Mary Nimmo Moran, Mary Cassatt and the painter-etcher movement: gender, identity and paths to professionalism

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MARY NIMMO MORAN, MARY CASSATT AND THE PAINTER-ETCHER
MOVEMENT: GENDER, IDENTITY AND PATHS TO PROFESSIONALISM

by

Elizabeth Carroll Schmid

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Art History in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

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INTRODUCTION

In 1887 etching advocate Sylvester Rosa Koehler singled out women artists by curating the first large scale exhibition of their work at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. This landmark exhibition featured more than four hundred etchings by twenty-four artists, many of whom had been working quietly until that time. “The Work of the Women Etchers of America” exhibition was followed by an even larger show at the Union League Club in New York a year later. Revealing more than his words express, contemporary critic Morris T. Everett found it to be a “magnificent display” instead of the “meager collection of scratches on copper” he expected:

The etchings were discovered to be the work not of amateurs but of experts. Many of them were striking in their originality, and betrayed a force and skill of execution that compared favorably with the best efforts of men who had fame with the needle.¹

As Phyllis Peet has written, both exhibitions were designed to promote as many women as possible and included works by etching pioneers Sarah Cole and Eliza Greatorex whose print work had been accepted by the Paris Salon. Mary Nimmo Moran, a frequent exhibitor with the American Society of Painter-Etchers and fellow of the Royal Society of Painters and Etchers in Great Britain, submitted fifty-four landscape etchings. Mary Cassatt’s dealer Samuel Avery sent in twenty-four of her signature motifs in etching, drypoint and aquatint. While the critical response to these events confirmed the significant contributions women were making to the etching revival, it also signaled

the many challenges women faced in transitioning from “lady amateur” to professional artist.

Since 1850 thousands of middle-class American women had contributed to the revolution in printed images as wood engravers, lithographers and photographers, but until the “Women Etchers of America Exhibition” the extent of their involvement in the painter-etcher movement was not widely known. As Peet has discussed, many of the women etchers were trying to earn their living through their art. Most had formal training, had participated in other art shows and simply hoped for the same recognition as their male peers.

During the 1870s and 1880s, etching emerged from being primarily the reproductive technique it had been since the eighteenth century and gained renewed appreciation among artists and collectors as an artistic medium. Women gravitated to etching as a professional pursuit for a number of reasons. It was socially acceptable and believed to embody a certain delicacy that was suited to them. It was in step with the aesthetic movement’s interest in breaking down barriers between fine and graphic art. Prints were also highly marketable, satisfying a growing demand for domestic art.2

With the rise of etching societies and opportunities for exhibition, this specialized medium could offer ambitious women a point of entry into the professional realm.3 Showing one’s work garnered press attention, and interest from collectors and served as


critical market venues. As Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang point out in their sociological study of the etching revival, it not only became important in helping women cross the first threshold to success, it tended to screen out those artists who were less committed to establishing a career.⁴

Some women were reluctant to exhibit their work publicly. The introduction to Koehler’s catalogue acknowledges that many known artists had been invited to participate but chose not to attend. Painter-etcher Blanche Dillaye offers her explanation in an 1895 Philadelphia Press article:

> There are many other Philadelphia women whose names should be equally associated with the art, but the spirit of modesty and retirement which seems to be in the air of the Quaker City has restrained them from exhibiting.⁵

This lack of assertiveness on the part of some women is telling. Lang and Lang contend that acting outwardly boastful or aggressive ran contrary to their sense of feminine decorum. They claim that during the period in which many “lady etchers” came of age, self-assertiveness was considered “unladylike, all too often resulting in an ingrained incapacity to act in what were then defined as masculine roles.”⁶ Feminine modesty likely also masked a deep-rooted insecurity. As Peet explains, many artists felt discouraged because the art world failed to take them seriously. Women were considered amateur artists or upper-class dilettantes who dabbled in art as a fashionable pastime.

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⁴ Lang and Lang, 274.


⁶ Lang and Lang, 275.
Critic Mariana G. Van Rensselaer acknowledged this in her introductory essay for the 1888 catalogue:

A peculiar degree of interest attaches to the to the work of women in the arts—it is so short a time since they entered the lists as genuine workers, displayed more than the passing enthusiasm and feeble accomplishments of the dilettante, and showed their wish and established their right to be judged in the same temper and by the same standards as their brethren.\(^7\)

While Koehler’s desire to single out women may be seen as progressive and encouraging, it nevertheless incited considerable debate. Ellen Day Hale lauded Koehler for his efforts on behalf of women, claiming it surpassed her expectation. In contrast, Cassatt, whom Peet claims had to often “defend her desire to become a professional artist, expressed dissatisfaction that her work was shown with amateurs.\(^8\)

Many shared Cassatt’s belief that exhibiting women’s art separately from men’s contributed to different sets of expectations, standards and assessments. In doing so, it reinforced the ideology of a separate sphere for women just as their work was garnering more attention in the market.\(^9\) Peet claims Koehler was simply following the precedent established by the Woman’s Pavilion at the Philadelphia Centennial of 1876. Through its efforts at inclusion, event organizers welcomed all forms of women’s creative output, from fine arts to domestic invention, a practice many believed blurred the distinction between professional and amateur work.\(^10\)

Clearly, Koehler struck a chord by advancing the complex issue of gender, evident not only by these disparate voices, but also through an overall sense of uncertainty regarding

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\(^7\) Peet, 12.

\(^8\) Peet, 35.

\(^9\) Peet, 13.

\(^10\) Ibid.
a woman’s proper place in the world of late nineteenth century American art. The period known as the etching revival, the years spanning the last quarter of the nineteenth century, offers an enlightening platform for consideration of this issue because it dovetails with the tremendous growth in social and educational opportunities for women. Yet, as we will see, these progressive measures were often at odds with socially ingrained barriers that prevented women from fully asserting themselves and being regarded as professionals.

Many scholars have addressed this topic. Whitney Chadwick has been especially notable for her scholarship on what she describes as the “contradictory relationship” women artists had with prevailing middle-class ideals of femininity. As she explains in *Art and Society*:

> They were caught between a social ideology that prohibited the individual competition and public visibility necessary for success in the arts, and the educational and social reform movements that made the nineteenth century the greatest period of female social progress in history. The qualities that defined the artist—indepedence, self-reliance, competitiveness belonged to a male sphere of influence and action.¹¹

As Christine Jones Huber argues, women could not function as professionals if they were still required to be the “mainstay of family life, maintain numerous accomplishments, such as embroidery and music, and conform to the self-effacing and modest image required of them by society.” However, she acknowledges that perhaps the more challenging obstacle for women to overcome was their attitude about themselves.

She writes, “It was difficult and still is, for women to break out of an acceptable pattern and create new roles for themselves with very little encouragement and very few successful models to follow.”\textsuperscript{12}

These arguments are further explored in recent scholarly investigations. Scholars Kirsten Swinth, Erica Hirshler, Laura Prieto and more recently Wanda Corn have examined aspects of the art world in which women struggled to make their way from amateur to professional, overcoming many socially and ideologically ingrained barriers. They trace the ways in which women worked to neutralize their gender, such as attending art academies or studying abroad, both important opportunities for egalitarianism. In addition, women formed societies and associations and worked in “lesser” media such as etching, watercolor and pastel, which were popular and offered a means to make a living. They sought out separate networks and opportunities to exhibit to help define their identities as artists. Or, as Hirschler argues, some women purposely joined their brethren stylistically in the pursuit of beauty, which was popular during the last decades of the century and offered a means to critical and financial success. Among these scholars, Swinth argues most strongly that professionalism represented the best way for artists to overcome gender biases in art:

At the most basic level, professionalism was the best available expression of middle-class women’s ambitions and best available marker of the seriousness of women’s intentions...Given the widespread trivialization of women’s artistry, professionalism offered an apparent ungendering.”\textsuperscript{13}


\textsuperscript{13} Swinth, 35.
Certainly these scholars and others make strong contributions to understanding American art, culture and gender at the turn of the century. They are joined by social historians Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang who in their examination of the etching revival, draw on findings concerning the lives and careers of hundreds of British and American printmakers, nearly half of whom were women, in their 1990 book *Etched in Memory: The Building of and Survival of Artistic Reputation*. While this work, along with Phyllis Peet’s *Women of the American Revival* (1988) touches on the important contributions Mary Nimmo Moran and Mary Cassatt made to the painter-etcher movement, what seems to be missing is a focused analysis of these two women’s lives and work in relation to these broader social and cultural issues. What becomes evident is that Nimmo Moran and Cassatt are representative of the growing number of women who defined the painter-etcher movement. They were not content to remain lady amateurs, but instead used their print work to subtly confront Victorian stereotypes, while personally defying traditional gender norms. As contemporaries they share important similarities. They were born within two years of each other in the 1840s and received their early art education in Philadelphia, with Cassatt going on to achieve considerable acclaim as a painter with the Impressionist movement. They both gravitated to etching and through this medium significantly expanded their artistic voice and advanced their professional careers, even though their influences, artistic styles, marital choices and milieus were dramatically different. Each in her unique way questioned the constraints of domesticity and sought increased independence and personal expression from her work. In doing so, claims scholar Wanda Corn, they reflect a larger breed of female artists who
“sought enlarged definitions of womanhood that would allow them to grow and develop their minds and talents in preparation for a life just inside but also outside the home.”

Nimmo Moran, for example, learned how to etch from her husband, the well-known landscape painter and printmaker Thomas Moran, but worked diligently on her own during his extended trips out West while she stayed back East to care for their children. Her etchings, which focus mostly on landscapes near their summer home on Eastern Long Island, have been lauded for their vigorous line and bold tone, and their decidedly “masculine” qualities. Through an examination of her work and the critical response it received, it becomes apparent that she disproved the so-called “gendered line,” that nineteenth century bias that women’s art is inferior to men’s despite similar inspiration, training and technique. At the same time, her frequent involvement in important exhibitions is a testament that marriage and family did not have to become an insurmountable impediment to professional success. In this regard, she followed the precedent established by Lilly Martin Spencer (1822-1902) and Frances (Fanny) Palmer (1812-1876) both wives and mothers who devoted their energies to becoming successful artists.

Much has been written about Mary Cassatt’s place in the Impressionist movement and her unconventional rise as a professional artist in a male dominated field. Many feminist scholars, including Griselda Pollock and Norma Broude, attribute aspects of Cassatt’s art to her womanhood. Most seem to agree that her studies of women and children in protected surroundings were chosen because they were familiar and accessible to her,

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while indicative of the limitations imposed upon her gender and social class. Even though these observations add considerably to our understanding, Cassatt scholar Nancy Mowll Matthews asserts that they draw away from her artistic accomplishments: “As an artist, she writes [Cassatt], “made clear, intellectual choices about her signature subjects that had more to do with trends in the contemporary art world than with the circumstances of her life.”

Certainly Cassatt’s interest in printmaking can be considered within this context. Adelyn Dohme Breeskin, Mowll Matthews and Barbara Stern Shapiro have all produced enlightening studies tracing Cassatt’s development as printmaker and their importance to her artistic development. While she is best known as a painter, Cassatt took up etching seriously in 1879 for a journal of original prints conceived by Edgar Degas that failed to develop. Undeterred and enamored by the possibilities of the etched line, she kept working with an eye toward exhibiting her work, creating a masterful series of drypoints and then a set of inventive Japanese-inspired color intaglio prints. While these works draw on her signature themes of women in domestic settings and mothers and children, she also explored aspects of modernity that pushed beyond the boundaries of the “women’s sphere.” As the early scholar of American printed imagery Frank Weitenkampf argued, her drypoints with their “wise restraint of linear expression, robust in method and sensitive in feeling, are among the best work produced in this field by Americans.”

