mary Cassatt herself to Mrs. Palmer on Oct. 11th, 1892, Letter. From Ryerson and Burnham Archives at the Art Institute of Chicago, The Bertha Honoré Palmer (1849-1918) Correspondence Collection, 1883-1899. Cassatt states that if she has not conveyed the “sweetness of childhood, the charm of womanhood” with being absolutely feminine, she has failed.

As for MacMonnies, for her tympanum mural, _Primitive Woman_ (fig. 7), she decided to place her women in an early agrarian society, where they contribute to the work of the community. Her mural is the only one of the six that includes male figures: two boys playing with a dog in the lower right with three men, two in the distance on horseback; while the third in animal skins brings back the game killed in the hunt (fig. 8). MacMonnies desired these figures, both men and women, to be nude rather than clothed, as noted in her response back to Palmer and her concern about nudity.\(^23\) Palmer suggested otherwise in her letter of correspondence dated January 4, 1893, by stating, “I should therefore urge you to keep the figures as much draped as you consistently can…as the matter of history is concerned, primitive women did really wear warm clothing rather than the floating drapery of Goddesses, so that there seems to be no impropriety or impossibility in the suggestion of clothes.”\(^24\) By this date, and as she conveys to MacMonnies, Mrs. Palmer was already informed of and was pleased by Mary Cassatt’s fully clothed figures of modern women.\(^25\) MacMonnies makes her point-of-view known that male artists creating figurative works for the Exposition certainly are not asked to clothe their figures and notes that her work is “entirely allegorical-symbolical-representation of an idea- not a picture of any particular epoch or people” in continuing to


\(^24\) Bertha Palmer to Mary MacMonnies, January 4, 1892*. Letter. From Ryerson and Burnham Archives at the Art Institute of Chicago, The Bertha Honoré Palmer (1849-1918) Correspondence Collection, 1883-1899. * The year of this letter is incorrect, see comment for footnote 72. In the body of the text, I also have corrected the year to be 1893.

\(^25\) Bertha Palmer to MacMonnies, January 4, 1892.* Letter. From Ryerson and Burnham Archives at the Art Institute of Chicago, The Bertha Honoré Palmer (1849-1918) Correspondence Collection, 1883-1899. Palmer is pleased that Cassatt figures are fully clothed and that none are draped in a decolite gown.

*Instead of 1892, the year must be 1893 (as correct in the research guide), since Cassatt does not even start painting until June of 1892.
make her case for artistic nudity (even if in the end she reminds Mrs. Palmer that she will comply with her wishes for more drapery). For MacMonnies, her drapery does not relate to a specific era in primitive or early times but rather depicts classically draped women working in imagined primitive times or space. Therefore, the work does not relate to a specific historical timeframe but rather to a concept in allegorical mode of an earlier primitive society. Even so, MacMonnies’ figures of women and their dress are closely related to Puvis’ portrayal of women in his murals, especially in the use of neoclassical garments. However, MacMonnies’ differs from Puvis’ in the lack of emphasis on landscape, since her figures are much more numerous and overwhelm the composition. They are nine-feet high and crowd the landscape, showing women working in their many responsibilities within what Garfinkle notes as a time when both sexes toiled toward survival.

Scholars such as Wanda Corn, Erik Trump, and Charlene Garfinkle, all discuss these “primitive” women mural examples in a variety of ways. Corn interprets MacMonnies’ mural, the *Primitive Woman*, as depicting a “dark age, a dystopia,” due to the women being portrayed as servants of man in an agricultural primitive era. Erik Trump notes the significance of looking backward (primitive women) to establish the work of women as “originators of most of the industrial arts, and that it was not until these became lucrative that they were appropriated by men, and women pushed aside.”

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28 Corn, *Women Building History*, 120.

29 Erik Trump, “Primitive Woman,” 220. The quotation in Trump’s article cite Weimann’s book page 393, but this sentiment was also stated in Elliott, *Art and Handicraft*, 33.
Garfinkle, reiterating MacMonnies’ sentiments about her female figures, also points out that MacMonnies’ figures are content in their Arcadian/Edenic setting and lack personal ambition.\(^{30}\) This ambition, or lack thereof, reflects, in my opinion, the decorative sense of the figures rather than a realistic connotation, partly due to the manner in which MacMonnies incorporates Puvis’ style. It also points to MacMonnies’ depiction of women alongside or as helpers to men, whereas, in Cassatt’s mural, the girls and young women depicted in her mural are pursuing fame, picking fruit, and enjoying music, art, and dancing all outdoors. Cassatt’s mural displayed three panels of girls and young women in a world of their own. Cassatt conveys this sentiment found explicitly in her mural in a letter written to Mrs. Palmer on October 11\(^{th}\), when she reiterates the question asked by an American friend, “‘Then this is woman apart from her relations to man?’ I told him it was.”\(^{31}\) In Garfinkle’s estimation, MacMonnies’ figures differ from Cassatt’s figures in their gendered spatial settings, either accompanied by men or entirely independent from them.\(^{32}\) In addition, MacMonnies and the other artists depicting both Primitive Woman, and the two minor Modern Woman murals, employ more of a decorative style stemming from an academic tradition, while Cassatt’s approach is much more experimental. These are telling signs of traditional American visual taste at the end of the 19\(^{th}\) century.


\(^{31}\) Mary Cassatt to Mrs. Palmer, October 11, 1892. Letter. From Ryerson and Burnham Archives at the Art Institute of Chicago, The Bertha Honoré Palmer (1849-1918) Correspondence Collection, 1883-1899.

Modern Woman Murals

If MacMonnies’ primitive women lacked ambition and could not be seen independent of men, the three murals depicting “Modern Woman” exhibit women’s progress as pursued by independent women in contemporary times. The minor, or rather, smaller murals depicting aspects of Modern Woman were painted by sisters Lydia Field Emmet and Rosina Emmet Sherwood, while the south tympanum mural on the same theme was painted by Mary Cassatt. According to Sally Webster, Cassatt based the background of her mural on an actual place – the environment around her studio in Bachivillers, France. In contrast, the Emmet sisters placed their women in a relatively nondescript interior space with references to classical architecture. Columns in Lydia Emmets’ painting frame a type of curtain that is drawn back, only to show a glimpse of the outdoors, while Emmet Sherwood includes fluted columns with what seems to be a Corinthian capital on one of the two depicted. These imagined spaces, referential to Greco-Roman times, reflect the sisters’ shared vision for “modern” women.

Lydia Field Emmet’s mural, *Art, Science, and Literature* (fig. 9), shows women in various activities associated with the three disciplines named in the title of the work. However, the young women are not convincing in their tasks, since they seem to be posing rather than truly engaging in their activities. This trait is also obvious in Emmet Sherwood’s, *Republic’s Welcome to Her Daughters* (fig.10), where, in particular, the figures of the young women also seem to pose for us. Hutton interprets the figures in

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33 Webster, *Eve's Daughter*, 74, 124-125.
both Emmet sisters’ works as “static assemblages, passive even when they sought to display activity.”

