

Mary CASSATT (Allegheny City 1844 - Le Mesnil-Théribus 1926)

The Head of a Baby with its Finger in its Mouth (Portrait of George Fiske Hammond)

Pastel on blue paper.
523 x 472 mm. (20 5/8 x 18 5/8 in.) [sheet]

Mary Cassatt's use of the medium of pastel is a characteristic of her entire career, and accounts for much of her finest work. She was extremely proficient as a pastellist, with her handling of the medium reflecting the profound influence of Degas, and becoming more free and spontaneous as her career progressed. For Cassatt, as for Degas, pastel became her primary medium towards the end of her career, and her preferred means of expression.

The present sheet was drawn on what was Cassatt's only extensive trip back to America after settling in France, between January 1898 and April 1899. Cassatt visited friends and family, and undertook portrait commissions in pastel, in Philadelphia, New York, Boston and Connecticut. The fact that she took only pastels, and no oil paints, with her on this trip underscores the importance that the medium had for the artist. As the Cassatt scholar Adelyn Breeskin has written, 'Cassatt used the two media of oil and pastel interchangeably and was able to obtain equally strong, solid works from both, but I feel sure that she favored pastel and preferred working in this medium since at the time she made her only extensive trip back to America after settling in France, she took only her pastels with her. She completed many studies during that trip in 1898-99 – studies of her nieces and nephew, and of friends such as the Whittemores in Connecticut, the Montgomery Sears, and the Hammonds in Boston. Some of these pastels were well-finished portraits, but others were lively sketches done on the spur of the moment...This spontaneous response to a passing sight resulted in some of the artist's most brilliant pastels.'

Although Cassatt had depicted children throughout her career, these tended to be portraits of the younger members of her family. By the late 1890s, however, she had acquired something of a reputation as a specialist in child portraiture, and began to receive commissions accordingly. Similarly, in her mother and child compositions of this period, emphasis began to be placed more and more on the child. As Cassatt's biographer Nancy Mowll Mathews has pointed out, 'In earlier examples it was the

mother who was the focal point, as if it was motherhood that was being extolled...But as the century came to a close, the child began to receive more attention in Cassatt's work. Her child models from this period have distinctive features and their expressions and gestures reveal more individualized personalities.'

The subject of this charming pastel, George Fiske Hammond, was the son of Gardiner Greene Hammond Jr. and Esther Fiske Hammond of Boston. Cassatt painted three finished pastel portraits of the Hammond children in Boston in 1898, and seems to have received the commission through the recommendation of John Singer Sargent, who had painted a portraits of their father in 1895 and was to paint their mother in 1903.

Cassatt set up a temporary studio - from which the children's parents were strictly excluded - in a room at the Hammond house at 261 Clarendon Street in Boston. As Nancy Mowll Mathews writes, 'Portrait commissions were the reason Cassatt went to Boston after her stay in New York City. Although she also had many friends among the artists' and collectors' circles in that city, it is doubtful she would have included it on her itinerary if it had not been for a portrait commission she had taken on. This time the subjects were to be the three children of Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner Greene Hammond. The parents had their own portraits done by John Singer Sargent; but he declined the request to do the children, recommending Mary Cassatt instead. Surprisingly, Cassatt agreed, even though the family was not personally known to her, nor were they collectors of her work. The experience was an agreeable one; the Hammonds introduced her to a wide circle of collectors in Boston, and she added as a favor a third, uncommissioned portrait to the two she had contracted to do. She typically set up her drawing board in a temporary studio in the sitter's house and endeavored to keep the children quiet by telling stories or having someone read to them.'

All three finished pastel portraits of the Hammond children – the four year old Frances Lathrop Hammond, her younger brother Gardiner Greene Hammond III, and the baby George Fiske Hammond, who posed with his brother - remain today in the possession of their descendants. The present pastel sketch is a study for Cassatt's pastel double portrait of George Fiske Hammond and his elder brother Gardiner Hammond.

One other sketch for the finished pastel portraits of the Hammond children is known; a study of the young Gardiner, preparatory for the solo portrait of the boy, is in the Phoenix Art Museum in Arizona. Nancy Mowll Mathews's comments on Cassatt's portrait sketches in pastel, and the Phoenix pastel sketch in particular, are also highly relevant to the present work: 'The Head of Master Hammond is infused with the exuberance that characterized Cassatt's first response to a sitter, and it clarifies her method of composing a work rapidly. She establishes the major lines of the composition at once, usually producing a radiating pattern with the face at the center of the configuration...The quick strokes of the pastel stick help to define figure and ground, as well as offering a preliminary color pattern. The face itself, obviously the most important part of the development of the work, is usually highly finished. The features are well defined, the direction of the gaze and the expectant expression captured early on. Finally, the creamy texture of the flesh is evoked through the thick application of very soft pigment, which is then rubbed and highlighted.'

