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# art & man<sup>®</sup> man

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**MARY CASSATT**  
*Working with the Figure*



# IMPRESSIONIST

*from Philadelphia*



*The young Mary Cassatt, as she saw herself.*

This newspaper article greeted the artist Mary Cassatt on her return to the United States in 1898. For 20 years she had been living in France, and had exhibited her work with such famous artists as Degas, Monet, and Renoir. Europeans regarded her as one of the most talented of the new "Impressionist" painters, but for years, Mary Cassatt's art was virtually unknown in her own country. Today she is considered one of America's finest artists and her works are in museums all over the world. What drove this young woman to defy her family and all the rules of the society she grew up in, in order to become an artist?

Born in 1844, Mary Cassatt was the daughter of a wealthy Pennsylvania stockbroker. When

**M**ary Cassatt, sister of Mr. Cassatt, president of the Pennsylvania Railroad, returned from Europe yesterday. She has been studying painting in France and owns the smallest Pekingese dog in the world.

*The Philadelphia Ledger*

Self-portrait, c. 1890. Watercolor. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

she was young, her family traveled a great deal. They even lived in Paris for several years. When the Cassatts moved back to the United States Mary entered the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts where, a century ago, young ladies drew and did "a little watercolor" in preparation for their futures as wives and mothers.

Mary Cassatt knew at once that she was different. She knew also that if she wanted to be a real artist, she would have to study in Europe. When her father heard of Mary's plans, he was horrified. "I would rather see you dead," he is reported as saying. But, as always, Mary got her way and, at the age of 21, properly chaperoned by her mother, she went off to France to paint.

Paris, when Mary Cassatt ar-

rived in 1866, was the center of the art world. This world was dominated by an official group called the *Salon*. This organization accepted for exhibition only work done according to very strict rules. Huge, detailed canvases showing heroic or historical subjects, done very carefully in dark colors, were the only kinds of works shown at the Salon's exhibitions. Mary Cassatt worked very hard on her entry and was overjoyed to have it accepted. She had arrived as a professional artist. But, a few years later, an event was to take place that would completely change her concept of art.

In 1874, there was a show that shocked the art world. A group of artists rented a hall and hung paintings so unlike anything ever seen before that crowds of people came to laugh and make fun. The





Poppies in a Field, c. 1874-1880. Oil. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Bequest of Charlotte Dorrance Wright.

*Mary Cassatt's early landscapes were typical examples of the exciting, new Impressionist style of painting.*

small, brightly colored landscapes and scenes of everyday life must have stunned the young Mary Cassatt. She was particularly impressed by the work of an artist called Edgar Degas. She said, "His work changed my life." She began to paint outdoors, using light, bright colors, brushing the paint on quickly in order to capture the feeling of, for example, a summer day (see the painting, above). Three years later, Degas would come to her studio and ask

her to join the new group of painters, now called "Impressionists."

Mary Cassatt spent the rest of her life in France, where she felt her work would be taken seriously. To her Philadelphia friends and relatives, she was "Alexander's sister who never married." To her nieces and nephews she was "Aunt Mary who painted." This independent and strong-willed woman produced over 1200 paintings, prints, pastels and watercolors, each of which is now

considered a masterpiece.

Like this month's cover, most of Mary Cassatt's works are of people. In this issue, you'll see other examples of this great artist's work and learn more about how she painted the figure. You'll explore different approaches to the figure through the work of well-known painters, as well as that of a young artist just beginning her career. Finally, you'll create your own different kind of portrait.

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A few simple lines  
can also reveal a  
great deal about  
a subject.

Discover how Mary Cassatt used the figure to create these three very different works.

*Mother Berthe Holding her Child*, 1889. Drypoint etching. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Purchased: Temple Fund.

If you were to visit Mary Cassatt in the 1880s, you might very well find yourself put in a chair, posed carefully and told to “hold it.” But since modeling for this artist required many hours of sitting completely still in an uncomfortable pose, soon only family members were willing to sit for her. And so the theme of *family* came to dominate most of Cassatt’s work. But, as you will see, she learned to handle this one subject in an infinite variety of ways.