In addition to the static quality of these figures, the Emmet sisters include references that link their murals to connotations associated with traditional allegorical figures such as the *Victory of Samothrace* in Emmet’s mural and a figure representing the Republic in Emmet Sherwood’s work. The particular reference (*Victory of Samothrace*), according to Corn, conveys a “metaphor for female ambition, emancipation, and progress.” Corn admits that the figure representing the Republic looks much more real, since she is portrayed as “muscular and firm limbed.” Nevertheless, such an inclusion of an allegorical figure, even if limbed and muscular, along with the overall composition and placement of her figures, all makes the painting more likened to a painter’s studio full of women, both young and mature, waiting their turn to pose for the artist with various props on hand. The figures in the Emmet sisters’ murals possess traits very much akin to Alfred Stevens’ *In the Studio* (fig. 11) from 1888. Stevens depicts three women, one of whom is holding a palette and other instruments for painting in one hand (leaning on her canvas), while the other two women, a model and a visitor, are all presumably situated in the art studio of the painter. All three women, including the painter herself, are static, posed, and decorative, as if props in an ornate


35 Corn, *Eve’s Daughters*, 126.

36 Corn, *Eve’s Daughters*, 126. Corn associates the inclusion of the small *Victory of Samothrace* statue in Emmet’s mural as an allegory of sorts.

37 Corn, *Eve’s Daughters*, 126.
room rather than figures actively engaged in a painting session. There is a lack of reality to not only Stevens’ painting but also to the Emmet sisters’ murals.

Instead of conveying a sense of reality and presentness, the women within the Emmet sisters’ painting embody more closely the sentiments concerning women as expressed by such 19th century figures as Baudelaire, who in his essay of 1863 states: “Women is for the artist in general…an object of keenest admiration and curiosity…She is an idol, stupid perhaps, but dazzling and bewitching…Everything that adorns women that serves to show off her beauty is part of herself…”38 Griselda Pollock interprets Baudelaire’s views of the flâneur/artist to “position her as the object of the flâneur’s gaze,” since “women do not look.”39 The women of the Emmet sisters’ murals invite the viewer to look. At least one figure in each composition gazes out at us, but even so, they appear, like the other women in the composition, quite aloof and unapproachable, similar to the Gibson Girl types (fig. 12) that were very popular in the 1890s. The cool and detached air of the Gibson Girl, as described by Lynn Gordon, is present in the disposition of the women in both of the smaller Modern Woman murals.40 Donald Kuspit, in his article on the Gibson’s Girl, states that Charles Dana Gibson’s art extolls “woman as an idol” and lacks human essence.41 If so, the idol-like women depicted in the Emmet sisters’ murals, in addition to the inclusion of academic and traditional tropes,


make their paintings very much traditional in style. This hampers any stylistic reflection of ambition or emancipation that is evident in Cassatt’s mural of the same theme. Her initial response of doing something new and fun may seem somewhat insincere regarding the project and its significance to women and their work. However, Cassatt saw the opportunity to paint for a different venue and on a different kind of scale, while staying with the same subject matter prevalent in her work: the lives of women.\footnote{The mural does not include the lives of mothers and children which are so prevalent in her body of work. She instead portrays girls and young women in pursuit of knowledge/science, the Arts, and fame.}

Through her correspondences, including those with Hallowell and Palmer, Cassatt appeared quite determined to do her utmost to paint her vision of a modern woman. Cassatt’s mural, *Modern Woman*, is comprised of three sections, individually known as (grammar and capitalization as found in her script in a letter to Mrs. Palmer): *young girls pursuing fame* (left ‘panel’, fig. 13); *young women plucking the fruits of knowledge or science* (central, fig. 14); and the *Arts Music (nothing of St. Cecelia) Dancing* (right, fig. 15). When compared to the other five murals, Cassatt’s contribution exemplifies a ‘modern’ approach to painting, conveying modern, contemporary women. By ‘modern,’ particularly with this mural, she continued her approach to painting as influenced by her associations with the Impressionists. As Nochlin noted, Cassatt “actively participated in the most advanced painting movement of her time, Impressionism.”\footnote{Linda Nochlin, “Issues of Gender in Cassatt and Eakins,” Stephen F. Eisenman, ed. *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History*, 2nd edition (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), 299.} Impressionism, the beginning of modernism in the history of Western art, sought to challenge academic traditions by being independent of such institutions, as well as favoring aesthetic
innovation. Cassatt showed her openness to experimentation as seen in her recent set of prints of 1890/91, just a couple of years prior to the Exposition. Her experimentation continued in her mural: the flattening or less fully articulated dimensional aspects, coloration, simplification, and subject matter, all reflect a modern investigation. She, along with the other Impressionists, desired a modern visual idiom of form, space, and technique, in order to convey modern society. This desire would be fully realized in Cassatt’s mural of *Modern Woman*.

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44 Webster, *Eve’s Daughter*, 22.
CHAPTER 4: MARY CASSATT’S MURAL, MODERN WOMAN

Mary Cassatt’s mural, *Modern Woman*, is “modern” in more ways than one. Her association with the modern movement of Impressionism is reflected in the mural with a shift away from incorporating traditional allegorical visual modes of representation to a more realistic and contemporary context relating modern life. In addition to the subject matter - a contemporary space with depicting only women in varied activities - her experimentation with stylistic influences within and beyond the Western tradition also reflects a modernist painting.¹ The term “modern” is multifaceted in its definitions and usages. A definition of sorts by Baudelaire in his essay, “The Painter of Modern Life,” published in *Le Figaro* in 1863, may be apropos. He noted that ‘modernité’ is not just the regarding of the here and now, but rather a particular attitude toward the present. To be more specific, Baudelaire’s definition connotes the “ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.”²

¹ The influences of such non-traditional western art like that of Japanese woodblock prints are evident in the mural. In addition, Cassatt may have been influenced by such avant-garde groups as the Symbolists and Nabis, as inferred by Webster, Barter, and Corn. Webster, *Eve’s Daughter*, 131. Webster notes that Cassatt’s utilizing multiple sources to generate her mural image is like that of the Nabis. Mary Cassatt, Judith A. Barter, and Erica E. Hirshler, *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman*. (New York: Art Institute of Chicago in association with H.N. Abrams, 1998), 87. “Perhaps she felt encouraged by the new climate for decorative painting among the Parisian avant-garde, especially among the Nabis group…” Of course, the artists such as Degas and Pissaro in the Impressionist group showed disdain for such decorative works. Corn, *Women Building History*, 137. Corn does not make a direct correlation but rather mentions the similarities of her mural’s flatness and pattern which is evident in symbolists’ and post-impressionists’ works. Personally, for not only Cassatt but also for the Symbolists and Post-Impressionists, they were all influenced by the eras’ fascination with Japanese art (prints); and therefore, it is not surprising that both attributes of flatness and juxtapositions of pattern are displayed in more than one artist and styles.

In Cassatt’s work, Baudelaire’s definition that includes the ephemeral and the immutable can be found.\(^3\) However, in common with other modernist painters such as Manet, Cassatt emphasizes modern traits more so than traditional ones as evident especially in her works after her association with the Impressionists. The modernist traits are more apparent in her mural, *Modern Woman*, rather than the other five murals in the Hall of Honors. Even so, Cassatt felt the additional tension of being an Impressionist painter rather than a traditional academic one, and yet, the occasion called for a mural decorator. Her struggle is evident in her enigmatic and puzzling mural which tries to reconcile these two polar opposites.