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Both highly accomplished printmakers, Mary Nimmo Moran and Mary Cassatt represent what Swinth describes as “the large numbers of women who entered art in unprecedented numbers after the Civil War flooding art schools, hanging their pictures alongside men’s, pressing for critical recognition, and competing for sales in an unpredictable market.” By the end of the century, these ambitious women who would become professional artists, were part of an extensive network of female artists that “transcended the stereotypes of flower painter and dilettantish amateur that still color descriptions of late nineteenth century artists.”

As my research demonstrates, it was not an easy path, and neither Nimmo Moran nor Cassatt was able to dispel all aspects of her Victorian upbringing but both used their print work to subtly confront the many prevailing Victorian stereotypes of the types and style of art women should create, while also personally defying the period’s traditional gender norms. In order to shed light on their accomplishments, I begin in the first chapter by examining the cultural forces in Europe and America that lured women to this specialized field of etching. Chapter 2 describes the challenging set of conditions that hindered women in their creation of art. These investigations draw heavily on the important work of feminist scholars such as Linda Nochlin, Roszika Parker, Griselda Pollock and Norma Broude who have examined the social and cultural climate, ideological attitudes, and institutions which have ignored or devalued the contributions of women artists over the centuries. Within this context, I then move on in subsequent chapters to examine the development of each woman as printmakers, intertwining personal and professional accounts for each. I conclude by considering to what extent they embody the new breed

\[17 \text{ Swinth, 1.} \]
of women that was emerging during the etching revival and what this means to more fully understanding their contributions to American art, culture and gender at the turn of the century.
CHAPTER ONE
ETCHING AND ITS 19TH CENTURY REVIVAL

The printmaking technique of etching can be traced to the fifteenth-century Europe when goldsmiths and engravers first saw the potential for producing images on paper from flat plates. Among the most notable contributors to etching’s development as an art include German artist Albrecht Durer (1472-1520) whose early technical prowess in handling the burin and innovative approach to subject matter revolutionized printmaking and directed it away from its early relationship to metalworking. During the seventeenth century, Rembrandt van Rijn (1601-1669), Jacques Callot (ca. 1592-1635) and others developed the expressive possibilities of the medium. Rembrandt’s complex, combined intaglio prints were almost unsurpassed in their technical and aesthetic qualities, particularly in his ability to convey the depth of human emotion. More than a century later, Francisco Goya (1746-1828) revealed the transforming effects of combining etching with aquatint to achieve subtle tone and a crisp contrast.18

Described in simple terms, the process of etching begins with a metal plate usually made of copper. This material is favored for its smooth and even surface, its reaction to most chemicals and non-corrosive qualities. Using a finely pointed needle-like tool, an artist incises or scratches an image through an acid-resistant coating called a ground to

expose the metal underneath. When the plate is immersed in an acid-based bath, the reaction from the strong chemicals “bites” away or etches the exposed metal. The width and depth of lines are controlled by the length of time the plate is submerged in the bath. Some etchers may prefer to use drops of strong acids on the plate, moving it about with a feather to complete the biting and vary the lines and tones.¹⁹

Alternatively, an artist can directly incise a copper plate manually without a ground or acid using an intaglio technique known as drypoint. In either method, ink is then spread over the plate and a rag is used to wipe the surface so that the ink remains only imbedded in the etched line. Many variations can occur in wiping, which artists learn to exploit for tonal effect. Tonal variations can also be realized by various mechanical processes, such as rouletting, and using a scotch stone as an abrasion on a cleaned plate. Once the desired effects are achieved, the inked plate is topped by a sheet of fine paper and rolled through the etching press. This transfers the lines on to the paper, thus replicating the image. Successive changes to a plate produce different states of a print and are useful for showing the creative process of the artist.²⁰

In her 1912 book, Concerning Etchings, Bertha Jaques, a turn-of-the century printmaker and founding member of the Chicago Society of Etchers, describes the intimate process of etching by calling on the words of artist and author Joseph Pennell, who was considered by many as the dean of American printmaking:

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¹⁹ Bertha E. Jaques, Concerning Etchings (Chicago: T. Rubovits, 1912), 8.

²⁰ See Maxime Lalanne, A Treatise on Etching, 1866 for a more descriptive explanation of the etching technique and process.
A great etching by a great etcher is a great work of art, displayed on a small piece of paper, expressed with the fewest vital, indispensable lines, of the most personal character; a true impression of something seen—something felt by the etcher, something he hopes someone may understand and care for as, the artist, does. 

While the process described by Pennell is centuries old, what the author seems to emphasize is the role of the artist in creating a work that is expressive and unique. This became increasingly important in light of the many commercial and reproductive techniques that developed during the nineteenth century. Edgar Breitenbach describes the artistic and economic environment in which these advances sprang forth:

The nineteenth century saw the enormous growth in lithography, the flourishing of steel engraving, the discovery and wide-spread use of photography, great technical advances in wood engraving and, finally, the advent of mechanical and near mechanical processes, the photogravure and the half-tone. All this came about as an inevitable result of the growth of the country, with the needs of its expanding population for mass-education and mass-information at all age levels and among all social groups. Pictures, as well as books, played their part in satisfying these needs.

While these developments were technically impressive, the escalation of mass produced prints and photographs led artists and critics such as Théophile Gautier to denounce the “mirror-like apparatus” and other “uninspired work which deprives an artist’s idea of its very nature.” Many artists responded to the rally cry and etchings

21 Jaques, foreword.


were seen as an increasingly important artistic print medium that could counteract the prevalence of mass-produced images. Phillip Earenfight elaborates: “The idiosyncratic nature of the etched line, selective toning and wiping of hand-inked plates and small, limited editions of hand-made prints of carefully chosen paper, vellum, parchment or silk found a favorable audience among collectors and artists.”

Set within this context—and in step with the aesthetic movement’s interest in breaking down barriers between fine and graphic art [within an aesthetic context rather than a commercial one]—by the 1870s the centuries-old art of etching re-emerged as an important creative outlet for artists in America, stimulated by slightly earlier revivals in France and England. In Europe it had been conceived by French publisher Alfred Cadart (1828-1875) a leading advocate and founder of La Société des Aquafortistes (Society of Etchers) who, along with printer Auguste Delatre, promoted etching as the printmaking’s most spontaneous, original and artistic process. The movement’s champions were Goya, and even more so Rembrandt, whose “simple, etched landscapes would epitomize freshness for numerous professional and amateur artists.”

During this time, many artists of the Barbizon School—most notably Théodore Rousseau and Charles Émile who etched many images of peasant life—gravitated to etching, producing evocative pastoral landscapes using drypoint and other effects. Interest spread among younger artists, such as Maxime Lalanne and Charles Meryon whose subject matter expanded to include striking etched views of Paris and other great cities. These printmakers established high

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25 Hults, 247.
standards by which later British and American artists would attempt to emulate in their architectural views and urban panoramas.

Perhaps the best known among the painter-etchers was the American-born James Abbot McNeil Whistler (1834-1903), a leading representative of the movement. Whistler was a superb draftsman who is recognized for his technical facility and mastery of precisely calculated effects. His sense of originality stirred many followers. As Joann Moser notes, the influence of the etching revival in Europe and England “led Americans to consider the medium much more autographic than engraving and conducive to individual expression both in drawing and the line and wiping the plate.” Artists began to sign their prints, not only in the plate or stone but on the sheet itself, and the practice of the limited edition was introduced.26

Etching first garnered attention in America at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition in 1876, which introduced European and American modern art to American audiences. The Centennial included seventy original contemporary prints, with twenty-five submitted by Lalanne.27 Alfred Cadart served as an important link between etching’s French origins and its expansion in America. Along with his roles as a dealer of fine prints, he served as an editor and publisher of Lalanne’s influential and instructive


Treatise on Etching in 1866. He also offered workshops on technique, along with offering supplies and a variety of prints that inspired American audiences.  

Through Cadart’s encouragement, the movement gained momentum primarily through etching societies that sprang up throughout the country. Attracting both amateurs and professional artists, groups such as the pioneering New York Etching Club, the Philadelphia Society of Etchers, and the Society of American Etchers were formed to encourage the pursuit of original printmaking through camaraderie, teaching and exhibitions. Founded in 1877, the New York Etching Club, for example, was organized around the philosophy that “the artist’s own personal style and motif were of more value than the reproduction of other artists’ paintings.” While subject matter varied among portraits and genre scenes, landscape was among the more favored subjects.

Interest in etching was also furthered by Francis Seymour Haden’s U.S. lecture tour in 1882. Haden was Whistler’s brother-in-law and an important advocate for the movement. He actively recruited American works for exhibition of his Society of Painter-Etchers, later the Royal Society of Painter Etchers and Engravers, and included Americans such as Thomas and Mary Nimmo Moran in the organization. More importantly, Haden is credited as serving as a key translator of style. As print scholar Linda Hults explains:

Haden’s taste was thoroughly characteristic of the European etching revival. He revered Rembrandt, preferred landscape as a subject, reveled in the spontaneity and suggestiveness of the etched line and the variable wipings of the plate.

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28 Breitenbach, 19.

29 Friese, 12.
Moreover, Haden was an amateur, a fact that must have encouraged American artists unfamiliar with traditional, non-commercial printmaking techniques.\textsuperscript{30}

Artists interested in studying etching found English critic and painter-etcher Philip Gilbert Hamerton’s book *Etching and Etchers*, published in New York in 1876 (the original edition was printed in London in 1868) and his journal *Portfolio* to be indispensable guides. Along with providing useful information on technique and tools, they emphasized working directly from nature and encouraged the freedom of spontaneous execution. Both publications also importantly included restrikes of plates by contemporaries, as well as Old Masters such as Ostade and Rembrandt.\textsuperscript{31}

Sylvester Koehler is credited for tirelessly promoting etching throughout America through his museum work, publications and exhibitions, including the important “Women Etchers of America Exhibition” in 1887. Prior to serving as an early curator of Prints at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, he was a technical manager of the lithographic firm Louis Prang & Co., one of the major American publishers of chromolithographs. Drawing on this experience, but committed to original prints, he was intent upon developing a level of printing for American etchings comparable to that available in Europe. His influential yet short-lived periodical *American Art Review* (1880-1882) was based on Hamerton’s’s portfolio, and was conceived as a “journal devoted to the publication of “Original Painter-Etchings by American Artists.” As Koehler noted in the first issue, he regarded the medium as a sign of artistic progress in this country and hoped

\textsuperscript{30} Hults, 713.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
to foster etchings growth by publishing plates. Because etching was not widely known in
the U.S. prior to its publication, it served as an important stimulus for both the artists and
the market for these works.\footnote{Joann Moser in Hansen, Mickenberg, Moser and Walker, 20.} Also importantly, Koehler translated Lalanne’s highly
regarded Traité de la graveur à l’eau-forte. When it was published in 1885 under the
title A Treatise on Etching, it offered offering practical advice as well as “promulgated
etching as an autographic, freely expressive process.” Hults claims that because of these
influences, “The long history of the medium as one imitating or combined with engraving
was conveniently set aside.” \footnote{Hults, 543.}

Despite their exclusion from etching societies until 1880 when Nimmo Moran became
the first female member of the New York Etching Club, \footnote{Lang and Lang, 168.} women made significant
contributions to the etching revival that continued into the twentieth century. As Phyllis
Peet has written, the many women painters who made etching part of their careers during
this period were part of a larger group of middle-class women who gravitated to
printmaking in the second half of the nineteenth century. These women pursued wood
engraving, lithography, photography, as well as etching. Women could learn etching
informally on their own or through a family member or colleague similar to the
experiences of Nimmo Moran and Cassatt. By mid-century, institutionalized educational
and training programs were becoming increasingly available. For example, the
Philadelphia School of Design for Women, which was founded in 1844, was the first
women’s institution to offer printmaking courses in wood engraving and lithography.
Courses in etching were added in the following decades as etching gained popularity. Through etching, women gained increased opportunities to exhibit and market their work, and ultimately greater professional success.