Born in March 1897, the subject of this pastel sketch, George Fiske Hammond (1897-1982), would have been just under a year old when the present sheet was drawn the following year. The youngest of the Hammond children at the time of Cassatt's trip to Boston, George almost died of pneumonia as a youth, and the family began spending winters in Southern California from 1908 onwards. After his parents divorced in 1910, George and his siblings settled with their mother in Santa Barbara, and later in Montecito. George Fiske Hammond graduated from the University of California in 1926, and later became a pioneering aviator.

As has been aptly noted of Mary Cassatt, 'It is in her pastels that she gave vent to her liveliest impulse, and they constitute her most spirited work. Taken together, they seem to indicate that although she was seriously committed to her art, she often approached it with a light heart, delighting in spontaneous expression and vivid charm.'

This pastel sketch remained in the artist's studio until her death in 1926. In her will, Cassatt bequeathed

a large number of her drawings and pastels – including the present sheet - to her longserving housekeeper, maid and companion, Mathilde Valet, who had worked for her for forty-five years and who managed the artist's affairs in the last years of her life.

Provenance:

Bequeathed by the artist to her housekeeper, Mathilde Valet, Paris and Château de Beaufresne, Le Mesnil-Théribus, in 1926
Her anonymous sale ('Collection de Mademoiselle X...Oeuvres de Mary Cassatt et divers'), Paris, Hôtel Drouot, 30 March 1927, possibly lot 72 ('Tête de bébé aux yeux noirs. Esquisse pastel. 26 x 27'), with the sale stamp (Lugt 2665a) near the lower left
Galerie Jacques Dubourg, Paris, by 1961
Charles E. Slatkin Galleries (Mrs. Regina Slatkin), New York, by 1966
By descent to Carole Slatkin, New York
David Tunick, New York
Acquired from him in 2005 by a private collector, New York.

Exhibitions

Paris, Galerie Jacques Dubourg, 1961; New York, Charles E. Slatkin Galleries, Drawings / Pastels / Watercolors, n.d. [1966], no.98; Washington, D.C., National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Mary Cassatt: Pastels and Color Prints, 1978, no.34.

Literature:

New York, Charles E. Slatkin Galleries, Drawings / Pastels / Watercolors, n.d. [1966], no.98, pl.90; Adelyn Dohme Breeskin, Mary Cassatt: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Oils, Pastels, Watercolors, and Drawings, Washington, 1970, p.140, no.320 (where incorrectly dated c.1900).

Artist description:

Born near Pittsburgh into a solidly upper-middle-class family, Mary Stevenson Cassatt studied art - against her father's wishes - at the Pennysylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, at the age of fifteen. Determined to become a professional artist, in 1865 she moved to Paris, where she continued her studies with the painters Jean-Léon Gérôme, Charles Chaplin and Thomas Couture, while also spending time in Parma, Seville, Madrid, Antwerp and Rome. Cassatt was to remain living and working in France for almost all of her adult life. Although she had a painting accepted at the Paris Salon of 1868, she achieved little success over the next few years. In 1877 none of her submissions to the Salon were accepted, and the same year she met Edgar Degas, who was to become a close friend and mentor. Degas invited Cassatt to exhibit at the fourth Impressionist exhibition in 1879, where she showed eleven paintings. She was one of two women artists to show with the Impressionists at this time, the other being Berthe Morisot, and she continued to be associated with the group until 1886, exhibiting at the fifth and sixth Impressionist exhibitions in 1880 and 1881.

In 1880 Cassatt's brother Alexander settled in Paris with his family, and Mary began to devote a considerable amount of time to portraits and studies of her young nephews and nieces, and to depictions of the intimate bonds between mothers and their children. The early 1880s also found Cassatt experimenting with printmaking, producing soft-ground etchings and drypoints in monochrome and, by the beginning of the next decade, in colour. In 1893 she received a commission to paint a large mural for the Woman's Building of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, a work which is now lost. A solo exhibition of Cassatt's work at the Galerie Durand-Ruel in Paris in 1893 was followed, two years later, by another large and comprehensive show at the same firm's galleries in New York.

By this time Cassatt was established as one of the leading female painters in France, and was also

highly regarded in her native country as one of the major American artists of her time. In 1904 Cassatt was awarded the Légion d'honneur; only the second female artist to have ever received the honour. In later years she began to suffer from cataracts, and the effect on her eyesight meant that she had to give up printmaking. Despite several operations on her eyes, by the end of the First World War she was almost completely blind, and had to abandon painting in the years before her death at the age of eighty-two.