In each of the “families” shown on these pages, there are

three figures. In all of Mary Cassatt’s work there is a connection between the figures that few other artists have been able to convey. If the people in her works do not actually touch or overlap, then they are linked by the way in which they stare at each other. And these figures are always connected to their environment. In the painting *Family* (top right), the path in the background leads directly to the family group. They are enclosed within the curves of the path, the chair and the line of trees at the top. Notice how the severely cropped figures at the bottom form a triangle. Their glances form a smaller triangle,

thereby focusing attention on the faces.

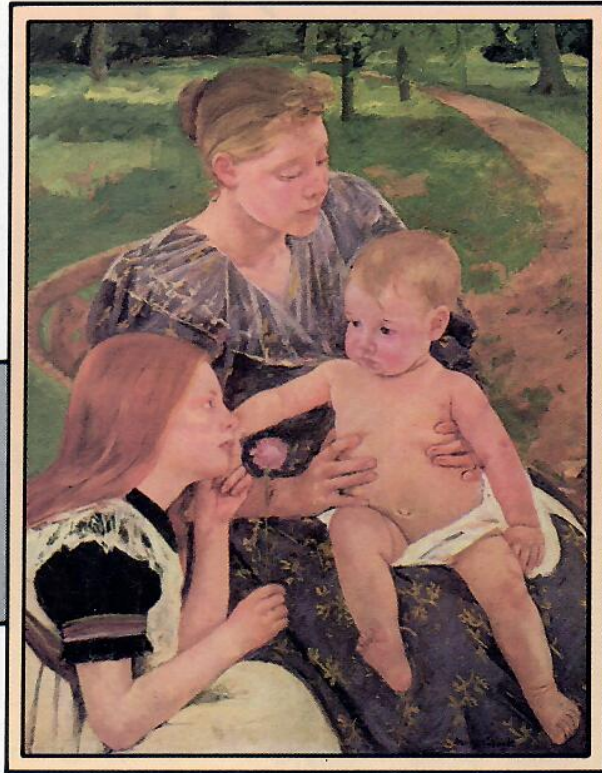
What do you notice about the drawing *Mother Berthe Holding Her Child* (above, left), what the artist drew, or what she *didn’t* draw? The drawing is essentially three round, dark shapes, repeated and overlapped. Look at the “figure” on the right. How many people are really in this family? How does this “extra” figure link the subjects with the background?\*

Compare the print *In the Omnibus* (below, right) with the painting *The Family* seen above it. Both treat the same subject in completely different ways. While the

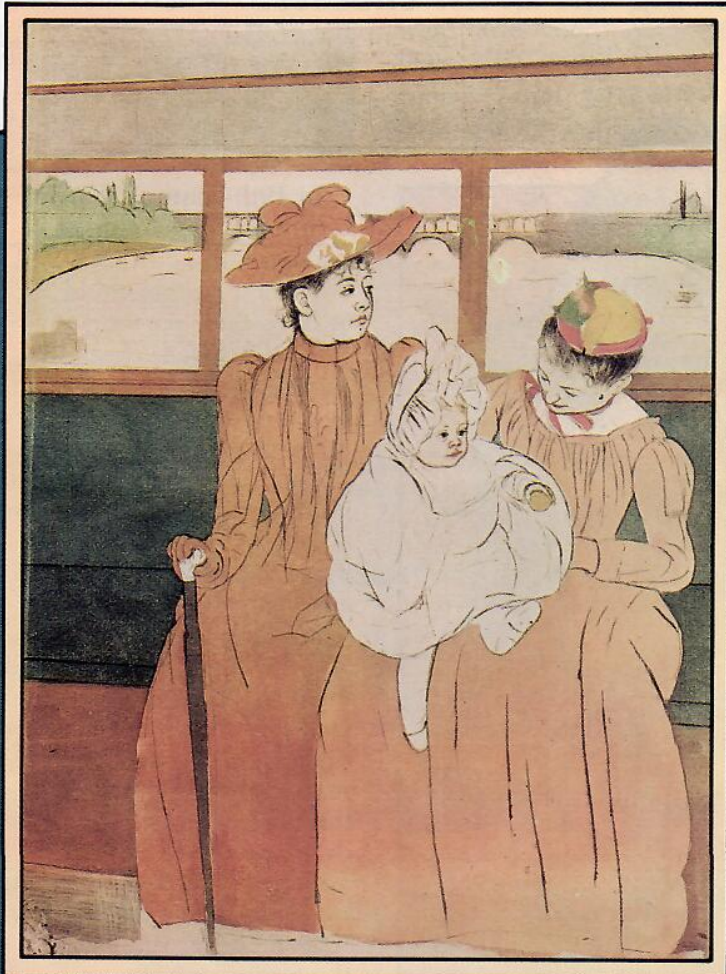
\* Note: the “third” figure is really a reflection in the mirror behind the mother and child.