The Philadelphia School of Design served as an influential training ground for women in many ways. As Nina de Angeli Walls writes in her 2001 book, *Art Industry and Women’s Education in Philadelphia*, this institution offered the first modern professional training for American women in commercial art, manufacturing design, and art education and helped lay the groundwork for women’s professionalization in art. As she writes:

> Profound changes occurred in art training and careers for women in the visual arts between the mid-Victorian and the modern eras, paralleling the revolution in women’s education and access to professions that occurred in other fields. Design schools gave women ‘unprecedented access to highly paid craft skills’ at first, and by the close of the nineteenth century, these schools helped ‘professionalize the work of women as art teachers and practicing artists.’

Moreover, by 1886 when Emily Sartain (1841-1927) became principal, the Philadelphia School of Design expanded its curricula to offer career paths in fine arts, art education and commercial design, in contrast to art academies that offered courses in painting and sculpture. These important changes gave women a formal education, as well as new attitudes of professionalism. As Walls explains, this is important in a number of ways:

> As defined by School of Design principal Emily Sartain in 1899, professional women were ‘self-respecting as wage-earners and artist,’ placing full value on their own abilities. Professionalism in all areas has been defined in terms of appropriate training and credentials. Thus, equal access to the highest levels of art training for women as well as men, one of Sartain’s lifelong goals, was the key to women’s self-respect and wage-earning capabilities.

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36 Emily Sartain, “Art…as a Profession for Women,” in *Women in Professions: International Congress of Women…1899* (1900) in de Angeli Walls. xxi.
Sartain was the daughter of John Sartain (1808-1897) who was born in London and trained as an engraver before coming to the United States. After settling in Philadelphia, he became a respected engraver of fine art reproductions and worked for several publications. In 1849, he started his own magazine of fine art and literature, and while it was short-lived, his reputation expanded nationally.  

Sartain was active at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and was instrumental in the training of artists such as Thomas Moran. Like her brothers, Emily learned engraving at an early age from her father. She and Mary Cassatt were close friends, having studied together initially at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts before traveling to Paris to further their studies in painting. When Emily returned to Philadelphia, she specialized in mezzotint engraving and is credited for being the first woman to engage in this technique. After earning critical acclaim as an artist, Sartain became principal of the Philadelphia School of Design in 1886, a position she held for thirty-three years. Along with her own accomplishments as an artist, her role as an educator promoting both fine art and commercial art training opened new doors for many aspiring women professionals into the twentieth century.  

Bertha E. Jaques (1863-1941) is another prominent woman printmaker who played a key role in expanding etching in the early decades of the twentieth century. As Lang and Lang have written, she had been a student at the Art Institute in Chicago, and while


attending the World’s Columbian Exposition in 1993 she became enamored with the etchings of Braquemond, Whistler, Haden, Tissot and other contemporary masters.

Largely self-taught, she intently studied Hamerton’s *Etching and Etcher’s* and Lalanne’s *Lalanne on Etching*, and experimented using etching tools crafted from her husband’s surgical instruments. With the purchase of a printing press in 1897, she continued to explore the medium creating more than four hundred prints during her forty-six year career. She created mostly landscapes from her travels, as well as evocative floral studies revealing her interest in nature and the Japanese aesthetic.³⁹ In 1910 she became a founding member of the Chicago Society of Etchers, which continued to popularize etching. In addition to her teaching and mentoring, Jaques wrote several books including *Concerning Etching* (1912). ⁴⁰

As we have seen, the art of etching that was expressed so powerfully through the hand of Rembrandt, Callot, Goya and others was reinvigorated during the nineteenth century. Their technique was translated through influential published sources, and carried on through the formation of etching societies, as well as through fine art and commercial training and education during the period known as the etching revival. The “Women Etchers of America Exhibition” in 1887 brought increased awareness to the contributions women such as Cassatt, Nimmo Moran and thousands of others were making to the

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painter-etcher movement. Etching provided many women with an entry into the professional realm and underscored their desire for professional success.
CHAPTER TWO
THE NINETEENTH CENTURY WOMAN ARTIST

The nineteenth century was a period defined in part by sharply divided lines of gender. In regard to art, men and women had different roles, often produced different kinds of art, and had vastly different opportunities for displaying their art, finding patrons and establishing their reputation. Yet this occurred as educational developments were gaining momentum for women during the second half of the nineteenth century. In order to understand the environment in which Nimmo Moran and Cassatt created their art and built careers, it is helpful to first understand how social beliefs and morality shaped the idea of a woman’s proper place in society and how those contributed to an ideology of separate spheres that shaped the path of women’s professional pursuit.

Late nineteenth century women artists grew up in a Victorian society that believed that women and men were by nature divided by fundamental differences and roles. Respectable women were expected to be modest, demure, and behave according to acceptable standards of comportment. Because they were “delicate,” middle and upper-class women were largely restricted to the private realm of the home, caring for family and serving as a quiet but important moralizing force for society.41 For the majority of these women, the domestic role was their destiny unless they worked outside the home because of economic necessity.42

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42 Nancy F. Cott has written extensively on subjects such as female domesticity and the emergence of feminism during the nineteenth century. See *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) and *The Bonds of Womanhood:
In contrast, the more intellectually and physically robust males became linked with the public domain as they brashly carried out their roles as sole providers for their families and champions advancing the country’s social, political and technological causes in the public sphere. As industrialization increasingly displaced work from the home, this distinction widened over the course of the century and served as a stabilizing force for a society that was becoming increasingly unmoored by change. As Laura R. Prieto explains, “The domestic ideal and the invention of the true woman were crucial to the formation of middle class and given cultural force by profound economic changes in industrializing America.”

Art was an acceptable private pursuit for a young woman and suited to her role in creating a cultivated home life. Along with skills in needlework and other domestic arts, women were expected to possess some knowledge of drawing and be versed in the education of art. Painting was one of the few acceptable, even desirable accomplishments for middle-class women, as long as it was pursued moderately. One writer on the subject of women’s roles and duties warned in 1844: “To be able to do a great many things tolerably well is of infinitely more value to a woman than to be able to excel in any one. By the former, she may render herself generally useful; by the latter she may dazzle for an hour…”


44 Ibid.

Because of its social acceptability, women could dabble in art professionally, so long as it did not interfere with their more important domestic duties. While artistic inclination furthered the image of an “accomplished lady,” the lack of professional ambitions for one’s art also defined the idea of a dilettante and made it acceptable. Over time, this relegation to amateur status fueled the misconception that women lacked serious commitment to art. As Linda Nochlin argues:

It is precisely the insistence upon a modest, proficient, self-demeaning level of amateurism as a ‘suitable accomplishment’ for the well-brought up woman, who naturally would want to direct her major attention to the welfare of others—family and husband—that militated and still militates, against any real accomplishment of the part of women.\(^{46}\)

Many feminist and social historians have sought to trace the origins of gender bias in nineteenth-century art. In one of the influential works, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Society* (1981), scholars Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock examine various aesthetic theories and institutional structures that have often minimized female art over time. They claim the “special characterization of women’s art as biologically determined or an extension of their domestic and refining role in society” reached a high point in the nineteenth century. It was most clearly expressed in bourgeois ideology where women were prescribed an important yet ancillary role serving as guardians of the home and social order.\(^ {47}\)

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Parker and Pollock credit John Ruskin’s book, *Sesame and Lilies* (1867) for fanning the flames of separatism where, in their words, “men work in the outside world and women adorn the home, where they protect traditional, moral and spiritual values in a new industrial society.” In his chapter on women’s role entitled “Of Queen’s Garden,” Ruskin wrote:

> Now their separate characters are these. The man’s power is active, progressive and defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer. His intellect is for invention and speculation. But the woman’s intellect is not for invention or creation but sweet ordering, arrangement and decision.  

According to Parker and Pollock, the most damaging Victorian writers were those such as Ruskin who attributed natural explanations for what were instead ideological attitudes. Another was art critic John Jackson Jarvis who contended that women were best suited to intellectual pursuits that required less expenditure of mental capital. Yet another example was the writer in an 1860 issue of *The Crayon* who claimed that the female painter or graphic artist was particularly well matched to the sedentary and excessively precise tasks of lithography or wood engraving, which tended to “womanize” male practitioners.

These attitudes denigrated not only the quality of women’s art, but also their suitability for certain media. In his 1860 essay in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, French critic Leon Legrange argued:

> Let women occupy themselves with the types of art they have always preferred, such as pastels, portraits, or miniatures. Or the painting of flowers, those prodigies of grace and freshness which alone can compete with the grace and freshness of women themselves. To women above all falls the practice of the

48 Ibid.

graphic art, those painstaking arts which correspond so well with the role of abnegation and devotion which the honest woman happily fills here on earth, and which is her religion.”

Parker and Pollock claimed that these stereotypes paved the way for the prejudice against women’s innate lack of talent and their predisposition to feminine subject matter. Under these conditions, some critics wondered why women would take up the indelicate art of printmaking at all with its use of sharp instruments, harsh chemicals and ink. Satirical poet and engraver Thomas Hood was known to claim: “It scarce seems a lady-like work that begins / In a scratching and ends in a biting!”

As Parker, Pollock, Prieto and others have recognized, it took the work of nineteenth-century historian Elizabeth Ellet to argue that social not biological factors account for a woman’s choice of art form. In her 1859 work, *Women Artists in All Ages and Countries*, Ellet strived to impart a domestic history of art, continually stressing the compatibility of women’s artwork with their family life, claiming:

>The kind of painting in which the object is prominent has been most practiced by female artists. Portraits, landscapes and flowers, and pictures of animals are in favour among them. Historical or allegorical subjects they have comparatively neglected; and perhaps a significant reason for this has been that they could not demand the years of study necessary for the attainment and eminence of these. More have been engaged in engraving on copper than in any other branch of art, and many have been miniature painters.

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50 Parker and Pollock, 13.

51 Lang and Lang, 271.

Ellet goes on to explain that these occupations might be pursued in the home where “custom and public sentiment consigned the fair student.” In many instances, she adds, women have been led to art through the influence of parents or brothers. She points to the Peale family and writes that daughters Anna, Sarah and Margaretta developed their artistic talent because it allowed them to contribute to the family business of portrait and miniature painting, not because they were genetically predisposed to them. These types of observations, along with the research of other scholars, have led us to understand that women do have a history but a different one from men.

In 1971 Linda Nochlin published the article with the provocative title, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” The answer, she argues, is not an absence of talent but rather a lack of encouragement and access to opportunities necessary in the creation of great art. According to Nochlin, women’s efforts at professionalism were halted by barriers to attending prestigious educational institutions because of their gender and limits in curriculum they could receive. This inability to enroll in the life class, with its emphasis on studying the male nude, prevented them from undertaking the large-scale historical, Biblical and allegorical subjects which traditional critics considered the highest realm in painting. This is why the majority of work produced by women artists includes the so-called lower genres of landscape, still life and miniature portraiture and lesser media such as graphic arts.

While the Pennsylvania Academy, the country’s oldest art academy founded in 1805, reluctantly gave women the opportunity to study from its statue gallery three hours a week, it took until 1868 for women to be welcomed into the life class but with access only to female models. As Christine Huber notes in her research on the Academy and its
women, the first evidence of male models used regularly in the life classes does not appear until 1877. Six years later, the Academy’s board of directors was still called to defend this practice and received stirring letters from the public:

Does it pay, for a young lady of a refined, godly household to be urged as the only way of obtaining a knowledge of true art, to enter a class where every feeling of maidenly delicacy is violated, where she becomes so hardened to indelicate sights & words, so familiar with the persons of degraded women & the sight of nude models that no possible art can restore her lost treasure of chaste & delicate thoughts!\(^{53}\)

Nochlin further argues that access to the same education as men was only one of the many factors hindering the potential of women artist. The other significant hurdle was that women were often faced with family demands that would distract them from the single-minded pursuit and sacrifice that was often necessary for great artistic achievement. For this reason, it was often the single woman or widow who would achieve higher levels of success, along with daughters or wives of artists. “One thing is clear,” she argues:

For a woman to opt for a career at all, much less for a career in art, has required a certain amount of unconventionality, both in the past and present; whether or not the woman artist rebels against or finds strength in the attitude of her family, she must in any case, have a good strong streak of rebellion in her to make her way in a world of art at all, rather than submitting to the socially approved role of wife and mother, the only role to which every social situation consigns her automatically.\(^{54}\)

Marriage and career were possible but not without “a complicated negotiation of costs and benefits for women,” argues Swinth. For this reason, the vast majority of turn-of the

\(^{53}\) Huber, 21.

