Mary Cassatt’s portraits of her sister, Lydia: Tracing signifiers of disease and impending death

Lini Radhakrishnan

In 2020, Stephen Russell, an associate Professor of internal medicine and pediatrics, developed a course for medical students at the University of Alabama. Titled “Prescribing Art: How Observation Enhances Medicine,” the course was a collaboration between the School of Medicine and the Abroms-Engel Institute of Fine Arts. Russell employed Mary Cassatt’s Girl in the Garden (1880–82, Musée d’Orsay) (Figure 1) to explain the practical application of artistic analysis in teaching strategies for clinical observation. He asserted that Cassatt had painted a woman suffering from rheumatoid arthritis.1 The painting depicts the foregrounded figure of a young woman seated in a garden with her torso facing the viewer and her head bent intently over a piece of lace held in her hands. The muted pastel-toned gown and pale skin highlight her slightly flushed cheeks. More importantly, the pale hues frame the redness and swelling around the knuckles of her right hand. The subject’s left hand is clutched awkwardly into a fist, while the digits on the right hand are wound tightly around the needle. The traces of rheumatoid arthritis visible in the redness on the knotted, slightly misshapen knuckles and the strained digits were the primary focal points for Russell’s intended audience. However, Russell presumed that Cassatt had no medical knowledge about the condition itself and he attributed the presence of the symptoms to the artist’s heightened sense of observation.

In contrast, a letter from Cassatt’s mother written in 1885 suggests that the artist most likely had the opportunity to observe the debilitating disease at close quarters. Writing to her granddaughter, Mrs. Katherine Cassatt noted the ameliorating effect of a change in location on her rheumatism—the layman’s term for rheumatoid arthritis. She reported relief in the stiffness of her joints and a blissful absence of pain.2 When Cassatt painted her sensitive illustration of rheumatoid arthritis, she was probably caring for her mother, who was struck with the very same affliction. Given this, Cassatt’s awareness of arthritic symptoms is quite plausible. The fact that Cassatt chose to show the subject sewing implies that not only was she mindful of the symptoms, but, in all likelihood, the condition inspired the pose and the depicted activity. She picked a pursuit that showcased the effort required to perform a repetitive action with afflicted joints.

Best known for her intimate depictions of women and children in domestic spaces, Cassatt is typically relegated to the role of female observer. In this paper, I challenge this conventional reading of her work as essentializing interpretations of domesticity. In recent years, feminist scholarship has reevaluated Cassatt’s work to great effect although these studies still largely overlook the inspiration behind her mother-child subject.3 Cassatt painted the young girl somewhere between 1880 and 1882, a period that featured a recurring subject in her work—her ailing sister, Lydia. I examine the artist’s portraits of her sister, painted in the final years of Lydia’s life, and identify potent, but overlooked signifiers of disease and impending death on her face and body. Analyzing her portraits of her sister reveal deliberate interventions by the artist. Cassatt bore witness to the bodily decline and ultimate demise of her sister and parents. Taking on the care of her invalid family enabled Cassatt to develop a deeper intimacy with the vulnerable body and honed her eye to recognize corporeal traces of disease. I argue that the portraits were visualized through the educated gaze of a caregiver. I trace the manifestation of signifiers that I term the “symptomatic index” and define as symptoms of disease expressed subtly on the subject’s form. The term symptomatic index was coined to trace the distinct signifiers of disease in Cassatt’s rendering of the figure and is inspired by Charles Pierce’s semiotic theory.4 These markers on the subject’s form


2 “Since I came to town my rheumatism has improved very much, or rather my stiffness for I had no pain except when I moved – I can now get in & out of the carriage without much trouble”. See letter from Mrs. Robert S. Cassatt to Katharine, November 12, 1885, Microfilm, Roll No. C1, Frame 189, Mary Cassatt collection, 1871–1955. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, New York office.

3 Critics have consistently characterized Cassatt’s work as a mundane recording of her bourgeois life.

4 For more information on semiotic theory, see discussion on Pierce’s semiotics in Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klönk’s Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods, (New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 208–212.
are perceived as an indexical sign not just of the medical condition that consumed the subject, but also of the artist's lived experience as a caregiver that in turn influenced her visual vocabulary. In other words, the symptomatic index is evidence of the invasive presence of disease in the subject's body as well as an indexical sign of the caregiver's gaze. Cassatt rendered her sister's skin to appear almost translucent, as if to reveal symptoms that have become fully visible on the surface.