# P EOPLE



*How does the way in which these people are painted, tell you more about their relationship?*



*Mary Cassatt is regarded by many as America's greatest printmaker. In the Omnibus is one of her most famous prints.*

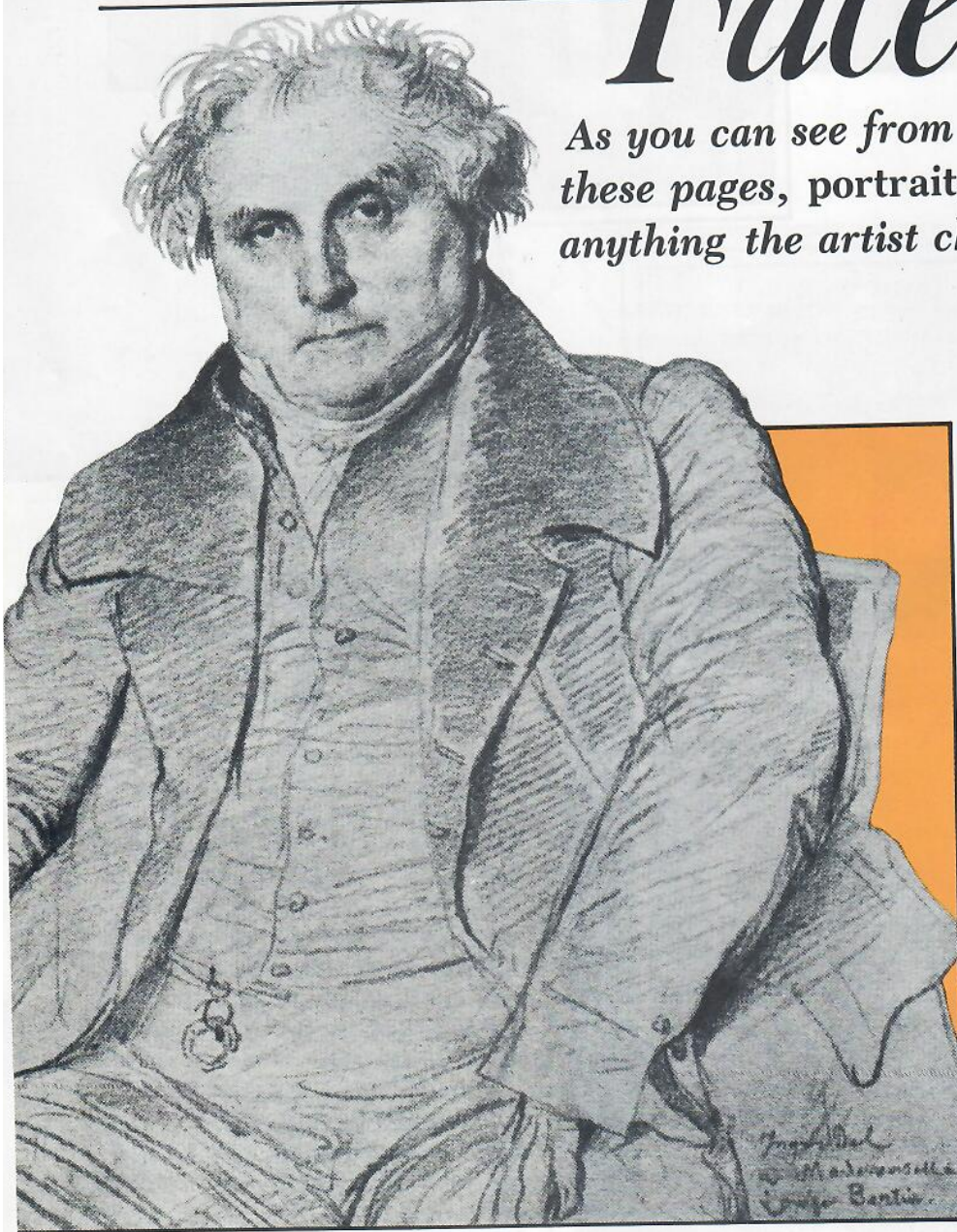
painting shows actual individuals, the print seems to stand for all families. The three figures in the painting, seen from above, appear to be real and solid, set in deep, three-dimensional space. The space in the print seems flat. We know the inside of the bus is behind the figures, and the river and bridge are in the distance, but everything has been reduced to a series of flat shapes, all on the same plane. Squint at the nearly symmetrical family group. Do they appear to be three separate figures, or just one? The glances of the women further link the group. And the baby, in its billowy, white, flower-like garment becomes a nearly abstract shape in the center of the composition.