\(^{54}\) Nochlin, 170.
century professional women did not marry. Although she concedes that, as with Thomas Moran, a woman’s husband could prove to be an encouraging partner, more often women abandoned art after marriage or “shifted” to less ambitious media or scope.\textsuperscript{55}

Given this socially conservative, often hostile environment it is not surprising that women were discouraged and limited in their pursuit of artistic careers. However, research also points to ways in which women began their transformation away from the limits of lady amateur. In *Painting Professionals: Women Artists and the Development of Modern American Art, 1870-1930* (2001), Kirsten Swinth embarks on a broad cultural study of the period and argues that staking claim to professionalism was the “best available expression of middle-class ambition” and the best avenue for women to be taken seriously.\textsuperscript{56} In doing so, she explains, men and women formed societies and exhibition associations, and worked in “lesser media” such as watercolor, pastel and etching, which were popular and enabled women to make a living. In her study of women artists of relatively the same period, *A Studio of Her Own: Women Artists in Boston, 1870-1940* (2001), Erica Hirschler takes a more focused approach by considering the lives and work of women artists in a major art center. She contends that with the emergence of the Boston School style of painting, with its emphasis on light, texture and color and feminine subject matter, men and women gained professional and critical success. She argues that while both sexes were united in their pursuit of beauty, female artists such as Lilian Westcott Hale tended to depict women in their domestic sphere engaged in productive activity, such as reading, as opposed to the leisure pursuits

\textsuperscript{55} Swinth, 94.

\textsuperscript{56} Swinth, 35.
commonly selected by men. Certainly, this calls to mind the brilliant approach Mary Cassatt employed in creating her new image of women.

In a similar vein, scholar Melissa Debakis notes, “as [women artists] struggled to create a professional persona, they imagined a world where ‘beauty’ and productivity—whether commercial or domestic—cohabitated. Negotiating complex roles as wives, mothers, and artists, these women used every available opportunity to gain professional stature,” from enrolling in art classes to participating in movements and associations. 57

Lang and Lang also espouse the belief that professional associations proved instrumental for women and drew on their innate ability to work collaboratively with others in pursuit of the same goals.

For women brought up in Victorian or Edwardian England with an ingrained fear of seeming ‘too forward’ or too self-seeking, such collaborative relationships eased their integration into the art world and, where these extended to marketing made this necessary activity less distastefully competitive. While the distribution of etchings was, to some extent, taken over by publishers and print sellers acting as artist’s agents, the proliferation of societies for exhibiting and marketing prints, as well as the clubs made up of what were essentially subscribers, made contact with a potential client easier… 58

The authors claim that in providing clear channels for achieving recognition, their integration into professional networks minimized, but did not eliminate conflict between the feminine role as traditionally defined and these women’s desire for success.

In her 2001 study, At Home in the Studio: The Professionalization of Women Artists in...


58 Lang and Lang, 274.
America, Laura R. Prieto examines much of the same background as Swinth in discussing women’s transformation during the second half of the century, but argues that instead of pursuing a gender-neutral professional model, they tended to more or less accept the “strictures of gender ideology and attempted to integrate conventions of womanhood with professional requirements.” 59 For example, while many women during the late nineteenth century envisioned an ideal artist who was independent of gender, this was imagined most often by women (including art critics, painters and sculptors), not men and was almost always invoked when considering a woman’s work. She points out that critic Mariana Van Rensselaer voiced this position in 1891 when she claimed that “she would be eager, be glad to criticize a woman’s work, but with regard to the work and not because it is by a woman…The fact that it is by a woman must speak for itself, but must not intrude itself, any more than a man’s sex should be emphasized in speaking of his achievements in art.” 60

Prieto cites another typical reviewer who wrote in 1888: “One would not need to ask of these drawings whether they were done by a man or woman, or care to know because the artists is uppermost in the expression and the execution is so broad and skillful that there is no need for excuse. This is the plane that our women must attain.” 61 Prieto claims the rebuke that “one would not need to ask” was necessary because viewers asked—or already knew that the particular work was by a well-known artist. To shield their gender,

59 Prieto, 243.

60 Prieto, 110.

61 Ibid.
she claims, some women began to use initials to signify their work, but these efforts were often foiled when the exhibition staff or reviewers would address them by feminine titles such as Miss or Mrs. The only time when critics claimed they did not need to know the gender of the artist was when discussing the work of a talented artist.

Prieto points out that less talented men did not provoke the same censure. “A male artist failed as an individual, not as the representative of the group that had to labor harder and better in order to win a modicum of respect.” Because of this, many women recognized that they had more to contend with than men, and more or less accepted it. As she explains:

While many women would have preferred to strive toward the androgynous ideal, they recognized the very real limits that gender ideology placed on them as professional artists…As a consequence they set aside evanescent ideals in practice and pragmatically chose to develop a group identity on their own terms. The most successful artists, such as Mary Cassatt, Cecilia Beaux, and Anna Lea Merritt, managed to live and work in the ideological boundaries of gender and attained professional status without giving up their publicly perceived femininity.

Clearly, this observation is true. Through an examination of Mary Nimmo Moran and Mary Cassatt’s life and art, we can see how these two artists successfully navigated restrictive gender stereotypes and societal dictates on their own terms.

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62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.
CHAPTER THREE
MARY NIMMO MORAN: MARRIAGE, FAMILY, ART AND THE GENDERED LINE

As a testament to her growing reputation in America’s painter-etcher movement, Mary Nimmo Moran’s evocative print *Twilight, East Hampton* (1880, figure A1) was selected as the frontispiece for the New York catalogue of “The Work of Women Etchers of America.” In its introduction, Mariana Van Rensselaer wrote: “if we put Mr. Whistler’s name aside as one with whom no other man or woman can possibly compete and think of a list of American etchers ranged with strict regard to the virile excellence of their production, we can easily imagine that a woman’s name might lead all others.” Nancy Friese claims Van Rensselaer was likely pointing to Nimmo Moran. 64

Mary Nimmo Moran was a printmaker, painter, illustrator, and teacher. She was best known as an etcher, creating an estimated sixty-two different plates. 65 Recognized for the bold and spontaneous style she developed in her mature landscape work, she was among the first women elected to the Royal Society of Painter-Etchers in London and the New York Etching Club. She also received a medal and diploma for her prints at the World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893. Along with these professional accomplishments, Nimmo Moran was the wife to Thomas Moran (1837-1926), the well-known landscape painter and printmaker, and mother to their three children. From the early days of their marriage, she assisted Thomas in his work, served as his business manager, cared for the children

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and household, and offered drawing classes to support the family financially. Joni L. Kinsey explains that Thomas’s ability to produce so much work for publication was due not only to his untiring energy, but “also benefitted from the assistance of his wife, Mary Nimmo Moran.” Kinsey explains that while her role “remains indeterminate since Moran never publicly acknowledged it,” she points to a letter dated 1873 that suggests that it may have been considerable. Thomas writes: “Work hard to improve your drawing, dear, as I have plenty of work for you this coming winter.” 66 Nancy K. Anderson elaborates: “While the match was based on affection, it also became an extraordinary working partnership…Until her death in 1899, she ran the Moran family household with such efficiency that Thomas was freed of most domestic tasks and thus able to devote himself almost entirely to his work.67

If Nimmo Moran’s life seems to embody a Victorian ideal with her emphasis on family, home and selflessly encouraging her husband’s career, the extent of her natural talent and professional accomplishments defy such a narrow characterization. Along with juggling her many personal priorities, she exhibited widely and received critical acclaim independent of her relationships or gender, very often truncating the signature on her etchings as “M.Nimmo Moran” or “M.N. Moran.” 68 Thomas Bruhn contends that confronting Mary’s work on its own leaves no question that “she created her own idiom,

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67 Anderson, 29.

separate from that of Thomas, though they traveled to the same places, saw the same landscapes, and used the same tools.” 69 While the most noticeable distinction between their two landscape styles for a comparable setting can be seen in terms of scale and dramatic effect, her more intimate, subdued vision cannot be attributed to gender. Contemporary critic Morris T. Everett refers to this in his writing: “Her etching has a virile strength that set it in a class by itself. Her plates, as it has been frequently said, would never reveal her sex, since they disproved the popular idea that the productions of a woman naturally betray feminine characteristics.” 70

Mary Nimmo was born in Scotland in 1842 to a family of weavers. Her mother, Mary Scott, died when she was five, and her father emigrated to the United States with young Mary and her brother. By 1858 they had settled permanently outside Philadelphia where they were neighbors to the English immigrant parents of Thomas Moran, who was part of a close family of well-known painters, etchers, illustrators and photographers that became known as the “Twelve Apostles.” 71 Mary fit in well with the lively Morans given their similar background and her artistic interests. Socially she was described as a “charming, and a bright and graceful conversationalist who was thoroughly conversant with different phases of art.” In demeanor she was very much a product of the period’s conservative upbringing and thought to be appropriately “modest and unassuming and as free from

69 Thomas Bruhn, America Etching: The 1880s (Storrs: The University of Connecticut, 1985): 27.


ostentation and affection as gifted natures usually are.”

Mary’s introduction to painting, and subsequently etching, came through her husband, so his early influences are also important to understanding her art. Thomas had entered an apprenticeship at the engraving firm of Scattergood and Telfer in 1853, where he became a solid watercolorist and produced his first wood engravings at the age of sixteen. Although he resisted a life in trade, the experience helped him to hone the technical skills that would become so important to his later work in lithography and etching. He also used this period to study print albums of Romantic landscape painters, including J.M.W. Turner, the major influence on his work. According to Bruhn, as a young artist Moran “could not help but respond to the way in which Turner evokes specific moods by the fall of light, by its density and directness, and by the interplay of clouds and light in the sky.” In replicating this in his print work, “Moran was one of the only important etchers in the 1880s who used techniques such as the roulette and mezzotint rocker to lay down tonal passages in his etchings that compare to Turner’s work.” Mary also became known for her stunning yet more subdued treatment skies, a focal point in many of her etchings.

After a few years into his apprenticeship, Thomas sought greater artistic freedom and joined his older brother Edward in his studio where he received much of his formal training. Along with studying European and American landscapes at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, he was taken in by the writings of John Ruskin. The English critic was a formidable voice beginning in the late 1840s, and Thomas was particularly swayed by his practical advice that stressed the importance of sketching directly from

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72 Friese, 5.

73 Thomas Bruhn, “Printmaker of the First Rank” in Anderson, 284.
nature. Ruskin’s fidelity to nature philosophy espoused in his work *Modern Painters* (1843) resonated with many American landscape artists during this period. His words, and later his friendship, would become important to Mary who became an object of Ruskin’s praise and affection.\(^{74}\) The well-known critic also purchased at least three of Nimmo Moran’s etchings in 1882, with a reporter for the *New York Herald* referencing her as “the only lady member of the London Society of Painter-Etchers…”\(^{75}\)

In 1862 at the age of twenty, Mary married Thomas and the Morans settled in Philadelphia where she continued her studies in watercolor and oil painting even after their first son Paul was born.\(^{76}\) Soon after the close of the Civil War, the couple like many American artists, embarked on a tour of European cities between 1866 and 1868. After several months in England to study Turner’s work, they moved to Paris for nine months and traveled extensively throughout France and Italy, together sketching street scenes, mountain villages and the French countryside.\(^{77}\) Mary’s interest in quiet, local landscape similar to the art produced by the Barbizon artists was likely awakened during this period, along with their plein-air method of working directly outdoors while observing nature. While Thomas preferred to work his plates in the studio, Mary clearly embraced the immediacy of etching outdoors. Throughout her career she was known to take her plate outside and sketch her chosen subject quietly in some secluded corner or under a

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\(^{74}\) Siegel, 41.