Emergent signifiers of disease—the symptomatic index

In 1913 Cassatt wrote to her dear friend, Louiseine Havemeyer, “How lonely one can be in this world!!”, an economy of words that expressed the depth of pain accrued over the years and the immense sense of isolation that pervaded her existence after she had lost all her immediate family. A particularly devastating loss was that of her older sister, Lydia, someone Cassatt had expected to be her lifelong companion. When Cassatt took on a studio in Paris in 1875, Lydia joined her sister as a companion and a chaperone, lending respectability to the otherwise unacceptable arrangement of a single woman living alone in the city. Lydia endured excruciating physical pain and weakness for several years. By 1879, doctors diagnosed the possibility of Bright's disease, a debilitating and deadly affliction of the kidneys that in modern medicine is termed acute or chronic nephritis. The pair developed an intimacy and a growing fondness that seems to materialize through the paint Cassatt used to delicately capture Lydia who became a frequent subject of the artist's work.

In an 1878 painting of her sister, Lydia reading the morning paper (No. 1) (Figure 2), Cassatt portrays Lydia enveloped in a delicate flurry of pale fabric engaged in the act of reading. She places the figure diagonally across the canvas, a placement she particularly favored when rendering Lydia and herself. The ample bosom suggests a fairly healthy disposition whilst not revealing any curves and the warm blush tones on the relaxed face sculpts the delicate profile against the pale backdrop. The portrait captures a seemingly tranquil morning relatively free of the frequent pain that plagued Lydia. Her face is sheltered in the warm morning shadow while the sunlight catches parts of her neck, ear and graceful fingers that hold up the newspaper. The rosy tones reflected throughout the picture allow the image to bask in the morning glow of wellness. The delicate brushstrokes on the gown render an appearance of sheerness as the fabric transitions smoothly into the skin around the neck and into the backdrop. Lydia’s form appears to be fading away into the warm morning rays. The armchair fashioned with a mass of curved soft brushstrokes expresses a plushness whilst emphasizing the gradual dissolution of form.

On a Balcony (Figure 3) is another full-bodied representation of Lydia seated in the morning sun reading a paper. There is a comparable absence of curves on the figure suggesting a layering of fabric, as if Cassatt’s sister was bundled up for warmth. The allusion aligns with recommendations made by contemporary doctors suggesting the patient wear something warm and absorbent to prevent the skin from becoming excessively cold or moist that could lead to chills and prove fatal. Her auburn hair pulled back in a bun is rendered unusually thick, but also with an exaggerated softness. Flesh tones are visible throughout the translucent fabric of the gown and the figure is framed by the backdrop of colorful blossoms. There is a redness on her facial skin—especially around the t-zone—that is quite noticeably enacted through Cassatt’s symptomatic index. Here, the index that expresses the symptoms and attests to the existence of disease in Lydia’s body appears as a bluish-green discoloration around her eyes, at the corner of her lips, near her hairline, her sideburn area and on her elegantly rendered hands. The blue tones around her eyes lend an air of fatigue suggesting a sleepless night. Her head is nestled in the shroud-like white fabric swathed around her neck. Cassatt used the same kind of dry white brushstrokes on the fabric curving over that single blossom at the neckline and in the backdrop to create a trail of transparent leaves that emanates from the back of Lydia’s neck. These delicate strokes lend an air of fragility to the representation. All these elements—just like the main subject—appear to be fading away, while paradoxically being immortalized in her sister's brushstrokes.

Their father, Robert Cassatt, chronicled Lydia’s suffering in the family records as “many years of ill-health and eighty-four days of deathbed agony.” In the final lines of this entry, he noted her courageous forbearance writing, “Lydia had been an invalid for years — suffering greatly at times. She bore all with the greatest fortitude and patience, scarce ever an impatient word escaping her lips.” In addition to the subtle signifiers of the affliction, Cassatt's portrayal of her sister includes a stillness, a calm that conveys the qualities of resilience and patience tenderly noted down by their father three years later in Lydia's death record.

A picture of Lydia, Lydia crocheting in the Garden at Marly (Figure 4), painted around a year later reveals an alarming loss of weight. In a letter to her son Alexander in the same year, Mrs. Cassatt described symptoms tormenting Lydia that could explain the weight loss, namely neuralgia of the stomach and

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5 See letter from Mary Cassatt to Louiseine Havemeyer, March, [1913?], Box 1, Folder 11, Item 06, Digital Collection – Havemeyer Family Papers relating to Art Collecting, 1901–1922, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives.