Although Mary Cassatt concentrated on one central theme throughout her art, each time she did a painting, a pastel, a drawing, or a print, she revealed to the viewer yet another aspect of this subject.



# The HUMAN Face

*As you can see from the works on these pages, portraits can be just about anything the artist chooses.*



Jean-Auguste Ingres:  
Portrait of a Very  
Important Person

In 19th-century France, before the development of photography, only rich and important people could afford to have their portraits done. Formally posed, carefully rendered, the imposing figure of this businessman projects a sense of wealth and power.

For Ingres, one of the world's great portraitists, the purpose of a portrait was the realistic depiction of the subject's appearance. *Louis Bertin's* features are meticulously drawn and his figure is completely modeled in light and shade to give a further feeling of three-dimensional reality. His dark, massive bulk fills the bottom of the picture. In the original drawing, the head is in the middle of the page, surrounded by white space. In this way, Ingres further emphasizes the focal point of the entire portrait, Louis Bertin's aggressive, hawk-like face.

Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780-1867). *Louis Bertin*, 1832. Pencil. The Louvre, Paris.

*Early portraits had to look just like the subject.*



**Edgar Degas:  
Chrysanthemums  
with Woman**

Thirty years after Ingres painted *Louis Bertin*, the French artist Edgar Degas did this work. In the period between these two portraits, art had undergone enormous changes. Quick, accurate, inexpensive photographic portraits had begun to replace traditional painted likenesses. Painters now had to express *more* about the subject and about the artist. The Impressionist painter Edgar Degas (also the teacher and friend of Mary Cassatt) sought always to portray the inner character of the person he painted. In many works he would include an object (such as a bouquet of flowers) that he felt symbolized his subject. In fact, what is the *real* subject of this portrait?



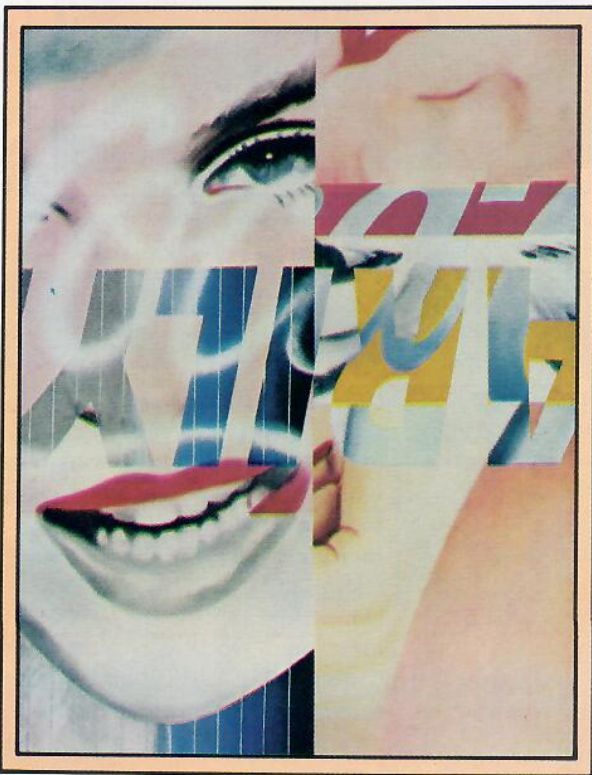
Edgar Hilaire Germain Degas (1834-1917). *A Woman with Chrysanthemums*, 1865. Oil. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY. Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929. The H. O. Havemeyer Collection.