\(^{77}\) Ibid.
sheltering tree, inspired by the scene that was unfolding before her.\textsuperscript{78} As Nancy Siegel notes, like the Barbizon painters before her, she paid close attention to atmospheric conditions and changing weather patterns. The immediacy of nature is read throughout many of her works.

The prolonged period sketching and observing art together in Europe also gave her insight into her husband’s aesthetic and informed much—but not all of her own. Everett elaborates on the importance of this experience to the Morans:

Mr. Moran was professedly an idealist. He had little interest in the commonplace, and less in the painful or depressing. He ignored the whims of fashion and the dictates of schools. The bent of his mind dictated by a selection of subjects worthy of their beauty and their essential quality to be made themes for pictorial art, and his wife naturally caught her inspiration from him.”\textsuperscript{79}

After this two-year sojourn, they returned to Philadelphia where their second child, Mary Scott was born, followed by another daughter, Ruth Bedford. The family relocated to Newark, New Jersey in 1872 so that Thomas to be closer to publishers in New York where he was a sought-after illustrator. Thomas’s reputation and the family’s financial position had increased considerably due to the payment from two large commissions, which enabled the family to purchase a home. In 1879, Mary recorded the view from nearby Hackensack Meadows in her oil painting \textit{Newark from the Meadows} (1879, unlocated), which is considered to be “one of the earliest depictions of the industrial

\textsuperscript{78} Everett, 11.

\textsuperscript{79} Everett, 6.
scene in America.\textsuperscript{80} This painting was shown at the Pennsylvania Academy’s annual exhibition in 1880, where she continued to exhibit her work sporadically.\textsuperscript{81} She later captured encroaching industry in some of her print work, including \textit{A City Farm, New York} (1881, figure A2). This work is important because it contradicts many critics who later argued that many notable etchers failed to portray the real conditions in American life.\textsuperscript{82} Living in Newark—and later Manhattan, Mary could not help but see the presence of the factory and how industrialization would exploit the natural resources that would were becoming so valued in her developing art.

A turning point in Mary’s advancement as an artist occurred in 1878 when she and Thomas purchased an etching press for their studio in Newark.\textsuperscript{83} Although Thomas had first tried his hand at etching in the mid-1850s under the tutelage of Philadelphia engraver John Sartain, he did not pursue it again seriously until 1878.\textsuperscript{84} Before leaving in 1879 for a commission to the Teton Range, Thomas offered Mary some basic instruction and left her with six coated plates. As daughter Ruth recalls, “My mother’s heart failed her when she looked at the lovely surface of those plates, so she took her calling card plate, ‘coated’ that with wax herself, and made some ‘wriggles’—as she said—for a tree, a few

\textsuperscript{80} Matthew Baigell in Francis, 14.

\textsuperscript{81} Huber, 34

\textsuperscript{82} Thomas Moran also depicted industrial scenes in his work around this time. See \textit{Communipaw, New Jersey}, 1885.

\textsuperscript{83} Siegel, 36.

\textsuperscript{84} Francis, 15.
lovely lines for water, and there it was.” 85 Lang and Lang describe her increased confidence later in the summer: “Once assured that she understood the technique, she took a plate in one hand, her daughter Ruth, by the other and went outdoors to needle the image of a bridge spanning a river near Easton, Pennsylvania, where she had been summering. She bit both plates, took impressions, and in this way began her involvement with etching.” 86 When Thomas returned from his trip, the originality and pronounced characteristics of Mary’s trial work impressed him enough to encourage her to submit four of the etchings to the New York Etching Club. Comprised of both amateurs and professional artists, this exclusive organization was the first club of its kind in America. While fewer than half of the twenty or so artists who were invited to participate had any direct experience with etching, the club encouraged participation by offering classes, providing a press and encouraging mentorship. 87 Nimmo Moran was subsequently elected to membership to this male-dominated organization on the basis of these four initial prints, and for years was the only woman member. She was elected a Fellow in the Society in 1881. Francis writes that because her signature was not identifiable on the works she submitted, “they were assumed to be by a man.” 88

That same year the Morans made their first visit to East Hampton, New York, which offered an important stimulus for the etching careers of both Thomas and Mary. 89 The

85 Ibid.

86 Based on Mary Nimmo Moran’s account in Pennypacker Long Island Collection; also Benson, pp. 66-84 and Friese, pp.4-7 all referenced in Lang and Lang, pp. 167-168.

87 Lang and Lang, 57.

88 Francis, 16.

89 Peet, pp. 32-34, with quote on p. 34 in Hults, 714.
expansion of the Long Island Railroad made this destination more accessible and it became a popular tourist alternative to Niagara Falls or the Hudson River Valley. Artists were attracted to the quaint fishing villages and open fields, simple views that many considered to be honest portrayals of American life. As Siegel explains, “Artists such as Thomas and Mary Nimmo Moran valued pure observations of the landscape, qualities of light, and changing atmospheric conditions, in essence objective quietude.” 90 It was a particularly desirable locale for artists returning from European training, who found the open fields and flat farmlands comparable what they had seen in France and England. For the Morans, East Hampton became a family retreat as well as a well-spring of subject matter. After spending several summers there, in 1882 the couple purchased a sheep pasture overlooking Goose Pond and their newly built home and studio were set among farmland dotted by potato fields, salt ponds and windmills. This varied landscape—rolling hills, stretches of marshland, woods and waterways—offered considerable visual inspiration. Mary’s landscapes are punctuated by inviting paths, fences, bridges and weathered cabins, which lead us into the depths of the composition or serve to emphasize the vastness of the natural elements surrounding them. Everett describes her choices as “something equally simple, and equally devoid of interest save when seen by an artist who had poetry enough in her soul to make such scenes replete with meaning and beauty.” 91 While farm animals or ducks occasionally co-exist in her quiet landscape, figures rarely appear. “Her main aim was in the spirit and texture of natural forms,”

90 Siegel, 9.

91 Everett, 14.
explains Friese.

One of her early works, Solitude (1880, figure A3) is an example of the kind of unassuming scene whose beauty she came upon and recorded. Here she presents a delicate rendering of tall, thin trees whose bare trunks are sharply outlined against the dusky sky. They effectively cut across a solid mid-ground mass of darkened foliage framing a small quietly illuminated pool of water. A low horizon of dunes is evident beyond. Francis notes that the composition is unusual in that the dark masses dominate yet still invite the viewer more deeply into the picture plane. 92

Koehler featured Solitude in his book American Etchings (Boston, 1886), a compilation of original prints by twenty artists that was republished after the demise of his American Art Review journal. He describes this work as exemplary for a number of reasons:

In etching, Mrs. Moran finds a language that accords entirely with her ideas and modes of expression. She treats her subjects with a poetical disdain of detail, but with a firm grasp of the leading truths that give force and character to her work. While her etchings do not display the smoothness that comes from great mechanical dexterity, her touch is essentially that of the true etcher—nervous, vigorous, and rapid and bitten with a thorough appreciation of the relations of the needle and acid, preferring robustness of line to extreme delicacy. 93

Bruhn claims that compositionally Nimmo Moran tends to emphasize a strong foreground, and lacking that a dominant middle ground. She invokes depth, but relative to her husband’s commanding perspective, hers is more commensurable to the

92 Francis, 16.

surroundings. This sense of intimacy is consistent with advice Ruskin offered her husband in a letter dated February, 1888: “Force yourself to show leaves and stone—such as God meant us all to be under—till you see the daily beauty of these and make others see it.” 94 This aesthetic is evident in Nimmo Moran’s *The Haunt of the Muskrat, East Hampton* (1884, figure A4), which captures the free and vigorous line that Koehler describes above, as well as the sense of detail valued by Ruskin in her rendering of the rugged grasses. Koehler also included this work in his 1885 treatise, *Etching, An Outline and Its Technical Processes and History with Some Remarks on Collections and Collecting*. He refers to this print as “an example of the use of the undisguised line, softened only by the mellowing that comes from printing.” 95

In addition, Ruskin’s dictum that good etching had to make dramatic use of light and shade influenced Mary as early as 1880, when she created the evocative print *Twilight, East Hampton* (1880, figure A1). This highlights Mary’s increased confidence with tonal processes and her willingness to let unworked areas of the plate be infused with greater light and air. Frank Weitenkamp notes her use of “some rouletting and much tint produced by roughening the copper plate with ‘scotch stone,’ a substance used to reduce plates.” 96 This creates a dark tonality that serves to highlight the subtly contrasted passageways of the road. This work also calls attention to her use of the wiping technique known as retroussage, which produces the somber effect of overcast sky with thick


95 Koehler, not-paginated.

96 Weitenkampf, 13.
clouds obscuring the day’s remaining light. In describing this work, Francis writes: “The light of Eastern Long Island and the Hamptons had now manifested itself in Mary Nimmo Moran’s prints.”

Nimmo Moran’s print The Goose Pond, East Hampton (1881, figure A5) reflects a setting very near their home. Mary often found beauty in the pond’s placid water and flat grassy terrain. In this print she employs a compositional device where the curve of the pond and dense foliage of the cluster of shade trees in the middle ground create a sense of both depth and intimacy. Her treatment of the sky with its blustery cloud cover is exemplary and no doubt indebted to her husband’s influence.

The Royal Society of Painter-Etchers Society (RSPS) recognized The Goose Pond, East Hampton, and an invitation was extended to this exclusive organization. Membership was limited to fifty fellows (an additional one hundred fifty associates could be admitted), with admission contingent upon the society’s approval of a diploma-worthy work. Lang and Lang acknowledge that while the RSPS, had from its beginnings, admitted more women than most other artistic societies, “women still had to clear more hurdles than men, so their election as fellows, or even associates, can be read as compelling evidence of peer recognition.”

One of her best known works is Tween the Gloamin’ and the Mirk, When the Kye Come Hame (1883, figure A6), which Peet claims displays her most daring use of mixed media. This print and its lyrical Scottish title seem to suggest a European setting with the presence of a windmill situated in the horizon, although it too was created very near the

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97 Francis, 16.

98 Lang and Lang, 11-12.
Moran summer home in East Hampton. The rich dark tones in the horizon and sense of quiet it evokes are remarkable. Here the panorama is somewhat compressed with a leading path placed diagonally so that the bridge becomes a focal point, along with the line of trees and outbuildings meeting the sky in the background. Nimmo Moran created the dusky darkened sky and horizon with a roulette which enabled her to create ragged etched lines to create a chiaroscuro that does not impede upon the more delicately rendered textural effects of the grasses or trees. As Hults notes, “as light shrinks toward the horizon, the eye gravitates toward the area to the right of the silhouetted mill, a Rembrandtesque touch, where the road, with cows slowly returning home, also leads.”

Nimmo Moran’s painting Under the Oaks, Georgica Pond (1887, figure A7) is one of her largest compositions and departs from her preference for smaller plates. However, it serves as an outstanding example of her adeptness at detail with the fine rendering of the etched foliage and weathered bark evident in the canopy of oak trees framing the composition. Here again, her use of tonality creates mass and depth. As Francis asserts, “All of the artist’s years of experimentation and exploration culminate in this, her largest print. Massive trees frame a brook as it flows into a pond and then to the sea, all under a luminous, reflecting sky. As in most of her prints, nature here is tranquil.”

Contemporary critics often described Nimmo Moran’s Solitude as a “preeminently manly” piece of work and used masculinity as standard in judging Twilight, East Hampton and Goose Pond Lake, East Hampton in favorable terms. Peet contends that Nimmo Moran adopted this type of style “to draw serious attention to herself as an

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99 Hults, 714.