7 Barter, Modern Women, 56.


an uneasy appetite. These unrelenting symptoms persisted over the years right up until the final months of Lydia’s life. Mr. Cassatt’s letter two months prior to her death presented nausea as the enduring cause that prevented Lydia from retaining any nourishment. He cautioned Alexander that neither Lydia nor her mother were aware of her critical state, which implied that Cassatt and her father were burdened with that painful knowledge while having to maintain a brave face to preserve the duo’s perceived ignorance. Mr. Cassatt ended an 1882 letter with the words—‘be the order of nature I ought to go first and I hope I may be so...’—reflecting his heart-rending hope that Lydia cheats the doctor’s prognosis, and he doesn’t have to bury his child. Another letter from Mr. Cassatt just two weeks later reiterated Lydia’s continued distress caused by the unyielding nausea, insomnia, and acute pain. Also chronicled is Lydia’s glowing endorsement of Cassatt’s excellent nursing skills, her heartbreaking acceptance of her fate as she conveyed her final wishes to her sister, and the artist’s dedication to her sibling as she prioritized Lydia’s care over her work.

In *Lydia crocheting in the Garden at Marly* (Figure 4), Cassatt chose to pose Lydia in a garden engrossed in the more mechanical act of crocheting. The activity complied with contemporary medical advice that recommended adequate mental stimulation to generate an interest in life without causing mental anxiety or exhaustion in the patient. Though the subject is foregrounded as in the earlier images, the inclusion of the receding path and foliage evoke a sense of distance. One could perhaps visualize Lydia vanishing down this path. The symptomatic index makes a striking appearance in the sunken eye sockets and the lips that are noticeably thinned, even through the tan gloves. The way Lydia holds the material and the crochet needle implies slow and labored progress. Her hair is obscured by a white layered lace bonnet tied off under the chin in an oversized bow that almost completely frames her pale face.

while the transparent lace trim over her forehead emphasizes her delicate gauntness. Tracing Lydia’s suffering over this extended period provides an inkling of the length of her agony and the feeling of helplessness her family must have felt in failing to ease her pain. While tending to her sister, Cassatt must have been anxiously observing the growing physical traces of decline.

The hint of distance between the subject and the viewer implied in the earlier work, *lydia crocheting in the Garden at Marly* (Figure 4) is amplified dramatically in two other representations, where Cassatt captures Lydia from behind, engrossed in her crocheting. In both paintings, Lydia is no longer foregrounded and is depicted facing away from the viewer. That physical distance between the sisters embodies Cassatt’s looming fear of losing Lydia. In *Lydia Seated in the Garden with a Dog in Her Lap* (Figure 5), a trailer figure is framed by blossoms much like *On a Balcony* (Figure 3) from the year 1878–1879. Author and curator of American Arts at the Art Institute of Chicago, Judith Barter assigned a gloomier significance to the later portrait suggesting the backdrop served as a commemorative tribute to the dying sibling. A similar memorializing note is perceivable in the other painting, *Lydia Seated on a Terrace Crocheting* (Figure 6), where the subject’s identity is buried in wispy white fabric almost from head to toe imparting a spirit like presence. The lone figure is seated on a dark green bench which is placed at an angle that further restricts the viewer’s access to the subject. Lydia appears to be moving away from the earthly realm and being recast as a memory right there on her sister’s canvas.

Corelating art and medicine in Cassatt’s images

Cassatt’s close encounters with disease in her personal life and her frequently articulated distrust of physicians spurred her interest in medicine. A 1903 letter addressed to her friend Theodate Pope, provides an insight on Cassatt’s view of the medical profession and her dissatisfaction with medical practices. She wrote, “We don’t seem to progress in medical science as much as we think; how is it there are so many mistakes made? The faculty of diagnosis is after all so many mistakes made? The faculty of diagnosis is after all psychic & few possess it. Poor Pissarro has just fallen victim to a mistaken diagnosis of his disease, I feel sad over his loss.” Cassatt believed that diagnostic skills were an innate psychic quality scarce amongst medical professionals. Her frustration over inaccurate diagnosis was not limited to Pissarro’s fate. She often spoke about the doctors being wrong about her mother’s condition. One such instance recorded in her letter to Louiseine Havemeyer states that her “mother outlived all of her doctors’ prognostics.” This deep-seated skepticism cultivated a need for agency, a need to avoid uninformed dependency on a physician’s recommendations. Her consequent close

13 See Letter from Robert Cassatt to Alexander Cassatt, dated 18 September 1882, “Some new and alarming symptoms have developed in Lydia’s case and she herself begins to realize her danger and has lately spoken to Mary of her probable death, and made her promise to have her buried in the country and directed her to give keepsakes to you and Gard. Poor dear! This is the first time she has spoken plainly and directly of her death... [she] bears her affliction with wonderful patience and resignation. She suffers fearfully not only from pain but from nausea and greatly also from want of sleep. She has intervals of comparative ease, but they grow shorter and shorter. Last night was a distressing one to her. Mame keeps up very well and Lydia says [she] has developed into a most excellent nurse. As far as her art is concerned her summer has been lost to her”, Mathews, *A Life*, 162.
reading of medical texts could also explain her inclination to recognize and render physical manifestation of symptoms. Her letters often included advice on treatment options and her suggestions were based on her study of publications on domestic medicine including that of French chemist, naturalist, and physiologist François-Vincent Raspail.