*What do you notice first about this "portrait"?*

Although Degas and Cassatt went far beyond photographic likenesses, both borrowed concepts from photography to heighten the informal feeling of

their portraits. They chose "off guard" moments, used closeups, and did compositions consisting of the tightly cropped fragments seen in snapshots.

James Rosenquist (b. 1933), *Marilyn Monroe, I*, 1962. Spray enamel. Museum of Modern Art, NY. Sidney Janis Collection.



*Why did the artist paint this strange face?*

**James Rosenquist:  
Portrait of a Star**

A century after Degas and the Impressionists, the idea of portraiture had, once again, changed radically. In James Rosenquist's America of the 1960s, faces no longer belonged to real people. They had become impersonal, mass-produced images seen over and over again in advertisements, billboards, magazines and TV. The mass media created fantasy faces such as that of the glamorous star Marilyn Monroe.

James Rosenquist began his artistic career as a billboard painter and later transformed certain visual aspects of his craft into memorable "Pop" art images. His paintings are like old billboards on which new sections are being painted. The huge scale resembles that of a motion picture closeup. The various fragments—a mouth, lettering, a smoky white Coca-Cola sign—create a chaotic jumble of images. While the painting works visually as a unit, the feeling produced is one of confusion and anxiety. Rosenquist's *Marilyn Monroe* is no longer a portrait of an individual, but has become a social statement.

(Continued on page 8)





Alice Neel (b. 1900), *The Family*, 1971. Oil. Graham Gallery, photo by Geoffrey Clements.

*Paintings like this one have made Alice Neel one of America's most noted portraitists.*

### Alice Neel: A Family Portrait

Compare this family with those of Mary Cassatt on pages 4-5. Which groups look closer, or happier? Which family would you rather be a part of?

The contemporary American artist Alice Neel has been painting portraits for more than 60 years. Her life has been one of extremes — she has lived among very rich people in Cuba, with very poor people in New York City, and among patients in mental hospitals. She

says, "This strange life I've had has been a search for experience and I've painted what I've seen. The face is the center of the senses. Everything — life, history, the environment — shows there."

Compare this family to Ingres' *Louis Bertin* on the previous page. Ingres' strong, confident lines express the same qualities found in his subject, while Neel's wiggly, uneven swirls convey exactly the mood of

hers. Her figures huddle in the center of the canvas, hunched over in uncomfortable positions, while their deep-set eyes seem to dart about. The artist has included details of their fashionable (for 1971) clothing — short skirt, shiny shoes, scarf, long hair. Do these things seem to make the family happy? In their portraits, are Rosenquist and Neel conveying a very positive image of modern America?



*Artist of the Month*

# LAURA LISBON:

## Making Portraits

*Laura Lisbon, 16, likes to draw her sister Melissa. Find out how she made one particular portrait say so much.*

**O**n the next page you'll see a portrait of a girl at a window. It's late afternoon. The light is yellow. A breeze blows the curtains on either side. The girl is resting her head on the sill.

Everything in this portrait—the expression, the gesture, the color, the technique, the medium, the background, the composition—creates a feeling of dreamy contentment.

Photo by Janet Soderberg.





*Mudë Melissa was a top winner in the annual Scholastic Art Awards Program.*

**How did you happen to do this portrait?**

Upstairs in my house there are these windows where the light comes in in the afternoon. It's a yellow light, and I just thought it would be a great place for a portrait. So I asked my sister to go over by the window for a second to see what it would look like. She gets mad when I do that 'cause she knows I'm going to want her to pose. But she agreed and when I put her in that light the flesh tones were so nice and the little strands of hair around her face looked so light and wispy. I thought, "Ah, I've got to do a portrait."