100 Francis, 17.
artist.” She explains that during this period of intense bias regarding the quality of women’s work, one could express her desire to be taken seriously through style and form. As a result, she argues, Nimmo Moran’s bold, assertive and expressive style “is a statement about herself as a committed artist.” \(^{101}\) One can look at the work of a contemporary, Eliza Greatorex (1819-1897) to see this distinction. Her 1880 etching *The Pond at Cernay-la-Ville* (figure A8) is described by Koehler in less favorable terms as “delicate, rather than strong in its inception as well as in its execution.” \(^{102}\)

In her 1883 article on American etchers in *Century Magazine*, Van Rensselaer singled out Nimmo Moran, claiming: “Her work would never reveal her sex—according, that is, to the popular idea of feminine characteristics. It is, above all things, direct, emphatic, bold—exceeding in these qualities, perhaps that of any of her male co-workers. \(^{103}\) For a woman artist of the late nineteenth century, this was indeed high praise, yet a problematic issue that continued into the twentieth century. Technically and formally the matter of stylistic differentiation was raised often. To paint—or etch—like a man was considered a compliment for a woman, yet men were never similarly praised for a feminine style. These preconceived ideas about the differences in women’s art gave critics the opportunity to apply different standards to women’s work because they assumed it was the product of amateurs.

It would not be until 1908 when art critic Mary Fanton Roberts, using the pen name

\(^{101}\) Peet, 34.

\(^{102}\) Koehler, unpaginated.

\(^{103}\) Peet, 33.
Giles Edgerton, challenged the bias of “feminine art” in an article titled “Is There a Sex Distinction in Art? The Attitude of the Critic toward Women’s Exhibition.” As Swinth explains, Roberts was a journalist with a very different background and approach to her writing than art critic Mariana Van Rensselaer, who was twenty years older and brought up according to Victorian tradition. As a single woman and proponent of women’s suffrage—an issue Van Rensselaer was ultimately against—Roberts “believed girls should be trained for a ‘profession’; and sought to define careers in fine arts.” As a result, argues Swinth, Roberts raised the issue of women’s art in a manner that Van Rensselaer never did.

In her article, Roberts reacted against the pre-conceived and condescending attitudes of critics as they approached the all-women exhibition at the Knoedler Galleries in New York that year. She argued against segregated exhibitions, which she believed to be old-fashioned and “opened the floodgates of masculine sentimentality and an honest point of view cannot be obtained.” She professed that male critics were patronizing in their response to women’s art, fearful that women would be too sensitive to criticism. While she acknowledged a difference in the work produced by men and women, she attributed this to their different outlooks on life. Nevertheless, she deemed their respective


105 Swinth, 161.

106 Edgerton (Fanton Roberts), 242.
expressions in art equal in terms of interest and technical excellence, thereby requiring the same criteria of evaluation.

Roberts’ writing is important for admonishing both men and women to maintain serious attitudes. She writes, “Women resent a sex distinction in art (not in the variation of art, but in the quality) and they honestly prefer just discriminating criticism to this attitude of tender-hearted masculine protection.” 107 For women, she argued, high standards and strict professionalism were always the best response. 108

While Nimmo Moran was heralded by Van Rensselaer, Everett, Koehler and others for the vitality and masculinity of her prints, she bowed to husband’s influence, explaining modestly, “I must say I have always been my Husband’s pupil.” 109 That self-effacing remark speaks volumes about the society in which she emerged and undermines the hard work and sacrifices she made on her own in developing her art. As Bruhn argues, while it is true that Mary embarked on etching at the suggestion of her husband and deferred to his lead in many ways, “etching was the one artistic medium where they could meet as equals.” 110 Mary’s talent and achievement earned her husband’s full respect, according to their daughter, Ruth: “His wife was the best critic he ever had. She encouraged all of his efforts and aided in developing his almost superhuman capacity for

107 Edgerton (Roberts), 240.
108 Edgerton (Roberts), 242.
109 Mary Nimmo Moran “Autobiographical Sketch” in Peet, 34 and referenced in Hults, 714.
110 Bruhn, 27.
work. ‘When she criticizes my pictures,’ he says, ‘she knew why and she was always right.’”

Nimmo Moran continued to exhibit and collect awards in the 1890s, including a medal and diploma earned from the Chicago Columbian Exposition in 1893. Nevertheless, she worked less in the 1890s due to decreasing interest in her work and in the medium itself. Peet hails Nimmo Moran as “the most prominent women of the women etchers in the late nineteenth century” who sadly did not live to participate in the next phase of the etching revival. She died September 25, 1899 of typhoid fever after nursing her daughter Ruth through the disease. She was buried in East Hampton near Goose Pond, the peaceful setting of so many of her prints.

Peet contends that it is Moran, and not well-known artist and printmaker Mary Cassatt who better “reflected American taste and attracted more attention from critics and writers than any other female (and most male) etchers.” She praises the artist not only for her body of work, but for opening doors to organizations such as the New York Etching Club which were previously closed to women. Perhaps just as important for women, she

111 Ruth B. Moran, “Draft for Biographical Sketch of Mary Nimmo Moran” in Peet, 32.

112 See Wanda M. Corn, *Women Building History: Public Art at the 1893 Columbian Exposition* (2011), specifically pp. 66-111 on the Woman’s Building. Corn notes that 104 American women submitted paintings, sculpture, and prints to the Palace of Fine Arts, with some women submitting works to both the Palace of Fine Arts and Women’s Building.

113 Francis, 18.

proved that marriage and family were not insurmountable barriers to professional success.
CHAPTER FOUR

MARY CASSATT: TRADITION, TECHNIQUE, AND A WOMAN’S SPHERE

Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) is remarkable for her accomplishments in art. She was the only American invited to exhibit with the French Impressionists, as well as one of the few women artists to succeed professionally in the late nineteenth-century. She adopted both the technique of the Impressionists and their commitment to painting scenes of everyday life. Using her family and friends as models, Cassatt produced a series of important oils, pastels and prints depicting the lives of upper-middle class women in Paris in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Although she is best known for her sensitive treatment of the mother and child theme, a motif that dominated her art after 1893, Cassatt looked beyond the traditional women’s private sphere by examining modern subjects such as public life in Paris. More than just a painter, she also experimented with new artistic developments throughout her career, particularly in the field of printmaking.

Cassatt’s interest in etching began in 1879 at the urging of her friend and mentor Edgar Degas. In spite of the fact that she was initially drawn to etching to improve her draftsmanship, she became a tireless and passionate printmaker. For over a decade she experimented with various etching and drypoint techniques, often producing many variations of the same image. Later, when she acquired her own press, she became satisfied only when her proofs met exacting standards. Between 1889 and 1891, all of this work, including her mastery of drypoint, culminated in a series of Japanese-inspired colored intaglios that is considered among her finest accomplishments. Scholar Griselda Pollock refers to them “as a milestone in graphic art and European printmaking, yet at the same time, absolutely in line with her own stylistic development and treatment of the
theme of women.\textsuperscript{115} While this is true, she also used this print series to introduce new motifs and pushed further beyond the politics of gender recognized in her painting.

Cassatt biographer Adelyn Breeskin claims that it is difficult to separate Cassatt’s life from her art. They must be considered together, she argues, “as the story of an American woman whose high ambitions overcame her limitations of precedent and sex, and the era to which she was born.”\textsuperscript{116} Her story thus begins in 1844 when she was born to a wealthy, socially prominent family in Pennsylvania. At an early age she asserted her desire to become an artist, but this ran contrary to the conventions of her class and gender. As Breeskin writes:

\begin{quote}
No respectable, refined lady could be a professional artist. Ladies were permitted to paint roses or pansies on china plates, even to make pencil sketcher or watercolors in their enclosed gardens, but to study art seriously, learning anatomy from nude models and having a studio of their own—it was never done and therefore was unthinkable.\textsuperscript{117}
\end{quote}

Against the wishes of her family, she enrolled at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts between 1861 and 1865, and then set off for Europe to expand her education even though conditions for studying art in Paris and elsewhere were no more favorable for women.\textsuperscript{118} She returned home in 1870 during conflicts in France, perhaps intending to practice art in Philadelphia. She rented studio space, located models and supplies, and

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{117}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{118}Huber, 16.
\end{flushright}
took up with friends she had known at the Pennsylvania Academy, including the Sartains—John and his children, Samuel, William, and Emily. After a brief period, she and Emily, an accomplished engraver who intended to develop her painting, longed to return to Europe, but Cassatt needed to come up with the funds to do so. Cassatt scholar Nancy Mowll Matthews writes: “Her parents were happy to support her, but felt that she should support her art: she was to pay for her studio, models, supplies and other expenses, including travel. Cassatt, who had always been eager to exhibit and sell, set out to raise the money.\textsuperscript{119}

In 1871 Cassatt and Sartain departed for Europe, stopping first in Italy for Cassatt to study the Madonna and Child themed paintings of Correggio (c.1489-1534) and Parmigianino (1502-1540), both of whom had a tremendous influence on her developing style and choice of subject matter. While Sartain traveled on to Paris, Cassatt stayed in Parma where she found studio space in the home of Carlo Raimondi, a professor of engraving and etching at the University of Parma. Breeskin surmises that she must have learned etching from him during her eight months stay in 1872. When she left, she gave him an early portrait inscribed “Mary Stevenson Cassatt/a mon ami C. Raimondi.” \textsuperscript{120}

From Parma, Cassatt traveled on to Rome, Spain and the Netherlands where she met her mother and announced that she would settle in Paris. From 1873 on she made Paris her home, and since her aging parents were unable to persuade her to return home, they joined her in 1877. This relationship was not uncommon for an unmarried woman. “For the next 18 years,” writes Susan Fillin Yeh, “Cassatt juggled her painting time with


\textsuperscript{120} Breeskin, 12.
complicated family responsibilities, including her beloved sister Lydia’s long and agonizing illness.”

In 1877 she met Edgar Degas, who upon seeing her work for the first time conceded that it was not bad—for a woman. At his encouragement, she became associated with a group of like-minded Independent artists later known as the Impressionists who banded together during the 1870s and 1880s to mount independent exhibitions of their work. In their desire to break through establishment practices, Pollock notes the Independents did much to help women who had fewer options than men:

During the mid-nineteenth century, there were a third as many female artists as male, yet none were able to attend the state-sponsored Ecole des Beaux-Arts, only seven percent had a received a Salon medal and only one the Legion d’honneur (statistics in Nochlin, 1972)...It is not surprising that two of the most notable women painters of the nineteenth century, Cassatt and Berthe Morisot, joined the Independents, for the radicalism of the organization in terms of nineteenth-century art practice signaled the rupture with generations of institutional discrimination against women artists.

An important aspect of Cassatt’s life as a professional artist was her regular participation in exhibitions where she would show her work and await critical response. This was often a frustrating experience for Cassatt, as well as other artists during the latter decades of the nineteenth century, who desired individual choice in subject matter and expression, and resented restrictions imposed by the official French Academy. “The Salon had become an antiquated institution with little relevance for innovative artists,” writes Phillip Dennis Cate. “In the face of this dissatisfaction, artists began looking to nontraditional and

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nonacademic ways to promote art and earn a living.”  

After ten years of exhibiting at the Salon, Cassatt welcomed the chance to exhibit outside the Salon system, and rejoiced that she could at last work independently. Mowll Matthews writes:

> When her opportunity to exhibit with the Impressionists finally came in 1879, Cassatt was not disappointed. She received favorable notice in the reviews that appeared in French newspapers and journals, and won the respect of the French intellectual community. Her masterful interpretation of the Impressionist style—especially the effects of light and shade—impressed the artists and critics who had seen Impressionism develop over the years. The most important of these was Degas, who welcomed her both as a colleague and a friend.  

Cassatt’s emergence as a printmaker was an important outgrowth of her involvement with the Impressionists, particularly her relationship with Degas. During the etching revival, many of the avant-garde artists produced prints, often in remarkable quantity and quality, notes James Rubin. For Édouard Manet (1832-1883), Camille Pissaro (1830-1903) and Degas, they were important to their artistic practice. Impressionist group exhibitions often contained prints, whether by those known mainly as painters or others who were exclusively printmakers such as Félix Bracquemond.  

