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book review of

Eve's Daughter/Modern Woman: A Mural by Mary Cassatt by Sally Webster

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Sally Webster
Eve's Daughter/Modern Woman: A Mural by Mary Cassatt
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In *Eve's Daughter/Modern Woman*, Sally Webster advances a compellingly feminist, solidly art-historical, and satisfyingly contextual reading of Mary Cassatt's monumental mural, which adorned the south tympanum of the Women's Building during the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. As Cassatt's only venture into public art, *Modern Woman* was in some ways an anomaly in the career of the Philadelphia expatriate, best known today for her easel paintings, prints, and pastels representing the lives and rituals of middle-class, leisured women. Yet the meaning of *Modern Woman*, as Webster so ably shows, is crucial to our understanding of Cassatt herself, as modern woman and modern artist alike, working during a period of radical feminist activism and profound change in the lives of women on both sides of the Atlantic. In proposing a feminist reading of *Modern Woman*, Webster radicalizes the work itself, showing how in both form and content the mural was no pastoral fantasy but rather a bold, vibrant, and fully contemporary vision of women's empowerment and agency in the modern world.

In the first two chapters, Webster carefully lays the groundwork, providing an economical account of Cassatt's evolution as an artist and a concise discussion of the planning, design, and construction of the Women's Building, which like the Columbian Exposition itself was a site of ideological conflict among competing philanthropic women's groups and personality clashes, especially with the titanic Bertha Honore Palmer, President of the Board of Lady Managers. In many ways a compromise, the Women's Building was nonetheless a powerful statement of women's advances, productivity, and achievements in the modern world. To reify and synthesize that message, Palmer articulated the concept that would guide Cassatt and her counterpart Mary Fairchild MacMonnies: "Of course we should want something symbolic showing the advancement of woman. My idea was that perhaps we might show woman in her primitive condition as a bearer of burdens and doing drudgery . . . and as a contrast, woman in the position she occupies today." (62) Once completed and installed, MacMonnies's *Primitive Woman* and Cassatt's *Modern Woman* faced each other some two hundred feet apart and 45 feet above ground level in the Hall of Honor.

Whereas MacMonnies's *Primitive Woman* did more or less what Mrs. Palmer envisioned, in a classically monumental style much indebted to the influential French muralist Puvis de Chavannes, Cassatt's *Modern Woman* was adventurously eclectic in its references, ranging from the Italian Renaissance through Impressionism, Symbolism, Japanese prints, Aesthetic Movement illustration, Puvis, and the decorative art of the Nabis, whose influence could be detected in the flattened, shadowless space and crisply outlined figures. The mural exists today only in the form of indistinct black and white photographs and one color print of the central section. But its color scheme was powerful: a prevailing "bright grass green" against which touches of red and, in the right-hand panel, the complementary hues of "corn-color and violet" in the women's dresses made a vibrant display that some found discordant against the restrained white and gold of the surrounding architectural décor (121).

No less bold and (to some, no doubt) discordant if not disruptive was Cassatt's vision of modern womanhood. At first glance, a viewer might pardonably suppose that there was nothing startlingly modern here. In the center panel, the largest of the three, women on ladders harvest apples; on the left, a group of endearingly awkward adolescent girls, chased by geese, pursue the nude, air-born figure of Fame; on the right, personified Music accompanies Dance, both in turn observed by Art. Yet this is no timeless Arcadia. As Webster deftly shows, the modernity of Cassatt's *Modern Woman* lies in its connotations, which point for point reference radical forces for change in women's lives. The central panel, *Young Women Plucking the Fruits of Knowledge or Science*, is a modern, domesticated Garden of Eden with neither Adam nor serpent. Here, modern Eves pick the fruits "for their own benefit and advancement." This reconfiguration of the Temptation story is the "most radical aspect" of the narrative, Webster argues, because it "advances a reinterpretation of Eve's transgressions as a precursor to women's emancipation." (74) Cassatt's new, positive spin on Eve's transgression in fact mirrored the new feminist theology as formulated by the redoubtable American activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who maintained that without Eve's insubordination, "humankind would remain forever indifferent to the power of the intellect." (78) Webster goes on to link Cassatt's concept with advances in education for women and with dress reform, hotly debated issues that had immense bearing on women's potential for independence and full citizenship. As did health: Webster argues that both [unladylike] ambition and physical education are themes implied in *Young Girls Pursuing Fame*, in which the exuberant trio dashes rambunctiously across the meadow, clad in the kind of loose, comfortable dresses recommended by gymnastics instructors.