The purpose of this chapter’s investigation in this particular mural is not to reduce it to one possible interpretation but instead to show that her work is complex: that it is not just a decoration, nor is it to serve only as a means to develop a modern allegory, but also as an extension of Cassatt’s oeuvre. What is consistent to her body of work is her regard and depiction of women and their lives differently from the Baudelairian view of women as objects for the flâneur/artist’s gaze. Cassatt, *Modern Woman*, as well as her overall body of work, celebrating women and their lives are all quite radical for her time, especially when considering the prevalent sentiments regarding women as expressed by such men as Renoir, Jules and Gustave Simon, and Baudelaire.

**Content: Allegory or Real?**

Out of the six muralists, Cassatt relies less on traditional allegorical imagery to compose her visual message. Among the other pictorial and sculptural works in the Exposition, there were numerous allegorical examples. Wanda Corn notes that this

\(^3\) Havemeyer, *Sixteen to Sixty*, 278. Havemeyer quotes Cassatt relaying such sentiments.
allegorical approach was the dominant artistic language and this symbolic means of reflecting virtues, vices, historical events, human strivings, continents, and nations in human form all was prevalent at the Exposition.\(^4\) She also points out that allegorical female representations were not usually associated with labor unless it was related to such endeavors associated with motherhood, fertility, education, arts and crafts, and as nuns for charity.\(^5\) In addition, Lovell, in her article, *Picturing a City*, points out that the majority of the female figures depicted in the art of the Exposition in general tended to be “voluptuous allegorical goddesses.”\(^6\)

For MacMonnies, in her letter to Mrs. Palmer on January 23, 1893, she explicitly states that her mural is “entirely allegorical-symbolical-representation of an idea – not a picture of any particular epoch or people,” as well as the work being successful as a decoration.\(^7\) Judith Barter, in her chapter, “Mary Cassatt: Themes, Sources, and the Modern Woman,” gives context to this difference by noting MacMonnies’ direct training in the studio of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes. In contrast, Cassatt, “had always been an easel painter associated with Impressionism and therefore with realism...A large, complicated allegory was not her stock in trade.”\(^8\) Cassatt’s *Modern Woman* is not allegorical in the traditional sense; instead, she, as an artist more accustomed to easel

\(^4\) Corn, *Eve’s Daughters*, 36.

\(^5\) Corn, *Eve’s Daughters*, 38.


painting, employs contemporary visual language to convey the multifaceted qualities of modern woman on a monumental scale required of a mural painting. According to Carr and Webster, Cassatt’s construction of a modern allegory was set in a “naturalist tradition of her Impressionist colleagues Pissarro, Berthe Morisot, and Gauguin,” versus the Arcadian construction by MacMonnies, and it is one aspect to convey modern woman.9

An examination of the three sections of her mural will show her attempts to reconcile the traditional usage of allegories and decorative style associated with contemporary murals, and her convictions as an Impressionist to show modern life in a contemporary visual language in her mural, Modern Woman.

**Examination of the three panels:**

Mary Cassatt’s tripartite shows a variety of activities carried out by girls and young women: on the left, there are three girls running after a fourth figure who is afloat; the center shows several girls and young women picking fruit; and the right consists of three young women in the middle of an artistic soirée. This portion of the chapter will address the variety of interpretations of these panels. In addition, I will continue to address the tension Cassatt may have felt between the allegorical and real in articulating these three scenes. Cassatt’s own words or lack thereof contribute to the numerous visual interpretations of the three scenes that comprise her mural, Modern Woman. She writes to Mrs. Palmer describing her work on October 11, 1892:

…for the subject of the central & largest composition young women plucking the fruits of knowledge or science & that enabled me to place my figures out of doors & allowed of brilliancy of color – I have tried to make

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the general effect as bright as gay as amusing as possible. The occasion is one of rejoicing, a great national fête. …the side panels for two compositions, one, which I shall begin immediately is, young girls pursuing fame – This seems to me very modern & besides will give me an opportunity for some figures in clinging draperies. The other panel will represent the Arts Music (nothing of St. Cecelia) d/Dancing & all treated in the most modern – The whole is surrounded by a border…with circles containing naked babies tossing fruit…I could take you only to my studio & show you what I have done that you would be pleased indeed…

It is no wonder that scholars such as Garfinkle have described Cassatt’s mural as enigmatic. Cassatt describes the young girls pursuing fame as a very modern thing to do, and yet, the benefit is not achieving fame but that depicting such an endeavor will allow her to paint some figures in clinging draperies. In addition, she presents the Arts without their traditional and obvious allegorical references, like St. Cecelia (who is identified with music and instruments) or with the attributes of the Muses – as Puvis would have done - in the right panel. Just as the three scenes are separated by a sizeable border, allowing for such independent activities, they also reinforce the lack of a cohesive conceptual continuum as found in MacMonnies’ work. This visual disconnect is not only obvious to us, but also to her contemporary viewers who found Cassatt’s mural puzzling.

An account recording Teresa Dean’s impression of the mural during a visit on April 18, 1893 to the Woman’s Building is indicative of the majority of responses. Dean writes that she “cannot understand Miss Cassatte’s [sic] picture,” even though she

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10 Cassatt, Letter to Mrs. Palmer on October 11, 1892. Letter. From Ryerson and Burnham Archives at the Art Institute of Chicago, The Bertha Honoré Palmer (1849-1918) Correspondence Collection, 1883-1899. A print of the full letter may be found in Cassatt a Retrospective ed. by Nancy Mathews, 186-88, and in Mathews’ Cassatt and Her Circle, Selected Letters, 237-239.


12 See Puvis’ Sacred Grove mural in Lyon.
acknowledges it as art, since Parisians confirm “Miss Cassatte as the greatest woman artist that America has ever sent over there.” Hallowell likewise celebrates Cassatt and her reputation in Europe, in addition to being aware of the vanguard movement like that of Impressionism, and she notes Cassatt as being one of the illustrious women artists of all time and “easily the best of our women painters.” She even goes further by stating, “From the beginning there have always been those who have stepped from out the ranks of women and stood beside men.” But these platitudes by Hallowell do not explain the content of Cassatt’s mural. Perhaps as Garfinkle remarks on these sections of the mural, the New Woman pursuing fame [left], knowledge [center], and creativity [right], all “solicit interpretations rather than just appreciating it purely for its decorative quality.”

The various interpretations for the three sections made by contemporary scholars will be addressed later in this chapter. However, one area in which the three panels seem to be in alignment is in the formal qualities that reflect a continuation of her associations with Impressionism, along with her interest in Japanese prints. There is relative shallowness of the space depicted and a flattening of the figures who are treated without much modeling. In addition, the bold color palette and flat patterns on the dresses of her figures all contribute to the overall lack of three-dimensionality. These visual traits, in addition to the brilliancy in color in Modern Woman, are reflective of Cassatt’s interest in

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13 Teresa Dean, White City Chips, 19-20.