During the 1870s when Impressionists had less opportunity to sell their paintings, they often turned to printmaking. Through their fascination with etching, both Degas and Camille Pissaro, for example, gradually developed complex combinations of techniques to enhance the uniqueness of print.  

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126 Ibid. p. 359.
Peinture (1879, figure A9), which conveys not only Degas’s brilliance in combining etching and drypoint techniques, as well as a close regard for his friend Cassatt. Its style also points to Degas’s emerging interest in Japanese prints. Linda Hults attributes the striking silhouette of Cassatt and her sister Lydia to a Japanese woodcut from eighteenth-century master printmaker Katsushika Hokusai’s (1760-1849) Manga.\footnote{Hults, 550.} As scholar Clay Lancaster explains, in 1856 printmaker Felix Bracquemond came upon one of the fourteen volumes of Hokusai’s sketch books containing thousands of drawings of figures, animals, plants and other subjects. This finding captivated artists and collectors in Paris and laid the groundwork in Europe for the interest in the colored prints of the ukiyo-e (floating world) school that first reached the West as wrappings around porcelains.\footnote{Clay Lancaster, The Japanese Influence in America (New York: Walton H. Rawls, 1963):33.}

Even though Cassatt’s interest in printmaking was likely initiated through her friendship with engraver Emily Sartain, as well as her early work with Raimondi in Parma, she had always considered painting her primary endeavor. A deeper interest was stirred when Degas approached her after the 1879 Impressionist Exhibition to contribute to a proposed journal of original prints known as *Le Jour et la nuit* (“Day and Night”), a title referencing the experimental effects of light and dark found in the prints.\footnote{Mowll Mathews, Cassatt and Her Circle: Selected Letters, 135.} Barbara Stern Shapiro writes that Cassatt was pleased to be included and set out to create an archive of painterly prints, many of which draw on her images of women. She writes:

> In this environment, with Pissarro, Degas and Felix Bracquemond as her teachers, she explored lesser known printmaking techniques such as softground etching and...
aquatint; these methods, new to her, soon found their way into numerous print compositions.  

This is best seen in In the Box (figure A10), an 1880 version of the Impressionist loge theme conveying a public setting that would have been acceptable for a woman to access. As Breeskin notes, “The composition is distinguished by a brilliant pattern of light and dark that seems to anticipate her later adherence to the flat arabesque, absorbed from Japanese prints.”  

Even though Degas’s publication failed to develop, Shapiro writes that these early experiments using diverse techniques impressed, as well as baffled audiences. For example, when several of these early untitled states were shown for the first time at the “Women Etchers of America Exhibition” in New York in 1888, many were referred to as “unfinished.” Phyllis Peet claims Cassatt’s exploration of modern themes were at odds with the “show’s other prints, which has been conceived firmly within the landscape and portrait styles popular in America during the Etching Revival.”

Cassatt continued to advance her draftsmanship in the next decade and worked toward exhibiting works capturing the simple elegant line of drypoint, a technique in which a clear, precise line and arabesque quality takes shape. From the first sketch on the uncoated plate, “she aimed to attain a free-flowing stroke, a rhythmic sense, and an

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132 Peet. 21.
exhilarating energy of line which became spontaneous and unfailing.”  

This can be seen in Baby’s Back (1890, Figure A11), a version of her signature mother and child that she explores across media. Here she deftly outlines the figure of the mother and soft contours of the child with subtle precision. The mother’s face is mostly obscured in partial profile to emphasize the delicate contours of the baby’s soft skin (and the importance of the child in late nineteenth century French society). The mere suggestion of her hands, often prominent in her paintings, is instead nuanced here.

By 1890 her interest in drypoint more fully develops. In explaining her preference for the technique, she explains: “In drypoint you are down to the bare bones. You can’t cheat.”  

This technique departs from etching in that a drawing is made on an uncoated plate using a steel or diamond needle, which deposits a slight ridge of particles on the edge of the incised lines. When printed these ridges, or burr, take up the ink, giving depth to the line and a nuanced effect to the rendered image.

That same year a major exhibition of the popular Japanese ukiyo-e prints of the eighteenth and nineteenth century was held at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts from April 25 to May 22. Cassatt’s first documented interest in the color prints is through a letter to Berthe Morisot urging her friend to join her. “You must not miss that. You who want to make color prints you couldn’t dream of anything more beautiful. I dream of it and I don’t think of anything else but color on copper.”

The prints in the exhibition held strong

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134 Ibid.

135 Mathews, Cassatt and Her Circle: Selected Letters, 214.
appeal to the avant-garde. “To the Impressionists and their second generation successor, Japonisme spelt liberation, the revelation of techniques which released them from the old traditional concepts of classical modeling taught at the academies,” writes Sigfried Wichmann. He cites the use of brilliant color on flat surfaces, fragmentation for depth, use of foreshortening and the close arrangement of foreground objects as key innovations. These changes, along with compositional strategies such as a partial and bird’s-eye view and the suspension of figures in space, all ushered in an artistic revolution. Japonisme stimulated an “enormous swing away from imitative and photographic and towards the decorative as a valid artistic means,” claims Wichmann.  

The Japanese aesthetic evident in the prints emphasized fleeting moments in Japanese culture. The subject matter was contemporary middle class life, its shows and festivals, along with the favorite actors and courtesans of the day. Much of the subject matter was also erotic, which held no appeal to straight-laced Cassatt. Instead, she was drawn to domestic images or beautiful courtesans that could be translated into the simple but refined women who inhabited her contemporary world and comfortable surroundings. This dialogue with her signature themes is readily apparent.

Although it is known that Cassatt collected woodcuts by many Japanese artists, she was most drawn to Kitawaga Utamaro’s (1754-1806) refined style and female subjects. His reputation has become synonymous with portrayals of women of great charm and

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beauty, most often associated with Edo’s licensed district. Harold P. Stern writes, “He must have loved them dearly, for he made them tower and imparted a sense of majesty to their rather precarious lives. At the same time, he was capable of commenting via scathing designs, on the most intimate, as well as sordid aspects of their existence.”

Utamaro’s woodblock prints capture the personalities and subtle moods of women across class, age and circumstance. When he began to focus more on single portraits of women, he emphasizes a woman’s upper body or head, creating beauties with distorted features including elongated necks, large heads and elaborate coiffures.

Cassatt was drawn to many of the prints associated with the eighteen-century printmaker, but most important was the appeal of one of his great masterpieces: The Twelve Hours in the Pleasure Quarters of the Yoshiwara, a series of twelve prints conveying the often ordinary activities of exotic women as they go about their day. By this time, Cassatt had become intrigued with the Japanese idea of creating a cycle of vignettes. She was obviously attracted to this unfolding of daily scenes, and she used this framework to depict women who performed their domestic tasks and activities in the cultured environment that the artist knew so well. Her series is close to Utamaro’s with an occasional repetition in figures and the suggestion of times of day—morning activities, caring for children, daily errands, afternoon socializing, and bedtime rituals. Within this cycle, Cassatt also broadens her scope by introducing new engagements such

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as riding an omnibus, visiting a dressmaker and tending to correspondence.

For an artist who declared that she despised conventional art, Cassatt found in Utamaro an invigorating approach to the depiction of ordinary events in women's lives. After repeated visits to the exhibition she set out to create a series in open admiration of Japanese subjects, compositions, use of color and technical innovations, stating: “This set was done with the intention of attempting an imitation of Japanese methods. Of course, I abandoned somewhat after the first plate and tried for more atmosphere.”

Cassatt had repeatedly explored the Impressionists’ interest in the quiet moment, and within the set of colored prints she continues her study of women captured in this way. Similar to her paintings, her subjects are not just decorative; they show active intelligence and engagement. In subject matter, The Letter (1890-91, figure A12) is certainly consistent with Cassatt’s store of nineteenth-century female pursuits (along with reading, writing and needlework). As an expatriate she was likely in the position of having a great deal of personal and professional correspondence, so it seems unusual that she did not capture this motif more often in her work. Perhaps as a busy artist she considered it an encumbrance on her limited time.

In this elegant genre scene, The Letter conveys an unknowing intimacy, created through the use of a strong geometric composition and emphasis on the foreground plane. As Hults points out, the focus is on a single figure, whose relationship to a husband or suitor is implied by the letter similar to seventeenth century Dutch genre painting.  

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140 Breeskin, 20.

141 Hults, 551-552.
Here Cassatt’s figure bends slightly forward, intent upon sealing an envelope and oblivious to being observed. Her eyes are downcast and slightly crossed, an effect used as a mark of beauty. Also Japanese in effect is the stark, unadorned secretary desk with its protruding sharp angles serving to counteract the strong overall patterns in her dress and flocked wallpaper. The image is in close dialogue with Kitagawa Utamaro’s Geisha Holding a Letter (1793-1794, figure A13), both in subject and style.

Cassatt’s interest in mothers and children was also explored brilliantly nearly a century earlier by the Japanese master. Stern claims that “no artist of the Ukiyo-e School handled scenes of the parent-child relationship more poignantly than Utamaro.” This is evident in his truthful representation of the subject in Mother Bathing Son (c. 1795, figure A14), which Cassatt appropriated for her color intaglio, The Bath (1890-91, figure A15). Having never worked in woodcut, she interpreted this technique into one in which she was adept, using metal plates rather than wood blocks and drypoint over softground line. Breeskin points out that the simple outlines are broadened and at the same time softened by very pale soft-ground, enabling her to come close to the character of the woodcut. 142

The act of bathing was a familiar subject in Japanese art, where it is treated with realism that incorporates both physical grace and an almost ceremonial content. (Certainly, Cassatt was familiar with Degas’s series of women washing themselves, and was no doubt impressed by his technique and format.) Here she seems to elevate this everyday human activity through the same unified figural grouping as Utamaro but with a quieter sense of motion. While Utamaro’s mother gets down to the business of the task

142 Breeskin, 21.
itself, evident as she crouches over the wooden vat to vigorously scrub the youngster’s face and contain his squirming body, Cassatt instead captures the earlier moment when a mother protectively tests the temperature of the bath. With one arm cradling the unstable baby and the other immersed in the gently swirling water, it is clear that Cassatt comes close to Utamaro in recording the honesty of this simple act.

Her approach in confronting this theme is best seen by contrasting it to the print of a contemporary, American Helen Hyde (1868-1919) who had likely seen both Utamaro’s woodcut print and Cassatt’s intaglios during her student days in Paris. Hyde’s color woodcut *The Bath* (1905, figure A16), with its linear rhythm and delicate washes, pays clear homage to both Cassatt’s etching of the same title and its Japanese predecessor. Set within a composition defined by a pair of screens, Hyde captures an endearing scene where a kneeling Japanese mother tenderly embraces her child as she lifts the little master from his bath. With lowered eyes and a serene expression, she appears to find much joy in this ritual. Her polished coif and patterned kimono serve as a foil to the purity of the unclothed baby, while her kneeling posture reinforces the ceremonial aspect of the task. What separates these two works most noticeable is Cassatt’s ability to restrain the smiling sentimentality that Hyde invokes. Perhaps it precisely this lack of sentiment and customary charm that explains why Cassatt’s work was not embraced by popular taste during her time.

Cassatt’s print, *In the Omnibus* (1890-91, figure A17) is a rare public scene in the artist’s images of women and children. Here an upper middle-class woman ventures out publicly with her child and nursemaid. They are seated closely together in the vehicle, with the arabesque form of the baby’s figure silhouetted against the figures of the mother
on the left and the maid on the right. The mother’s head is framed within one of the bus windows, as she turns and looks protectively around her, while the nursemaid holds and engages with the child.