Cassatt further demonstrated her faith in Raspail's cures when she sent a copy of his book, most likely Annuaire de la santé to her brother in 1885. Her accompanying letter included remedies she endorsed for treating sprains. Raspail's reputation as a skilled practitioner who scorned royal dysplomas, but cared about curing ailments must have appealed to Cassatt. The artist shared a comparable disdain for academic authority in her field. The positive sales figures of Raspail's books suggest that Cassatt was in good company, with educated, affluent individuals as well as aristocrats placing their trust in the "physician's" medical abilities. Raspail's book Annuaire de la santé also makes an appearance in Vincent van Gogh's Still Life with a plate of onions exhibiting the widespread popularity of Raspail's domestic remedies.

Louise Havemeyer recalled a period in 1883 when the artist was laid up in bed with a broken leg and self-treating with Raspail's camphor remedy. Cassatt considered Raspail the "Father of Modern Surgery." She extolled the virtues of camphor, a compound covered extensively by Raspail for treatment of various ailments and advocated the use of camphor to her family and friends to treat various medical conditions. Cassatt's study of medical texts undoubtedly supplemented her knowledge of treatment options and cognizance of physical traces of ailments—knowledge that she channeled into her caregiving and artistic practice.

Around the same period as the portraits examined in this paper, a seemingly different albeit comparable subject is seen in Cassatt's 1878 Children in a garden (The Nurse), which depicts a nurse with her charges in a verdant plot reminiscent of the spaces occupied by her sister, Lydia. There are other parallels as the nurse is also caught in profile, seated and shown knitting. The younger child is sleeping blissfully in the pram, while the other is at the woman's feet bent over playing in the dirt. Each subject is depicted occupied in their own space. The painting indicates that as far back as 1878 when Lydia was her prime subject, Cassatt's visual register began associating her own caregiving experience to representations of women and children. Her thoughtful employment of a nurse as one of her figures presents her subjects as caregiver and cared-for.

Artistic and physical signs of deterioration

Returning to the images of Lydia, the gradual detrimental effects of the degenerative disease on her body are traceable in the series of portraits painted by her sister. A notable observation is that the signifiers in the work are not limited to the manifestation of symptoms. Also discernable are distinct artistic choices that suggest a philosophical leaning. In Autumn (Figure 7, 1880), the colors echoing the title are concentrated on Lydia's attire, as she is shown seated on the familiar green park bench against an autumnal backdrop as the green foliage changes color and the ground is carpeted with golden reddish-brown flecks of fallen leaves. The rust color on the bonnet rim is echoed on the rest of the ensemble along with other autumn colors of orange and yellow. Lydia's uncharacteristically idle hands covered in tan colored gloves are placed on her lap. The right hand clutches a closed fan, while the left hand grasps the right, betraying a tension mirrored in her expression. Unlike the earlier portrayals that show Lydia immersed in some activity, here she appears self-absorbed. Her strong profile is clearly defined and her eyes gaze sightlessly into the distance, suggesting a degree of emotional turmoil. The symptomatic index of her agony is orchestrated in the blue discoloration around her eyes. The autumnal colors express a melancholic vision of a fading life reflected in the changing season visualized around the figure.

In Cup of Tea (Figure 8), Lydia is once again shown self-absorbed holding up the teacup in a vacant gesture. Incidentally, doctors advised a cup of strong tea to treat...
headaches, a condition that frequently bothered Lydia and is listed as a persistent, violent natured symptom caused by high blood pressure and retention of toxins that the kidney is unable to purge out of the system. In the painting, she is covered in the now familiar layers of fabric and only her facial skin is exposed. The wispiness of the fabric, the contrast of the dark armchair against the light colors on the figure, the discoloration marking the tired eyes are comparable to similar passages in earlier representations. There is a remarkable fluidity to the brushstrokes forming the figure that make it appear as though Lydia is dissolving into the paint—in fact, her features appear to be a step away from liquefying into her ensemble. Particularly striking is the planter containing upright, mostly purple and white blossoms with the exception of the singular flower on the far right. The viewer’s eye is literally directed by Lydia’s gaze through the line of the basin to the only drooping flower that is almost falling out of the container. She chose to paint this sole bloom in the same tints that make up Lydia’s attire, thereby establishing a striking connection between the listless figure and the wilting carnation in her line of vision—both are definitively envisioned headed towards the inevitable end designated by nature.