16 Garfinkle, “Women at Work,” 164. Garfinkle does not provide a definition of “New Woman;” however, Corn discusses the diverse associations with the term in her monograph, Women Building History, 72-73, 128-129.
Japanese prints more so than other sources. Lucy Monroe states in her article printed in *The Critic* on April 15, 1893, that the work was painted flatly without shadows. Webster interprets such contemporary responses, and as evidenced in photographic documentation, that traits of flatness, broad areas of intense color, along with the emphasis on linearity in her mural, all convey a Japanese aesthetic. This aesthetic was commonly adopted by the Impressionists who employed the same visual language. Cassatt’s adaptation and interest in the Japanese aesthetic for her mural connects it to her greater body of work of the same time period.

The incorporation of a non-western aesthetic in Cassatt’s “modern” mural extends to her color palette. Contemporary viewers like Monroe noted the “dull red and of many gay and sunny colors in the costumes…in the coloring after all that this impressionist has shown herself a true decorator.” However, most commenters like Florence Fenwick Miller describe Cassatt’s work as “garish and primitive character of the colouring of this fresco cannot properly be appreciated from description…,” while Henry Brown Fuller states, “Miss Cassatt does not address the eye at all – she assaults it. Mrs. MacMonnies’ tone is light and silvery, while the impudent greens and brutal blues of Miss Cassatt seem

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17 I attribute the flatness, the usage of patterns, and the brilliancy in color to be reflective of her interest in Japanese prints rather than Italian Renaissance or Puvis, since all three traits are not associated with them.

18 Mathews, *Cassatt Retrospective*, 201.

19 Webster, *Eve’s Daughters*, 102.

20 Webster, *Eve’s Daughters*, 98.


to indicate an aggressive personality.”

Dean also shares that she was startled by the “heavy colors…which seemed out of all harmony.”

Cassatt scholars like Sweet describe her mural in the following manner that differs from her contemporary detractors, especially regarding her colors (fig. 16), “Mary Cassatt’s Chicago mural certainly brought out aspects of her style, or new developments in her style, that were not apparent before. …Japanese influence…emphasis on line, flat pattern, flowered dresses or wallpapers contrasting with simple areas, and the introduction of subtle color harmonies.”

Sweet is not the only scholar who notes the influence of Japanese prints. Barter notes Cassatt’s inspiration in Japanese art’s “bold linearity, evocative color harmonies,” while Webster comments on the flat decorative space at the expense of volumetric or perspectival development of form.

Even with these conflicting remarks, Cassatt seemed unaware of any color disharmonies or puzzlement in the interpretation of her mural. In her letter to Mrs. Palmer on October 11, 1892, when the center panel was nearly completed, she wrote, “I think, my dear Mrs. Palmer, that if you were here & I could take you only to my studio and show you what I have done that you would be pleased indeed without too much vanity I may say I am almost sure you would.”

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25 Sweet, Miss Mary Cassatt, 134.


27 Mary Cassatt to Mrs. Palmer, October 11, 1892. Letter. From Ryerson and Burnham Archives at the Art Institute of Chicago, The Bertha Honoré Palmer (1849-1918) Correspondence Collection, 1883-1899.
Center:

The central panel (fig. 14) was the first of the three sections to be completed by Cassatt. It shows an orchard-like setting, a bit too spare to be an actual orchard, whether it is of an apple or orange grove (one of the baskets look to be full of fruits smaller than apples), with girls and young women picking fruit. The environment, although with many more trees than the other two panels, is still spare and flat, especially in the areas of grass, a dominant feature in the composition. At the same time, the work matches the horizon line of the Left and Right sections. Women in orchards and even picking fruit from trees are not atypical of a subject matter by muralists such as Puvis de Chavannes, who painted such work in, among other murals, *Inter artes et Naturam* (smaller version) of 1889 (fig. 4). Puvis’ imaginary Arcadian scene, with men and women in harmony with nature and one another, shows their different duties. Corn observes that the women of Cassatt’s central panel, in a scene absent of men, are ‘deeply aligned with nature, picking apples from trees.’ However, Cassatt’s version does not convey the idealized classicism that Puvis’ work embodies, but rather a reality that makes the young women and girls believable in their task.

28 Mary Cassatt to Mrs. Palmer, October 11, 1892. Letter. From Ryerson and Burnham Archives at the Art Institute of Chicago, The Bertha Honoré Palmer (1849-1918) Correspondence Collection, 1883-1899. Cassatt states, “My central canvas I hope to finish in a few days.” Therefore, making the center section almost complete at the middle of October of 1892 with Cassatt stating in a later correspondence on Dec. 1st of the same year that “I have one of the sides well under way & I hope to have the whole finished in time for you to have it up and out of the way by the end of February.”


Again, one of the baskets seems to include smaller fruits like cherries or plums. This does not necessarily negate the Eve and Eden reference, since Genesis only states that Adam and Eve were not to eat fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, without stating what type of fruit tree, though traditionally linked with an apple tree.
For many scholars, like Corn, Webster, and Nochlin, Cassatt’s motivation for this section was to reclaim Eve from her traditional association of bringing sin to Eden and humankind, and instead, as also representing the first woman who desired knowledge.\textsuperscript{31} Hutton, in his interpretation of Cassatt’s mural regarding Eve, references the statement made by Maud Howe Elliott: “Woman the acknowledged equal of man; his true helpmate…We have eaten of the fruit of the tree of knowledge and the Eden of idleness is hateful to us. We claim our inheritance, and are become workers, not cumberers of the earth.”\textsuperscript{32} This quote in particular has been used by Webster, Hutton, and others alike to portray Cassatt as reclaiming Eve from her associations as a “prop for social and legal subordination of women” to that of an empowered protagonist symbolizing female independence.\textsuperscript{33} During this time period, women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton promoted a similarly revised theological interpretation of Eve in her publication of 1895, \textit{The Woman’s Bible}.\textsuperscript{34}

However, I offer two possible additions to this allegorical interpretation by scholars like Hutton and Webster, among others. The first interpretation is that perhaps there is no allegorical reference to Eve at all, or Cassatt minimizes this connotation by placing the girls and young women in the orchard picking fruit as if engaging in an everyday activity. Cassatt did not state that her central panel portrays her reformation of Eve, and in addition, painters of both sexes contemporary to Cassatt (Puvis de

\begin{footnotes}
\item[33] Hutton, “Picking Fruit,” 322. Hutton points to 19\textsuperscript{th} century writings such as Eliza Sharples who believed Eve to embody “Sweet and Fair Liberty” and even in the novel, \textit{Shirley} (1849), by Charlotte Bronte, where the protagonist sought to rehabilitate Eve.
\item[34] Webster, \textit{Eve’s Daughter}, 77.
\end{footnotes}
Chavannes, Pissarro, and Berthe Morisot) all portrayed women in a garden or orchard gathering fruit without such an explicit connotation. Florence Fenwick Miller, a contemporary British writer on art, described the central panel in 1893 in the following manner: “The central panel...shows ‘Modern Woman’ engaged in no more characteristic an occupation than gathering apples off trees.” Miller makes no association of “knowledge” with the Tree of Knowledge.

