

MARY CASSATT AND THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Rev. Kowalski, 10/6/19

If you had wandered into Chicago's Art Institute at just the right time, you could have seen "The Studio of the South," an exhibition featuring the paintings of Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh. The idea for showing their work in tandem arose from the fact that they shared quarters and painted together for a brief nine weeks in the year 1888 in the south of France. It was an experiment that began with high hopes. Vincent initially envisioned it as the beginning of an artistic colony, where kindred spirits could support each other emotionally and financially in their creative enterprises. But like so many high-minded ventures, this one fell flat. After a series of increasingly heated disagreements, Van Gogh recklessly threatened Gauguin with a razor, then in a fit of remorse later that same night cut off his own ear. But despite their bitter parting, the two men did have much in common. Both came to art relatively late in life. And both understood the artistic quest in explicitly spiritual terms, as what D.H. Lawrence would call a moral undertaking.

The son of a Dutch reform minister, Vincent had begun his career as a theological student and missionary, working and living among the poorest of the poor. And although he eventually abandoned the faith of his childhood, he said, "That does not keep from having a terrible need of--shall I say the word--religion. Then I

go out at night and paint the stars.” No one who has ever seen “Starry Night” can doubt that Van Gogh was subject to the most intense private visions, visions that would eventually lead him beyond the bounds of genius and into the realm of madness. Shortly after parting from Gauguin, Van Gogh was hospitalized in an asylum. But whatever angels or demons haunted him refused to go away, and Van Gogh shot himself in the summer of 1890. During his lifetime, he’d sold just one painting.

Gauguin’s upbringing was less religious. Born into a middle class family in France, he spent time in the Merchant Marine as a young man before settling into a successful career as a stockbroker. But at the age of thirty-five, he abandoned his comfortable life--along with his wife and five children--to devote himself exclusively to his art. Following his disastrous liaison with Van Gogh, Gauguin fled Europe and sailed for the South Seas, to escape (as he said) “everything that is artificial and conventional.” Gauguin wanted to revisit paradise via the primitive, the wild and uncivilized, but the titles of his works like *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* suggest that he found more questions than answers in his spiritual journey. Like Van Gogh, Gauguin tried to end his own life, but the attempt was unsuccessful in his case. He eked out a few more years with help from a sympathetic art dealer in Paris. But both men ended their lives on a note of failure.

It is one of the ironies of history that these two are now acknowledged among the masters of modern art, a reversal of fortune that holds for many of those with whom they associated. After being rejected by the leading critics and arbiters of taste, a circle of painters that included Monet, Renoir, Degas, Cezanne and others who had broken with convention to explore a fresher and more spontaneous approach to applying pigment to canvas had begun organizing their own shows as an alternative to the establishment in 1874. One of the pictures in that first exhibition was titled “Sunrise, An Impression,” and the name stuck. Today the images the Impressionists created have become familiar icons of pop culture, plastered on everything from tote bags to coffee cups. But in their own time, they were considered radical, if not downright ridiculous. One newspaper reviewer complained of paintings where “pink skies overhang a lilac forest, the trees are blue in another picture, and the heavens are brown.” In one portrait, he continued, “a pea-green woman, evidently in the last stages of Asiatic cholera mooes at you from out of the shadows.” But just as exasperating as their free handling of color was the subject matter of these paintings, which challenged conventional canons of aesthetics.

Art was supposed to deal with mythological themes or grand historical subjects--think Washington crossing the Delaware--or else peasants in exotic garb and romantic poses. What serious art had never considered before were scenes that were unposed and casual and non-idealized. Degas said what he wanted was to “observe his

models through the keyhole,” to catch life in its unguarded and unvarnished moments. (Of course what he really enjoyed seeing through the keyhole were naked women climbing out of the tub, but that’s another sermon.) Often the Impressionists worked outdoors, in the *plein air*, preferring the shifting moods of light and shadow to the set pieces of the studio. And the reason I think we still like these quick brush strokes is that they do so often seem to successfully capture what’s evanescent and glimpsed in passing. By focusing on what’s fleeting, hardly worth noticing, their pictures have managed to become strangely resistant to the passage of time.