Certainly Cassatt is calling attention to the much contested issue of a respectable lady venturing out in public unchaperoned. She approaches this uniquely by showing the different reactions between the middle class woman and her nurse. As scholar Norma Broude writes:

While the class differences between women, observable both in their dress and comportment, would have seemed self-evident and probably unremarkable in the 19th century, Cassatt displays that difference here in the more nuanced social and psychological terms by contrasting the wariness of the middle-class woman, for whom riding on this public conveyance constituted a transgressive act, and the oblivious of the working-class nursemaid who plays happily with the child on her lap. 143

No doubt Cassatt herself found these types of social constraints difficult to navigate in her personal and professional life. These conventions dictated where a respectable woman could venture without sullying her reputation. As Ingrid Pfeiffer points out, the cafes that the Impressionists liked to frequent from 1876 onwards were out of bounds for female artists such as Cassatt. “Their only chance of appearing in public was to go to the opera, a public park or—especially important to the women artists in Paris—the Louvre where they could walk around at their leisure, meet fellow artists and copy old masters.”144


In the Omnibus also reveals Cassatt’s exemplary use of color throughout her 1890 series of prints. The hues, although particularly subtle, are chosen from Cassatt’s palette and are unlike stronger colors such as deep blues favored by the Japanese. “Much of the beauty of the set—and its importance to the history of printmaking—is based largely upon the presentation of color and surface: granular and subtly modulated patches of blue, mauve, and green best described as faded or “dusty” in tone, are played against a dramatic blocks of black and white,” explains Deborah Johnson. 145 Accordingly, the two women’s dresses in In the Omnibus are contrasted in tones of brown and a rosy tan. What is significant is that Cassatt’s subtle, warm and muted palette is not drawn from clean, fresh prints but instead echoes the faded and discolored impressions of the century-old prints she observed. Shapiro notes that the artist felt that since she was doing the inking, she could vary the manner of applying the color, and thus achieve different effects in her impressions. 146 In Baby’s Bath, which is the first in the sequence of her series, Cassatt went through seventeen identifiable states or stages in development until she realized the full expression of her technique and color harmony.

After seeing Cassatt’s set of ten colored prints, Camille Pissaro wrote to his son Lucien, also a printmaker, in April 1891:

It is absolutely necessary, while what I saw yesterday at Miss Cassatt’s is still fresh in my mind, to tell you about the colored engravings she is to show at Durand-Ruels…you remember the effects you strove for Eragny? Well, Miss Cassatt has achieved just such effects, and admirable: the tone, even, subtle,


146 Stern Shapiro in Stern Shapiro and Mowll Matthews, Mary Cassatt: The Color Prints, 44.
delicate, without stain on the seams, adorable blues, fresh rose, etc. …the result is admirable, as beautiful as Japanese work and it is done with printers’ ink.  

According to Pissaro her tones were exceptionally fine—the result of using the best quality plates (copper), a dusting box and a good printer. As far as the actual technical procedure Cassatt used in making the prints, she described this complex process in her customary straightforward manner in a letter to New York print dealer and collector Samuel Avery:

My method is very simple. I drew an outline in drypoint and transferred it to two other plates, making in all, three plates, never more for each proof. Then I put in aquatint wherever the color was to be printed; the color was painted on the plate as it was to appear in the proof.

Cassatt worked diligently on developing this process, pulling up to ten proofs a day with the help of her trusted printer, M. Leroy. She produced twenty-five editions of the ten set series, and signed them with both her name and Leroy’s to convey her regard for his instrumental role. This was not customarily done in Cassatt’s time. However, in Japan the creation of prints was a collaborative effort between the artist, woodblock carver, printer and publisher. Cassatt must have shared this sense of collaboration.

Cassatt experts traditionally place this set of ten color prints at the highest level of the artist’s oeuvre. Breeskin argues this work “would give her claim to fame if they were her sole accomplishment. They are indeed her most original contribution, adding a new

147 Mathews, Cassatt and her Circle: Selected Letters, 219.

chapter to the history of graphic arts…“\textsuperscript{149} Viewed collectively, Cassatt’s print series successfully brings together innovative composition, abstract patterning, remarkable hues and powerful line. Although she was restricted by social conventions to models from the life of bourgeois women and children around her, she nonetheless used the ordinary happenings of family life to assert her most significant achievement, a new image of women that transcends the traditional sphere of women. In doing so, she used her art to challenge Victorian stereotypes while personally transcending constricting gender norms of her day. Accordingly, she is one of the most important contributors to the etching revival.

\textsuperscript{149} Breeskin, 21.
CONCLUSION

PAVING THE WAY TO A “NEW WOMAN”

Mary Nimmo Moran and Mary Cassatt found in etching the full expression of their artistic voice and created many of the best examples of the late nineteenth-century Painter-Etcher movement. As they moved beyond the realm of lady amateur, these artists successfully navigated gender throughout their personal and professional lives. In doing so, they paved the way for the emergence of a new modern woman during the early decades of the twentieth century who would work to abolish gender differences in art.

Born just two years apart in the 1840s, Cassatt and Nimmo Moran came of age during a time when most women were destined for domestic roles. Art was an acceptable, even desirable activity for becoming an “accomplished lady” but only as an amateur. Both artists transcended these limitations not only by creating art of significance, but also by exhibiting their work within professional circles to great acclaim. While neither woman had to make her living solely by her art (Cassatt was independently wealthy and Nimmo Moran was married and supported by her husband), they both showed in their work and professional activities that their work could be taken seriously in a male-oriented context.

These women relied on style, subject matter and technique to draw serious attention to their work. Both of these women exhibited widely and vied for sales and critical reception, although Nimmo Moran was forced to truncate her signature to shield her gender and Cassatt preferred to distance herself from women’s only exhibitions because of their “amateur” associations.

As we have seen, these women not only used their art to subtly challenge Victorian stereotypes, but also defied traditional gender norms in their personal lives. Nimmo
Moran married the well-known landscape painter and printmaker Thomas Moran, raised a family, and supported his career, but also achieved her own success in art. Cassatt never married but spent much of her adult life caring for her aging parents and sister while advancing her career. She acknowledged once that “a woman artist must be…capable of making the primary sacrifices.”  

In combining work with family duties, each in her own way questioned the constraints of domesticity and sought increased independence and personal expression from her work. In doing so, claims scholar Wanda Corn, they reflect a larger breed of female artists who “sought enlarged definitions of womanhood that would allow them to grow and develop their minds and talents in preparation for a life just inside but also outside the home.”

During the years that Nimmo Moran and Cassatt were exhibiting their work, forward-looking women were on the cusp of acquiring a new cultural label, argues Corn. She writes: “The once rigid definitions of Victorian womanhood were giving way, ushering in a modern woman unlike her predecessors.” Many scholars have discussed the phenomenon of the “New Woman.” Corn describes her as college educated, professionally trained and critical of the gender conventions that shaped her predecessors. Kirsten Swinth explains that as these women turned the corner into the twentieth century, they were part of a generation “interested in feminism, in flouting convention and in

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152 Ibid.
deliberately undermining the ideal of the true [married] woman.” 153 They gained knowledge and confidence through the expansion of higher education, and gained strength from a growing labor force of women and momentum in the suffrage movement. “By the early twentieth century,” claims historian Nancy Cott, “it was commonplace that the New Woman stood for self-development as contrasted to self-sacrifice or submergence in the family.”154

Prieto also credits the expansion of educational opportunities for spurring the transformation of women as domestic artists to a more self-consciously aware professional. Yet because of the presence of separate institutions, a special brand of feminine professional took hold that shaped the idea of a New Woman, “an image that in turn won increasing acceptance for women in the public sphere.”155 This new woman proved to be a successful model because, “unlike the domestic lady artist, it could preserve the woman’s gender identification without threatening her professional status.” Women used their sense of purpose to support public, even political movements, and occupied the stage with a confidence that they could make significant accomplishments to American art and society while still retaining their femininity.156

As both Corn and Kirsten Swinth have identified, women artists of the older generation—those artists like Cassatt, Nimmo Moran, and Emily Sartain (among others), born between 1840 and 1860, paved the way for the more independent women who came

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153 Swinth, 169.

154 Ibid.

155 Prieto, 145.

156 Prieto, 147.
of age during the 1890s and after, and became modernists. Corn likens this earlier group to the female consciousness that dominated the Woman’s Building at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 as having a “post-Victorian” sensibility, a term she describes as “the liminal moment when many adult American women, raised in the manners and strictures of bourgeois Victorian homes, began to forge new female identities without shedding all of the traditional proprieties they had acquired at the feet of their traditional mothers.” As post-Victorians, these women made the first important steps in challenging the pre-ordained roles they were assigned in their youth.

Corn claims these women’s sense of self was in transition. In many ways they were progressive, yet they also seemed to cling to tenants of their upbringing. “Not yet the fully formed “New Woman” their daughters might become, neither were they still the Victorian matrons whose days and duties were centered on hearth and home. As feminist scholar Norma Broude asserts, women like Cassatt “desired autonomy, success and fame, but they also absorbed the patriarchal values of their bourgeois, Victorian era. And in a century of dynamic and discomforting social change, their own ambivalence may have been the necessary price, or even the necessary condition, for their extraordinary achievements.”

The last few decades of the nineteenth-century dovetailed with the tremendous growth in social and educational opportunities for women, yet these progressive measures were

\[\text{Corn, 72.}\]
\[\text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{Broude, Norma, “Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman or the Cult of True Womanhood?” Woman’s Art Journal 21, no. 2 (Autumn, 2000-Winter, 2001): 37.}\]
often at odds with socially ingrained barriers that prevented women from fully asserting themselves and being regarded as professionals. As we have seen through an examination of their lives and work, Mary Nimmo Moran and Mary Cassatt were at the forefront of these changes, and as representatives of the movement, paved the way for women artists to achieve professional success.
Figure A1: Mary Nimmo Moran, *Twilight Easthampton*, 1880
Etching, Terra Foundation for American Art.
Source: ARTstor Digital Library.

Figure A2: Mary Nimmo Moran, *A City Farm, New York*, 1881
Etching, Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American Art and History,
Tulsa, Oklahoma.
Figure A3: Mary Nimmo Moran, Solitude, 1880. Etching, University of Iowa Museum of Art Digital Collection.

Figure A4: Mary Nimmo Moran, The Haunt of the Muskrat, East Hampton, 1883. Etching, University of Iowa Museum of Art Digital Collection.

Figure A6: Mary Nimmo Moran, *Tween the Gloamin’ and the Mirk, When the Kye Come Hame*, 1883. Etching, University of Iowa Museum of Art Digital Collection.
Figure A7: Mary Nimmo Moran, *Under the Oaks, Georgica Pond*, 1887. Etching, Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American Art and History, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Figure A8: Eliza Greatorex, *The Pond at Cernay-la-Ville*, 1880. Etching, Dickinson College, The Trout Gallery. Source: ARTStor Digital Library.
Figure A10: Mary Cassatt, *In the Opera Box*, 1880. Softground etching and aquatint, Indianapolis Museum of Art. Source: ARTstor Digital Library.

Figure A11: Mary Cassatt, *Baby’s Back*, 1890. Drypoint and softground etching, Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas. Source: ARTstor Digital Library.
Figure A12: Mary Cassatt, *The Letter*, 1890-1891. Drypoint, softground etching and aquatint, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Source: ARTstor Digital Library.


Figure A15: Mary Cassatt, *The Bath*, 1890-1891. Drypoint, softground etching and aquatint, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Source: ARTstor Digital Library.
Figure A16: Helen Hyde, *The Bath*, 1905.
Polychrome woodcut print, Terra Foundation for American Art.
Source: ARTstor Digital Library.

Figure A17: Mary Cassatt, *In the Omnibus*, 1890-1891.
Drypoint, softground etching and aquatint.
Cleveland Museum of Art.
Source: ARTstor Digital Library.


Everett, Morris T. “The Etchings of Mrs. Mary Nimmo Moran” *Brush and Pencil* 8, no.1 (April, 1901).