Cassatt’s other works depicting a similar subject matter, like Young Women Picking Fruit (fig. 17), painted in 1891, and Baby Reaching for an Apple of 1893 (fig. 18), reflect her disinterest in implementing allegories or referring to such biblical narratives. The 1891 painting was done the year before she was approached to do the mural. The two women depicted seem to be in a private conversation, while the one standing reaches for a fruit. The emphasis here is more of their closeness, and the viewer seems to be intruding into their space. The painting is of a young mother or caretaker helping the baby reach for an apple which also shows this intimacy. Yeh states in her article (in regards to Cassatt’s work dealing with mother and child images) that Cassatt strips away “time-honored spiritual baggage” (of Mary and Christ Child).

It is plausible then, as Mathews and Webster note, that this central section depicts Cassatt’s desire to

35 Cassatt describes the central panel to Mrs. Palmer as: “young women plucking the fruits of knowledge or science...I have tried to make the general effect as bright as gay as amusing as possible. The occasion is one of rejoicing, a great national fête.” See, Cassatt, Letter to Mrs. Palmer on October 11, 1892. Letter. From Ryerson and Burnham Archives at the Art Institute of Chicago, The Bertha Honoré Palmer (1849-1918) Correspondence Collection, 1883-1899.


37 Cassatt uses “knowledge or science” in her explanation, implying one or the other or one as the other without capitalizations for either word. Therefore, not a direct reference to the Tree of Knowledge.

depict a real space: a scene that is right in front of her at her studio in Bachivillers. Mathews states that Cassatt posed her models directly in front of the mural instead of working from smaller sketches. It seems that Cassatt even housed them in many of the rooms at the château. The central panel, based on models wearing contemporary garments, and engaged in an activity of gathering fruit, may be less about Eve than about the work at hand.

The garments worn by the girls and young women also support their activity. They are dressed in contemporary dresses that are loose and more comfortable for their task. Hutton states the following regarding Cassatt’s dresses, “[her] women wear fuller garments; the outlines are looser and more rounded…they are contemporary clothing, revised to allow for greater freedom of movement.” Webster furthers this assessment by providing a possible context for Cassatt’s looser dresses, “While often fitted at the waist, these are uncorseted dresses and as such reflect the health concerns of the dress reform movement.”

In her letter to Mrs. Palmer on October 11, 1892, Cassatt explicitly states that, in her mural, the figures of modern women were depicted in contemporary fashion. She wrote the following as she addressed the misperception of the intent of her work, as printed in one of the New York papers, in addition to her own vision for the mural:

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41 Hutton, “Picking Fruit,” 343.
42 Webster, Eve’s Daughter, 81. Citation in her book lists other sources for information on dress reform.
43 Mary Cassatt to Mrs. Palmer on October 11, 1892. Letter. From Ryerson and Burnham Archives at the Art Institute of Chicago, The Bertha Honoré Palmer (1849-1918) Correspondence Collection, 1883-1899.
“…the writer [New York paper] referring to the order given to me, said my subject was to be ‘The modern woman as glorified by Worth’! That would hardly describe my idea, of course I have tried to express the modern woman in the fashions of our day and have tried to represent those fashions as accurately and as much in detail as possible.”

Cassatt dressed her figures in the latest contemporary fashion, but not so much as to reflect the fashionable elite class. In a most obvious and direct manner, Cassatt dresses her women to convey the sense of the present time while at the same time, the reality of plucking and gathering fruit. François Tétart-Vittu in his chapter on fashion states that “from the late 1860s to about 1880, the woman and her dress were these painters’ favorite inspiration.” If this is the case, then Cassatt uses these contemporary dressed girls and young women to counter the types of painting, where not only is the “symbiotic relationship between painter and costumer apparent,” but rather they are no longer decorative in fashion, but instead active agents of modernity. These females are not the classicized or idealized examples to gaze upon and admire; they are simply going about their work. Cassatt has proposed in this section of the mural a social practice of work with and by females who are independent of men.

The second possible interpretation in the discourse of whether the central panel is an allegorical representation or not, is that perhaps, the allegory is not so much regarding

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44 Mary Cassatt to Mrs. Palmer, October 11, 1892. Letter. From Ryerson and Burnham Archives at the Art Institute of Chicago, The Bertha Honoré Palmer (1849-1918) Correspondence Collection, 1883-1899. Webster, Eve’s Daughter, 81. The “writer” of the article for the paper is noted in Sally Webster’s monograph as Mariana Van Rensselaer.


47 Pollock, Vision and Difference, 93. Pollock states that “The spaces of femininity are those from which femininity is lived as a positionality in discourse and social practice.”
Eve, but that it reflects (as do the other side panels) emblems of the United States.

Cassatt was an expatriate for decades, and yet, she was asked to paint a decorative mural for a world exposition in the United States. The fruit orchard, or as Miller noted apple trees, may relate to Americana - such as the legend of Jonny Appleseed who introduced apple trees all over the Midwest and even Cassatt’s home state of Pennsylvania. The reason for this suggestion is that there is another Americana reference in the central panel: the turkey. There seems to be two at the foreground of this panel near the feet of the central group of women (fig. 16). The turkey is only native to North America and regarded by some like Benjamin Franklin, according the Franklin Institute’s website, who believed that the bird is much more respectable than the eagle. Cassatt’s inclusion of these birds goes unexplained, and if this was not enigmatic enough, she paints other birds in the left panel, “young girls pursuing fame.”

**Left section: young girls pursuing f/Fame**

“I am beginning to feel the strain a little…I have been shut up here so long now with one idea, that I am no longer capable of judging what I have done.”

Cassatt conveys these sentiments to Mrs. Palmer about two months after her letter written in October conveying much excitement of her central panel as well as relaying her plans for the side panels. In her earlier letter to Palmer, Cassatt explains that these girls are pursuing fame, in addition to stating that she, for this specific section, can show figures with clothing clinging to the body. She achieves this with the three girls in

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49 Mary Cassatt to Mrs. Palmer, December 1, 1892. Letter. From Ryerson and Burnham Archives at the Art Institute of Chicago, The Bertha Honoré Palmer (1849-1918) Correspondence Collection, 1883-1899.

50 Mary Cassatt to Mrs. Palmer, October 11, 1892. Letter. From Ryerson and Burnham Archives at the Art Institute of Chicago, The Bertha Honoré Palmer (1849-1918) Correspondence Collection, 1883-1899. Cassatt states that young girls pursuing fame is to her very modern (no further explanation), and that this
contemporary clothing running after what seems to be a fourth girl or Fame who may be nude or perhaps wears a diaphanous, see-through gown, and who is floating or flying away with perhaps (not exactly visible but assumed) a horn in her hands. These girls are running, according to Corn, since they are chased by a gaggle of geese or ducks. Cassatt certainly could not be referencing such works like Boethius’ *Boy Strangling a Goose* (several copies), or Julien Dupré’s *Children Feeding Geese* (1881), in the Museum of Fine Art in Boston, or even Camille Pissaro’s *Little Goose Girl* (1886) with her inclusion of geese or ducks in her composition. These examples are tending to, feeding, or strangling a goose or geese. Cassatt’s scene shows the birds chasing after the girls. Perhaps, she is not referencing a visual work, but rather, a children’s game of “duck, duck, goose.” The game, where a child chases another child, is at least by some accounts, is a Scandinavian game brought to the United States (Minnesota) by Swedish immigrants. This running game may even help to explain the three girls who themselves are chasing after a floating figure of another girl or Fame.