It’s precisely in the transient that we come closest to the eternal. Ordinary life can be extraordinarily beautiful. But it’s all a matter of perception. As the spiritual teachers of many traditions have reminded us, the most startling wonders lie right on our own doorstep. The place to find illumination is here and now. And perhaps this is why I prefer the paintings of Mary Cassatt to those of better known artists like Gauguin and Van Gogh. She and Gauguin both showed with the Impressionists for the first time in 1879. But while Gauguin and Van Gogh would eventually seek their muse in ever most remote locales, on the extreme fringes of civilization and the tortured edges of human experience, Cassatt was able to find her inspiration closer to home, in the figure of her mother reading the morning newspaper, or her sister Lydia working on her tapestries, often choosing models who were not particularly young or attractive but rather plain and sturdy, as in one canvass that now hangs in the

National Gallery, where a woman seated on a park bench rests her head against one hand while gazing reflectively down at the other, which holds a red zinnia. Cassatt seems in this and many of her works to be inviting us into active contemplation, the art of seeing and appreciating the world that's immediately in front of us. In her fictionalized account of Cassatt's life, Helen Scott Chessman offers this description of sister Lydia's reaction to the painting of *A Child's Bath*, done in 1880:

It's like a gift, the oil painting, when May shows it to me: a calm moment, a mother squeezing a cloth in a blue and white basin, her hand large and strong, her other hand holding a sleepy child, legs akimbo, eyes half-open, gazing at her, her face bent to gaze back, her forehead touched with light, her morning dress a white landscape on which he rests, becalmed, idle, in this moment before bathing, so clear, so still, that it remains cut out of time. Always the hand hovers, poised, in the water of the basin, always the mother bends to her baby, always the baby bends toward her. Outside the room, the world moves on, with its ships and trains, its republics, its foreign colonies, its industry, its injustice, its wars, its terror. The world becomes merely a thought about something other than this quietness, this room, this careful love.

Cassatt would become famous for her scenes of mothers and children, protesting in 1913 when Congress enacted legislation

making Mother's Day a national holiday, as though she could foresee what Hallmark would later do with this theme. And her own depictions never slide into sentimentality. Yet for a woman who chose to remain unmarried and childless, they do reflect the importance that family and friendship were to have in her life. Unlike Van Gogh or Gauguin, whose spiritual journeys were essentially solitary and ended in loneliness, Cassatt lived with her parents and sister in Paris, and during her brother's frequent visits the home was filled with nieces and nephews and the cries and laughter of little ones. After Lydia's death, she would find close companionships with other women. She did, I say with respect, disinherit several of her family members when they refused to support votes for women. Yet despite this, it's another reason I think Mary Cassatt is a good model for religious pilgrims. Because the spiritual path should not be a path pursued in isolation, separate from society of other men and women. Indeed, most teachers have emphasized the importance of community to our personal growth. And Cassatt's paintings of mothers with their babes seems to remind us of the biological and spiritual fact that none of us comes into this world alone, but that we were loved even before we were born.

Mary Cassatt herself would probably not have described her vocation in such overtly spiritual terms. Like many women of the Victorian era, she struggled for emancipation, which included emancipation from religious traditions that narrowly circumscribed women's sphere. She was fortunate to study at the Philadelphia

Academy of Fine Arts, one of the few institutions that admitted female students in those days. But when she told her family that she was leaving for Paris, her father said he would almost rather see her dead. Edgar Degas, who recognized her talent and became her mentor, also said of Mary that “no woman had a right to draw that well!” But she was ambitious and strong enough to persist despite the obstacles. She wanted to make a name for herself and she did. She achieved success during her own lifetime, not just an outstanding woman artist, but as one of the world’s great painters.

Few of us will attain that level of accomplishment. Many of us may identify with her sister Lydia more than with Mary, wondering whether our lives, our work, our hopes have amounted to anything, sensing our own mortality, struggling with disappointments and dreams deferred. But each of us is an artist who can create something beautiful, be it an intimate moment, a job well done, a relationship nurtured, or a day well lived. Each of us is creative, with gifts to share: an encouraging word, a listening ear, an open heart, a comforting presence. In ways we may not even realize, each of us may be an inspiration to others, through how we cope with difficulty, like Degas, continuing to work in old age despite his failing eyesight. Living is an art, and the point is not to make monuments or museum pieces that will survive us when we’re dead and gone, but rather becoming alive and awake to the dazzle all around.