**Did you sketch her then?**

No. I took a photo. I'd rather do a sketch, but she would never sit there that long. She's always moving. She even hates sitting there just for two minutes while I take her picture.

**How did you begin the portrait?**

I brought the photo into class

and did a few sketches. This helped me work out the composition and decide what to leave in and what to take out.

**Why did you decide to use colored pencils?**

I wanted to try something different. My teacher suggested a different way of using them — doing everything in little short strokes. I discovered I could even layer the strokes. I'd put yellow, for example, on the bottom and then red, and I'd do it so that some of the yellow and the white of the paper still showed through. This gave it an airy feeling.

It was great because I discovered you could make the short strokes go around the curves in the hands and face. It really made me pay attention to the roundness of the form. I had to consider, how does the skin really go?

**You say you layered little strokes of different colors. How did you decide which colors to use in the**

**I**n this interview with the artist Laura Lisbon, you'll find out *how* she made it all work together in her portrait *Mudë Melissa*. Laura, by the way, is a senior at Jamesville-De Witt High School in De Witt, New York. She won a Scholastic Art Award last year and hopes to make a career in art.

**face, for example?**

I used different shades of yellow, a rusty color, and purple for shadows. But I didn't use the "flesh-colored" pencil. It was more interesting learning on my own what colors went together to make flesh. You know, you start to wonder what color skin really is, what color lips are.

I had to be really careful, because some of the strong colors were non-erasable, I was almost scared to use them. Doing the sketches and drawing her face about five times made it easier though.

**There is a purplish feeling throughout the portrait. Why did you make this color dominate?**

When I looked at the trees I saw lavender in them and I saw purple in the shadows of the drapes. I also like the way purple tones down the warm yellowish skin colors. Yellow and purple are complementary colors (opposite each other on the color wheel).





Like Mary Cassatt, Laura Lisbon frequently uses her sister as a model. Compare this drawing of Melissa to the one on the left.



Knowing how to tie a picture together is so important. Besides the color purple, what else unifies this portrait?

I guess the repeating forms — the round shape of the trees and the head. I also think the slant of all the lines works together—the tilt of her head, the slant of her shoulder and arms, even the angle of her eye and the way the lines of the back and the arm seem to converge there.

A lot of times you have to look to find these things. That's what my teacher keeps telling us. Maybe I'll see something and say I like it.

But then I'll look again and find out *why* I like it.

**How long did it take to make this portrait?**

Maybe about two and a half months. It was really time-consuming. I even brought it home on weekends. I'd sit up in my room and work on it for hours —when I should have been doing my homework. I can remember getting a little tired of it at the end. I wanted it to be *done*!

**How did you feel when it was finished?**

I was pretty satisfied because I felt I had accomplished the feeling I wanted — kind of transparent, sleepy, flowing.

**How did you choose the title "Mudë Melissa"?**

I wanted something that was just right. I take German and *mudë* means sleepy. I just like that word. It sounds sleepy itself.

**Did Melissa like the portrait?**

I don't know. I remember she hated the way her hair was in the photo. Actually she asked me not to draw it. I didn't listen to her, of course. But I think she liked it when it was finished. That can be a problem. People have a sense of how they like to see themselves and sometimes it's different from the way I see them. It's tricky.

**What is it that you like about doing portraits?**

People just fascinate me. I love watching them. When I get a strong feeling about a person, I want to make it come through in a portrait. Last summer I was mountain-climbing in Colorado, and we met this old man. He got to the top just after we did. He was just amazing—68 years old—with this long white beard. I finally got up the nerve to ask him if I could take his picture. I just couldn't pass it up. I *had* to make a portrait.



CREATING A FULL-FIGURE

# PORTRAIT

Discover an unexpected way to add life to your portraits.