This activity of running allows Cassatt’s to depict these girls in clothing clinging close to the body. She does not give a clear explanation as to why this is important to her, but the style of the dress, loose and forgiving (as well as clinging when running), helps to convey a sense of freedom of movement. Webster goes on to state that the girls are presented in a very atypical manner. She notes Mary Terhune’s treatise and Dio Lewis’ writings in the late 1800s in which they categorize running among other ‘extreme’ will give her an “opportunity for some figures in clinging draperies.” I suggest perhaps that the clinging draperies have more to do with the realistic portrayal of movement and flight than something more metaphorical.

51 Corn, Women Building History, 139. Corn suggests that the nude figure is based on such previous depictions of Fame, from Pompeii.

52 See https://julieglover.com/tag/duck-duck-goose-origin/
activities that young girls should be dissuaded from doing lest they be mistaken for the working class.\textsuperscript{53} They are not the prim and proper young ladies or girls of the middle to upper classes.

Another puzzling aspect in this section is the girl/Fame floating or flying upward in the sky. Some scholars like Corn and Webster consider this figure to represent Fame of Greek mythology. However, Cassatt explicitly writes, “fame” as not capitalized in her letter to Mrs. Palmer describing this panel.\textsuperscript{54} Fame is found in Greco-Roman mythology and she is usually visualized as a winged female with a horn.\textsuperscript{55} Maud Howe Elliott contributes to the interpretation of the flying figure as Fame in her chapter on the Woman’s Building: “On the left we have \textit{F}ame, a flying figure, pursued by a flock of ducks and women.”\textsuperscript{56}

However, Cassatt’s letter suggests otherwise, as Garfinkle also notes that Cassatt does not capitalize the word “fame” (unlike the words Art and Music) in the same correspondence. Therefore, the supposed allegorical figure as interpreted by scholars like Corn and Webster “may be actually an individual who is herself pursuing fame and has

\textsuperscript{53} Webster, \textit{Eve’s Daughters}, 86. Webster notes Mary Terhune's treatise, \textit{Common Sense for Maid, Wife, and Mother} (1882), and Dio Lewis in her book, \textit{Our Girls} (1871): “It was also feared that if a young girl 'looks strong and moves with a will, she will be mistaken for a worker, for a servant.'”

\textsuperscript{54} Corn, \textit{Women Building History}, 138, 141. Corn notes that Cassatt’s Fame was converted from a winged cupid to a more corporeal version and she has a horn raised in her hands which is a traditional attribute for Fame which were supposedly acknowledged by contemporaries. Unfortunately, she does not give any examples or any citations.

Webster, \textit{Eve’s Daughters}, 84-85. Webster notes that the floating/flying figure is highly untraditional and therefore difficult to identify if it were not for Cassatt designating as such in her letter.

\textsuperscript{55} Corn, \textit{Women Building History}, 139. See example in Rudolf Friedrich August Henneberg’s painting of 1868.

\textsuperscript{56} Elliott, \textit{Art and Handicraft}, 45. This sentence is the only descriptor made by Elliott on this section of Cassatt’s mural. Elliott capitalizes Fame. Even though she is directly associated with the endeavors of the BLM and is present at the Exposition, she mistakenly describes the females chasing after Fame as women even though photo documents of this section clearly shows girls rather than women.
taken flight upon attaining it,” as Garfinkle suggests.\textsuperscript{57} Perhaps the inclusion of such a theme in \textit{Modern Woman} is self-referential due to her own pursuit of fame. Cassatt’s mother, writing to Aleck her brother just a year before Cassatt begins working on the mural, states, “Mary is at work again, intent on fame and money she says, and count on her fellow countrymen now that she has made reputation here [Paris].”\textsuperscript{58}

How and why the girls chasing after a fourth girl or Fame or even the birds (turkeys, geese or ducks) relate to women’s work is not explained.\textsuperscript{59} It is also interesting to note, when compared to the other sections, that in this panel, only girls are depicted. The right section only includes young women, while the center depicts both girls and young women, with neither section showing more mature, older women. Griselda Pollock states that these three panels may suggest the “Ages of Woman – Childhood, Youth, and Maturity – as well as representation of Work and Play.”\textsuperscript{60} Cassatt’s reason for segmenting and allocating the different ages within a woman’s life is unclear, and the only certain, even if difficult to decipher, aspect of Cassatt’s intention is that for this activity of the girls pursuing fame, it is a “very modern thing to do.”\textsuperscript{61} Cassatt has generated imagery that is more modern, not only in the sense of reinvention, but also perhaps of being self-referential.

\textsuperscript{57} Garfinkle, “Women and Work,” 176.

\textsuperscript{58} Mathews, \textit{Cassatt and Her Circle}, 222.

\textsuperscript{59} Garfinkle, “Women at Work,” 177. Regarding the birds see from around pages 164 and on for various interpretations both contemporary to Cassatt and up to the present.

\textsuperscript{60} Griselda Pollock, Mary Cassatt: \textit{Painter of Modern Women}, (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1998), 48. I do not believe that Cassatt intended to demarcate the sections with specific age groups to show the Ages of Women since the right section includes females in similar ages compared to those in the middle panel with no depictions of older women.

\textsuperscript{61} Mary Cassatt to Mrs. Palmer, October 11, 1892. Letter. From Ryerson and Burnham Archives at the Art Institute of Chicago, The Bertha Honoré Palmer (1849-1918) Correspondence Collection, 1883-1899.
**Right panel:**

“The other panel will represent the Arts, Music (nothing of St. Cecilia) Dancing & all treated in the most modern – The whole is surrounded by a border, wide below narrower above…”

The right panel (fig. 15) of Cassatt’s mural depicts three young women gathered around one another and involved in different activities. One young woman stands in front of the other two, holding up her skirt with her hands. A second woman sits and plays the banjo, and the third sits to observe her companions. Cassatt’s description of this section is quite brief and puzzling as related to her notion of “most modern,” which she asserts again in the same letter when describing the girls pursuing fame in the left panel. Cassatt also explicitly states, even though in parenthesis, that she includes “nothing of St. Cecelia.” St. Cecilia is a patron of the arts and is usually depicted with instruments to represent or personify music as seen in such contemporary paintings as John William Waterhouse’s 1895 work, *St. Cecilia* (fig. 19). In Waterhouse’s painting, St. Cecilia is asleep in a chair while two angels play stringed instruments in front of her.