Lydia at a Tapestry Frame (Figure 9) was likely the last portrait that Cassatt painted of her sister. As the title indicates Lydia is depicted at a tapestry frame, but this time the hands at work are neither gloved nor elegant. The left hand seen under the frame has become misshapen and the bluish gray tinge seen on the contorted digits denote poor oxygenation, a distinct sign of diminishing kidney function. There is a similar discoloration on her facial skin and signs of edema or swelling around the eyes and under the chin. Edema was a condition linked to Bright’s disease and referred to the puffiness caused by excess fluid trapped in the body’s tissues. The symptomatic index especially the clearly pictured edema and crudely rendered distorted hand implies the progression of the disease and the advanced physical deterioration that ensued. Cassatt’s observational prowess and medical knowledge led her to project these powerful reminders of imminent loss on her subject.

**Conclusion**

Lydia died in November of 1882 after being bedridden for months. The mounting trauma of witnessing the decline of a loved one came to a head with Lydia’s demise. Cassatt was so devastated by her sister’s passing that she could not pick up a paintbrush for six months. I propose that her subsequent work should be read as a response to the death of her favorite subject, who was also in her care. The evident signs of malady or the symptomatic index and the philosophical artistic signifiers in Lydia’s portraits are a reflection of the artist’s traumatic lived experience as a caregiver. By establishing the presence of the symptomatic index and linking these signifiers to Cassatt’s personal history, these images become foundational to the next chapter of her work and serve as a precursor to a remarkable shift in her subjects. They signpost a critical juncture in her oeuvre when she began to construct representations of women and children that disrupt traditional maternity tropes and reimagine the visual culture of caregiving.

Rutgers University

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MARY CASSATT’S PORTRAITS OF HER SISTER, LYDIA: TRACING SIGNIFIERS OF DISEASE AND IMPENDING DEATH

Figure 1. Mary Cassatt, *Girl in the Garden*, between 1880–1882, oil on canvas, 92.5 x 65 cm, © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay). Photo credit: Wikimedia.
Figure 2. Mary Cassatt, *Lydia reading the morning paper* (No. 1) / Woman Reading, 1878–1879, oil on canvas, 98.42 x 78.74 cm, Joslyn Art Museum purchase, Joslyn Endowment Fund, 1943.38. Photo credit: Wikimedia.

Figure 3. Mary Cassatt, *On a Balcony*, c.1878–79, oil on canvas, 89.9 x 65.2 cm, Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mrs. Albert J. Beveridge in memory of her aunt, Delia Spencer Field. Photo credit: Wikimedia.

Figure 4. Mary Cassatt, *Lydia crocheting in the Garden at Marly*, 1880, oil on canvas, 65.6 x 92.6 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Gardner Cassatt, 1965. Photo credit: Wikimedia.
Mary Cassatt's Portraits of Her Sister, Lydia: Tracing Signifiers of Disease and Impending Death

Figure 5. Mary Cassatt, *Lydia Seated in the Garden with a Dog in Her Lap*, c. 1880, oil on canvas, 27.3 x 40.6 cm, private collection. Photo credit: Wikiart.

Figure 6. Mary Cassatt, *Lydia Seated on a Terrace Crocheting*, oil and tempera on canvas, 38.1 x 61.5 cm, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Hermanowski. Photo credit: WikiGallery.
Figure 7. Mary Cassatt, Autumn, Portrait of Lydia Cassatt, 1880, oil on canvas, 91.4 x 63.5 cm, Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris. Photo credit: Wikimedia.
MARY CASSATT’S PORTRAITS OF HER SISTER, LYDIA: TRACING SIGNIFIERS OF DISEASE AND IMPENDING DEATH

Figure 8. Mary Cassatt, *The Cup of Tea*, ca. 1880–81, oil on canvas, 92.4 x 65.4 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, From the Collection of James Stillman, Gift of Dr. Ernest G. Stillman, 1922. Photo credit: Wikimedia.
Figure 9. Mary Cassatt, *Lydia at a Tapestry Frame*, ca. 1881, oil on canvas, 65.1 x 92.4 cm, Flint Institute of Arts, Gift of the Whiting Foundation. Photo credit: Wikimedia.