Looking at a Mary Cassatt painting gives us the feeling of "being there." It is as if we can touch the figure, feel the warmth of the light, and breathe the air in the picture. Yet, we know that we are looking at a flat, rectangular surface that has no real depth, atmosphere or light. Mary Cassatt's choice of subject enhances our sense of closeness to her paintings. But she used other means as well to achieve the effects that she wanted to convey. These "other means" include her choice of color, type of brushwork, and perhaps most importantly, her treatment of the *figure/ground* relationship.

The figure-ground relationship

is the way in which the subject (figure) relates to the space around it (ground) within the *picture plane* (the rectangle of canvas). Sometimes we refer to the shape of the figure as the "positive shape" and the areas of the ground as the "negative shapes," and the arrangement of these shapes in

the picture plane is called the composition or design of the painting.

In the painting *Family* on page 5, we see a typical Cassatt figure/ground interaction. She has filled the picture plane with the figures and uses the ground to emphasize and repeat many of the contours and shapes within the figures themselves. The curve of the road, for example, repeats the curve of the chair, and the curve of the girl's arm. Most of all, it is the way Cassatt has chosen to place the figures within the space of the painting that brings us close to the subject, and heightens the sense of intimacy. Had she made the figures smaller within the picture's ground, we would have felt removed from them. Had she increased the figures' size, we might have been overwhelmed.





# MATERIALS

You will need several very large sheets of white paper or brown "kraft" paper, pencils, pastels or chalk.

# STARTING OUT

This month we will work with the figure-ground relationship. We will see how different figure "shapes" and their placement within different backgrounds can change the composition and mood of a work. By working with actual life-sized figures, you will automatically achieve accurate proportion.



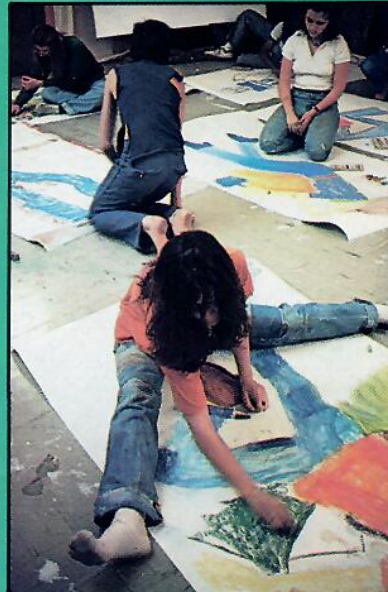
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Place your "model" in different positions to get an interesting shape against the "ground" of the paper.



2

Trace your model's outline directly on the paper. (If it is to be a self-portrait, have someone else outline you.)



3

Begin to work in color. Pastels can give you shaded, 3-dimensional effects...





4

...or you can obtain brilliant, flat shapes, by rubbing with your fingers.



The background itself can become a flat shape. (Black will make the figure seem to "pop out.")



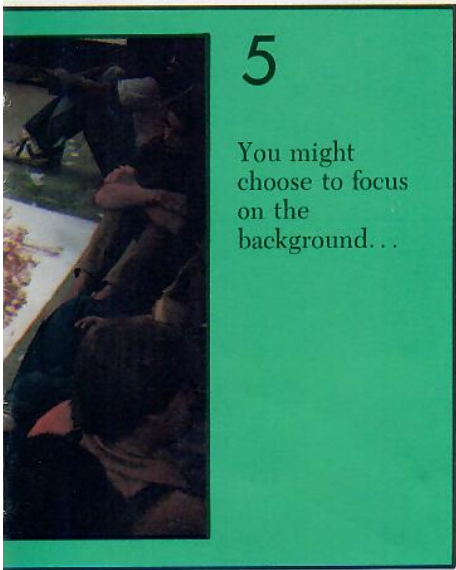
## SOME SOLUTIONS



Do you want your figure to be in a setting, or "floating" against the ground? What about placement—do you want a lot of space at the top, or at the bottom? How about scale, should the figure be large or small within the picture plane?

Photos by Richard Hutchings.





5

You might choose to focus on the background...