According to Mathews and Webster, the young woman playing the banjo, a common feature of “polite drawing rooms” in the 1880s, may be another example of

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62 Mary Cassatt to Mrs. Palmer, October 11, 1892. Letter. From Ryerson and Burnham Archives at the Art Institute of Chicago, The Bertha Honoré Palmer (1849-1918) Correspondence Collection, 1883-1899. The reference to “Worth” from the article, as restated by Cassatt in her letter, is the name of the fashionable English designer, Charles Frederick Worth, who established his fashion salon in Paris in 1858. Fashion in Paris, as viewed by Brevik-Zender, contributed to the sense of modernity in the late 19th century (see Heidi Brevik-Zender, *Fashioning Spaces: Mode and Modernity in Late Nineteenth-century Paris* [Toronto: University of Toronto, 2015], 7). Even so, it is puzzling why Cassatt would try to show the “ideals” of the age in an act of labor. Perhaps she intended less of the ideals as much as trying to portray modern life for middle to upper class women who are depicted in the act of labor (picking or plucking fruit).

63 Peter Trippi, *J. W. Waterhouse*, (New York: Phaidon, 2002), 138. There are numerous examples depicting St. Cecilia in the History of Art. Waterhouse’s painting is contemporary to that of Cassatt’s mural. The painting has shown at the Royal Academy (1895) and the National Portrait Gallery, but since 2000, it has been in a private collection.
updating the traditional allegorical representation of music. Other interpretations may explain the inclusion of a banjo player: First, the banjo may continue Cassatt’s desired Americana theme found in the other panels, with the exception of it not being ornithology related. In this section, the inclusion of the banjo, an instrument that is acknowledged as African in origin, was brought to the United States and elsewhere through the slave trade. It may have been a common feature in drawing rooms at the end of the 19th century, but the banjo and banjo-like instruments have been documented in the United States in South Carolina in the 18th century. Second, the banjo by Cassatt’s time may have been more common in middle to upper-class drawing rooms in France, since the instrument was noted in a Parisian report on May 4, 1654. If this is true, then perhaps, the young ladies playing the banjo convey no references to the United States or as a personification of Music but instead of St. Cecilia. Cassatt’s other works of the same subject matter like The Banjo Lesson (fig. 20), ca. 1893, shows a younger sister overlooking the shoulder of her older sister playing the banjo on her lap very similarly to the one in the mural. This version has no connotation of a reinterpreted traditional allegory. They are two sisters learning and enjoying the banjo.


68 There are at least three pastel works or studies of one or both of the females depicted in the print version playing the banjo. One of the three is entitled, “The Two Sisters.” They are all dated, 1893/1894. See Barter, Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman, 296-297.
Garfinkle comments that this section is depicted without any traditional attributes.\textsuperscript{69} There is no “Fame/fame” as in the left panel or any possible associations to Eve as proposed by scholars interpreting the center panel.\textsuperscript{70} However, scholars differ in their interpretation of this right panel. Webster, in regards to the figure observing the other two women in artistic activities is a personification of Art.\textsuperscript{71} The usage and reinterpretations of traditional personifications by Cassatt may be another instance of her reinventing motifs for modern viewers, as evidenced in the other two sections. However, if this is true, surely her contemporaries would not have been so puzzled by the work. Hutton, who believes that the mural is clearly an allegorical representation, also notes that her contemporary critics found no allegory in it.\textsuperscript{72} One article, printed in \textit{The Art Amateur} on June 1893, states that the central panel may be “a very beautiful piece of work” but the “two end panels are more or less ridiculous.”\textsuperscript{73} Other similar statements made by the critics were even less generous. Corn notes that no other painting at the Exposition drew such fire.\textsuperscript{74}

Cassatt’s right panel depicting three women, one of whom is standing and dancing, may have contributed to such negative responses. Skirt dancing developed in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century based on classical ballet and popular step dancing which became

\textsuperscript{69} Garfinkle, “Women at Work,” 177.
\textsuperscript{70} Mathews, \textit{Mary Cassatt: A Life}, 209. Mathews makes a case for the observing woman to personify Art as an art lover.
\textsuperscript{71} Webster, \textit{Eve’s Daughter}, 92 and 96.
\textsuperscript{72} Hutton, “Picking Fruit,” 335.
\textsuperscript{74} Corn, \textit{Women Building History}, 172.
popular entertainment for European societies.\textsuperscript{75} By the 1890s, it had become a form of exercise for women and a “means of teaching grace, manners, and a sense of form.”\textsuperscript{76} Cassatt was obviously aware of this new trend in exercise or entertainment and included such an activity in this panel portraying the arts. For this particular section, Bertha Palmer’s concern over Cassatt’s dancing figure outweighed any of the enigmatic and puzzling modernized allegories associated with this panel.\textsuperscript{77} Palmer may have feared that the skirt dancer would scandalize American viewers who were much more conservative than art viewers in Paris.\textsuperscript{78} By the time Palmer received Cassatt’s mural, Palmer makes no further (documented) comments regarding the skirt dancer, nor are there disparaging remarks specifically aimed at the dancer by viewers. Instead, comments in general about the odd postures of Cassatt’s figures may apply to the dancer.\textsuperscript{79} By Garfinkle’s estimation, Cassatt’s dancer is more refined than the “music-hall version…which reveals glimpses of the leg…while the dancer performs a slow pirouette.”\textsuperscript{80} However, the figure’s pose is less graceful than depictions of dancers as found in Mary Means’ mural

\textsuperscript{75} Corn, \textit{Women Building History}, 137.


\textsuperscript{77} Webster, \textit{Eve’s Daughter}, 92. According to Webster, both banjo playing and skirt dancing signified modernity in the early 1890s. She gives no citation or further discussion on the matter of why these are signifiers.

\textsuperscript{78} Mrs. Palmer to MacMonnies, January 4, 1892.\textsuperscript{*} Letter. From Ryerson and Burnham Archives at the Art Institute of Chicago, The Bertha Honoré Palmer (1849-1918) Correspondence Collection, 1883-1899. \textsuperscript{*} 1893 is the logical year also amended in the finding aid. Mrs. Palmer after making a request to MacMonnies to clothe her figures since “semi-nudity attracts much more comment than it would in an art center like Paris” points out to MacMonnies that Cassatt’s figures are clothed and even in modern dress, Cassatt’s females do not even have a “…decolite gown assigned to modern women. Perhaps the skirt dancer, which we are to receive later, may show more latitude in that direction.”


\textsuperscript{80} Garfinkle, “Women at Work,” 178.
(fig. 21) in the Illinois State Building.\textsuperscript{81} In Cassatt’s figure, rather than the tension between types of dresses, contemporary or classical, it is the manner in which the dancer holds her dress. It is done in such a way that is unbefitting respectable women, unlike the photograph (included in Corn’s book) of Smith College women (fig. 22). These young women hold their upper-dress hems to the side, as in Letty Lind’s or Loie Fuller’s skirt dance photos (figs. 23 and 24), where the under layers of dresses cover the dancers’ legs. Instead Cassatt’s dancer seems to fully expose herself to her companions by lifting what appears to be the front of the dress.\textsuperscript{82} This is puzzling, since Cassatt has shown her command of perspective in her body of work, in addition to being a good draftswoman. I doubt, even if the pose seems to convey such a shocking display, that Cassatt intended for the dancer to connote such an inference. Instead, it may be due to the dancer’s orientation towards the other women in the composition that creates an odd pose; the banjo player looks down at her instrument, the observer seems to be gazing towards both performers and the skirt dancer is facing inward toward the other two – they are in a world of their own.