In Webster's view, the three teenagers chasing the apparition of Fame mature into the three women personifying Dance, Art, and Music in the right-hand panel of the mural. Little attention in the past has been paid to this panel, but Webster's deep and inspired scrutiny reveals how important a role this scene plays in producing the meaning of the whole. Closely reading contemporary descriptions and criticisms of the mural, Webster has discovered that the Dance represented here is the thoroughly modern and wildly popular "skirt dance," which in its more spectacular manifestation was performed by the celebrity dancer Loie Fuller. Made popular in British music halls, the skirt dance, Webster notes, had become the vogue in the United States. A challenge to "the hegemony of ballet," it was related to the graceful, "aesthetic calisthenics" of the Delsarte system, which from the 1890s had an enormous impact on American dance and physical culture (96). Webster reproduces the illustration, "At a Society Skirt Dance," which appeared in the New York *World* in 1892.

Here, four long-skirted, high-kicking socialites dance in a row on stage, in poses stunningly similar to that of Cassatt's Dance, who raises her voluminous skirt preparatory to flinging one foot high in the air. "It was Cassatt's skirt dancer, not Degas's ballerina, who presaged the modern era for women," Webster notes. (96)

In the *World* illustration, a woman playing the banjo accompanies the four skirt dancers. Like the skirt dance, the banjo was a middle- and upper-class feminine craze in the late nineteenth century, representing a radical departure from the piano and guitar, hitherto the chief instruments used in performing genteel, lady-like parlor music. It was a sign of utmost modernity, appropriated as such by Cassatt, who in one of her rare comments on her vision of the mural told Bertha Palmer that her image of Music would contain "'nothing of St. Cecelia.'" (96) For all that they enact their performance in an indeterminate pastoral space, Cassatt's skirt dancer and banjo player are the quintessential embodiments of modern femininity and modern art alike. They also indicate, as Webster notes, that Cassatt was acutely attuned to popular culture, American style, and chose these symbolic activities with an American audience in mind.

The other figure, personifying Art, wears a fashionable dress but lacks any attributes, traditional or modern. She sits quietly, observing the other two, making up the third in a modernized version of the three graces. Webster suggests, moreover, that the figure of Art might conceivably be Cassatt herself, which casts the mural in a new and different light as an essay in artistic and ideological autobiography. The three sections of the mural, Webster writes, represent the three ages of women: child, young woman, and mature adult, shown not in their domestic roles but as "aspiring scientists, intellectuals, and artists. These aspirations, traditionally associated with men, Cassatt claimed for herself and in Chicago for all womankind." (112)

No ordinary mural, *Modern Woman* was a symbolic manifesto of feminine autonomy, value, and self-worth. Densely textured with references to historical and contemporary women's achievements, *Modern Woman* made unconventional use of conventional forms to convey its transgressive and hopeful message. At a time when much public art concerned itself with pompous pronouncements and tired allegorical clichés in support of the status quo, *Modern Woman* was fresh, bold, and brave. Webster's important and highly engaging study makes it absolutely clear and irrefutable that *Modern Woman* stands at the ideological core of Cassatt's oeuvre. In unraveling the mural's sources, linking it to feminist activism and other reformist currents, and viewing it in relation to the artist's own life story and struggle, Webster restores the work to the important place it deserves as the fiercely independent artist's most public, political, and (in its coded fashion) most personal expression. This restoration is all the more significant given that the painting itself has never been found. Webster ends her book with a fascinating and suspenseful account of her search for any trace of its wanderings and whereabouts. Her painstaking archival digging illuminated traces of a trail, only to arrive ultimately at a dead end. Presumably held for some years by Bertha Palmer, the mural (along with Mary MacMonnies's) was at different times destined for the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana or the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. It is not out of the question, writes Webster, that the Cassatt murals "exist somewhere high on a library wall, covered in grime, in some Midwestern college building within a hundred-mile radius of Chicago." (139) Future sleuths may yet discover them, but more likely they

were disposed of sometime after 1918, the year Bertha Palmer died. Reading Webster's absorbing narrative is as near as we can hope to approach and view the lost original in all its brilliance and complexity.

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