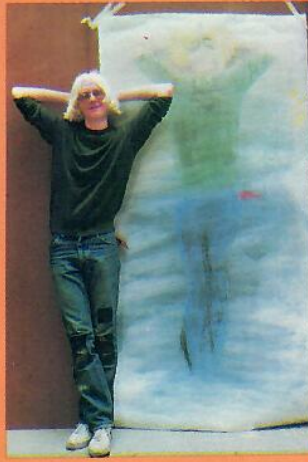


6

or emphasize certain characteristic details.



You can enhance the "mood" you wish to create by placing the figure in a realistic (or a fantasy) setting.



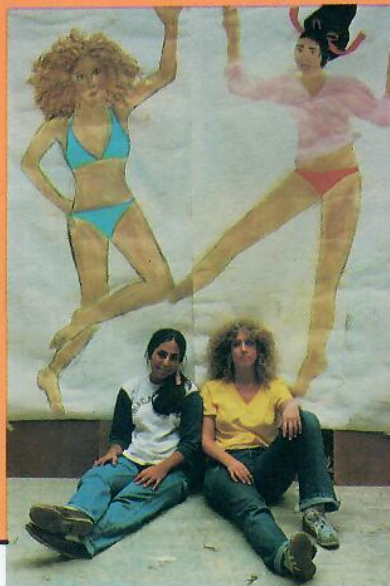
You can take an abstract or expressionistic approach (soft and "hard" edges give two very different feelings).



Try varying the shape of your format. (You don't have to use a vertical rectangle.)



Is there an activity or a piece of clothing that reveals something about you?



Try putting several portraits together. What happens to the relationship between the figures and the backgrounds?

When you have finished, stand back and think about how the shape and placement of the figure in relation to the ground of the picture affected the outcome.



# Arts Alive

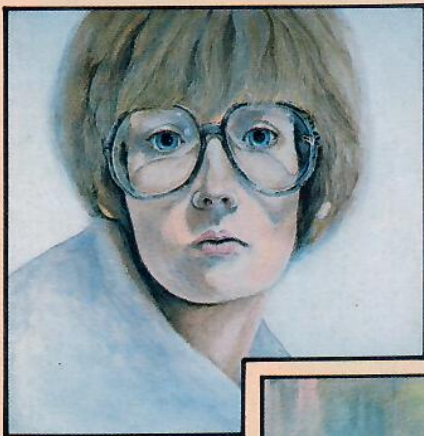


## A Double Winner

When 17-year-old artist Kahi Ching of Hawaii did his drawing, he had no idea that, some months later, he would be looking at it in New York City, some 4500 miles away. As a result of his winning one of

the top places in Scholastic's annual Art Awards Program, World Airways gave both Kahi and his art teacher Dorinda Cum, round-trip tickets to see his work in the National Exhibition.

There were 475 other winning pieces, such as the exciting self-portraits done by 17-year-old Marci Sime from Wisconsin and 16-year-old Rhode Islander Anthony Bevilacqua. The deadlines are quickly approaching for the 54th National High School Art Awards Exhibition. For information, write to: Scholastic Art Awards, Scholastic Inc., 50 W. 44th Street, New York, NY 10036.



## Chinese Army Invades U.S.

When the first emperor of China was buried, over 2000 years ago, he was not alone. His "eternal bodyguard" was with him. Thousands of life-sized terracotta warriors, like this infantryman, at left, were created and placed in his tomb to protect him. You can see some of these ominous and beautifully sculpted figures, as well as many other rare jade and bronze art works from ancient China, in a show which is traveling to major museums all over the country.

*The Great Bronze Age of China* has just left the Field

Museum in Chicago and will go next to the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, Dec. 10-Feb. 18, 1981. It will then go to the Los Angeles County Museum, April 1-June 10, 1981, and end at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, July 22-Sept. 30, 1981.



## Picasso at 100

In the November issue of *Art & Man*, you read about Pablo Picasso, the Cubist painter and sculptor. If you are in the Washington, DC, area this winter, you will have a chance to see another side of this remarkable artist. To celebrate the 100th anniversary of Picasso's birth, The National Gallery will be showing works devoted to one of his favorite themes, the circus. Many drawings, prints and paintings (such as the famous one above) will be exhibited in *Picasso: The Saltimbanques* at The National Gallery of Art from December 14, 1980 through March 15, 1981.