It is important to reiterate this last point: that Cassatt creates these visual worlds as a world without men. In so doing, Cassatt continues what is prevalent in her oeuvre prior to the Exposition – works focusing on the lives of women. Yeh points out that Cassatt’s work became heavily associated with themes of women’s friendships with other women and their autonomy from men.\textsuperscript{83} We as the viewers are outsiders looking into

\textsuperscript{81} Corn, \textit{Women Building History}, 149, 151. Image in black and white included in Corn’s book.

\textsuperscript{82} Webster, \textit{Eve’s Daughter}, 94, 95. Photos included.

\textsuperscript{83} Yeh, “Mary Cassatt’s Images,” 361.
their soirée. The skirt dancer is performing not for us, viewers looking in, but rather for her companions in the scene. Within the circle, the viewer who is appreciating her companions’ dancing and/or playing the banjo is not a male but a female. This type of intimacy is very common in Cassatt’s body of work, in which she portrays women and their daily lives and varied activities. *Young Women Picking Fruit* (fig. 17) of 1891, *Baby Picking and Apple* (1893, fig. 18), and *The Banjo Lesson* (fig. 20) of ca.1893, all reflect such an intimacy and spaces for women.

The sections in Cassatt’s *Modern Woman* reflect perhaps Cassatt’s struggle of working out her composition while acknowledging the decorative nature of murals. Yet, she could not paint in such an unnatural and decorative manner, which would have been contrary to her work. She may have reinterpreted or reassigned traditional allegorical traditions of Fame/fame, Eve, and Music but by doing so, her mural gave contemporary viewers an unclear meaning. This therefore demonstrated her Impressionist principles, as those artists rejected academic subjects (including the usage of allegory), techniques, and institutions.84

Hutton, in his article on Cassatt’s mural, notes that hers differs from the other muralists’ works in not only the “boldness of its palette,” but also in the “valorization of the right of woman to *act*-apart from men.”85 The active nature of her three sections – girls *running* or *pursuing*; girls and young women *plucking* fruit as laborers, and young women *dancing* or *playing* the banjo – are all done without the presence of men. These

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84 Hutton, “Picking Fruit,” 337. Hutton notes that the women (Cassatt, Bracquemond, Morisot) associated with the Impressionists had demonstrated such Impressionist tendencies, but that they also reinvented their women subject matter to embody a synergistic nature by “…break(ing) down the barrier between ‘timeless’ allegory and the living world of contemporary women.”

85 Hutton, “Picking Fruit,” 338.
girls and young women are independent and active in their vocations. Yeh also reiterates the same sentiment concerning Cassatt’s woman-centered art that portrays women complete within themselves. Cassatt’s mural is void of, as Hutton notes, “the clutter of iconic tokens and virtues,” as associated with the figures personified in the other murals. Her figures are not idealized or classicized like those by MacMonnies. Instead, they convey a sense of reality that reflects Cassatt’s sincerity as a painter of modern life. Georges Lecomte in 1892 writes in *L’Art Impressioniste d’après la collection privée de M. Durand-Ruel*: “Always, Miss Cassatt avoids compromising their sincerity with conventional prettinesses…Her art maintains its distinction as well as its truth.” Lecomte’s traits regarding Cassatt’s work could also apply to her mural: the girls and young women portrayed are distinct – they are real, modern women.

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86 Yeh, “Mary Cassatt’s Images,” 359.

87 Hutton, “Picking Fruit,” 343.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

“The Exposition will thus benefit women, not alone by means of the material objects brought together, but there will be a more lasting and permanent result through the interchange of thought and sympathy among influential and leading women of all countries, now for the first time working together with a common purpose and an established means of communication.”

Bertha Palmer and the women who contributed to the fruition of the Woman’s Building at the World Columbian Exposition in 1893 envisioned an endeavor benefitting women well beyond the Exposition. They desired to further women and their work in a more lasting setting than the temporary exposition. This unfortunately did not materialize in a permanent building to exhibit works of art and handicrafts by women, as Palmer had originally hoped. However, Cassatt’s *Modern Woman*, as part of her larger body of work, has established her legacy within and her contribution to the history of art. Mary Cassatt’s 1913 biography by Achille Segard, *Mary Cassatt: Un peintre des enfants et des mères*, highlights her investment in the lives of women by painting them, in this case as mothers and infants. Cassatt’s keen interest in portraying women and their lives, in addition to her view that great works of art possessed a ‘modern note,’ contributed to her self-identity as a progressive, and furthered the Impressionist movement.

Cassatt promoted not only the vanguard artistic movement but also the dignity of women artists and the lives of women as something to celebrate. As an artist, she lived and worked during a crucial moment in history, not only during the early women’s rights movement in the West but also of the onset of modern art. Her mural, *Modern Woman*,

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1 Elliott, *Art and Handicraft*, 30. Part of Bertha Palmer’s Inaugural address at the opening of the Woman’s Building at the World Columbian Exposition

that includes three sections conveying the pursuit of fame, knowledge, and the Arts, all for the World Columbian Exposition, may not have been favorably received in 1893. However, Cassatt’s feminist convictions and her modernist interests are reflected in her openness to experimentation as well as in her practice of portraying the lives of modern women in a realistic and non-objectified manner. Perhaps from a 21st century perspective, Cassatt’s work and convictions may not seem radical, but if we understand her and her work in the context of her era, the attributes of “progressive” and “radical” would be befitting.

These explorations and attempts to reconcile the various influences in Cassatt’s *Modern Woman* categorize this mural not so much as a decoration but rather as a painting that portrays activities of modern life by showing pursuits and activities of young women in the late 19th century in the new and more modernist style of painting. Cassatt continues the mural’s subject matter of women being out in the garden or outdoors picking fruit, young women playing banjo, even after the exposition. *The Kitchen Garden* (print) and *Women Picking Fruit* (painting) both of 1893; *The Banjo Lesson*, *The Two Sisters*, and *Girl with a Banjo* – all pastels done in 1893/94; *The Banjo Lesson* (print) of c. 1893; are all independent of men.

Cassatt’s mural, *Modern Women*, expresses the vision of women in the late 19th century who were involved in creating a space for women by women in the Woman’s Building of 1893. Bertha Palmer, the Board of Lady Managers, and the women who desired equal compensation for work, among other feminine and feminist issues, sought

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3 Pollock, *Mary Cassatt*, 65. Pollock states, in regards to the mural and the related paintings, that the American public were not familiar with “new painting” as those in Paris would be especially due to Cassatt’s role in contributing to and advocating modern French art.
to celebrate the contributions of women throughout history. Cassatt’s mural is representative of the dignity and humanness of women. The women’s building in both the Centennial and Columbian Expositions reflect the coming progressive age for women in the twentieth-century. These public spaces for women allowed their voices to be heard, not only among women, but also for a global audience. These gendered spaces created a place for women to share, express, and debate their place in society. For Mary Cassatt, women are able to look at one another, in their own world, no longer considering themselves as decorations to be gazed upon, but rather as real persons active in their own lives.
Bibliography


Dean, Teresa. *White City Chips* (collection of printed articles for the Chicago ---), as a
book in 1895 but initial print was done between April and through October of 1893.


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