

## Family and Friends Portraits

Capturing people's likenesses has been a prominent subject matter in art for thousands of years. This activity will explore the connection between artist Mary Cassatt and Louisine Havemeyer, the mother of our founder, Electra Havemeyer Webb, and provide some tools for creating portraits of people important to you.

### Goals

- learn about a special portrait by an important artist in Shelburne Museum's collection
- learn to create a portrait using proper proportions
- create a portrait that is meaningful to you

### Vocabulary

**Composition**—the placement and arrangement of the elements of work on the canvas.

**Pastel**—similar to a crayon. They are made of compressed oil or chalk pigments.

**Portrait**—a representation of a person that often depicts an individual's head and shoulders. Portraits can be created in any media.

### Standards

VA:Cr2.1.6a Demonstrate openness in trying new ideas, materials, methods, and approaches in making works of art and design.

### Resources

- **Shelburne Museum exhibition catalog.** Mathews, N.M., Cassatt, M., & Cantor, J.E. (2008). *Mary Cassatt: Friends and family*. Shelburne Museum.
- Biography of Mary Cassatt, [marycassatt.org](http://marycassatt.org), <https://bit.ly/Cassatt-SM>
- Talking about and Looking at Portraits, The J. Paul Getty Museum, <https://bit.ly/Getty3-SM>
- Art Term: Portrait, The Tate, <https://bit.ly/Tate-SM>
- Mary Cassatt, Smithsonian American Art Museum, <https://bit.ly/SAAM-SM>
- Mary Cassatt, Google Arts & Culture, <https://bit.ly/Go>



Mary Cassatt (American, 1844–1926), *Louisine Havemeyer and Her Daughter Electra* (detail), 1895. Pastel on wove paper, 24 x 30 ½ in. Museum purchase. 1996.46.

## Family and Friends Portraits

### Background/ History

In 1895, Louise and Electra Havemeyer visited Mary Cassatt in her new home northwest of Paris. During their visit, mother and daughter posed for this touching double portrait—a tender image of maternal affection. Nestled on her mother’s lap, Electra is dressed in a striped pinafore—a loose garment put over clothes to keep them clean—ready for play while Louise is dressed in a more modern dress fitting for a lady at the head of her household. Mother and daughter are lost in thought and their arms encircle one another creating a heart shape while their hands meld together in the foreground of the image.

Cassatt employed pastel—a medium she had recently become increasingly interested in after seeing the works of 18th-century French pastellists at the Louvre—to create her subjects’ soft, rosy cheeks and shiny tresses. She considered pastel “the most satisfactory medium for (depicting) children”. Not only was Cassatt’s and Louise’s friendship long lasting—they visited one another and corresponded long after this portrait was complete—but young Electra developed a friendship with Cassatt that lasted well into the 1900s.

### About the Artist

Mary Cassatt (May 22, 1844–June 14, 1926) was an American painter and printmaker who lived and worked much of her adult life in France during the impressionist art movement. Today we think of Mary Cassatt as a prominent impressionist painter but that was not always the case. In her early career many of her paintings were submitted to galleries and never purchased and her application for commissions were not chosen. It was not until 1879 when her work was exhibited in an impressionist show where she gained wider popularity. Cassatt referred to herself as an independent, rather than an impressionist, and focused on women, children and family members as the subjects of much of her work, becoming known for her sensitive paintings of mothers and small children. remained an active member of the impressionists until 1886.

### A Lifelong Friendship

Mary Cassatt and Louise Havemeyer had one of the most important friendships in the history of American art. Cassatt and Louise had developed a friendship in the early 1870s and Cassatt mentored



Mary Cassatt (American, 1844–1926), *Louise Havemeyer and Her Daughter Electra*, 1895. Pastel on wove paper, 24 x 30 ½ in. Museum purchase. 1996 46.

and influenced her friend’s collecting tastes, while Havemeyer supported Cassatt and challenged her to continue creating even when other artists found her to be loud and highly opinionated.

In 1889 Louise, and her husband H.O. Havemeyer, traveled to Europe to their first European art market and Havemeyer began collecting Impressionist works at the suggestion of Cassatt. It was Cassatt’s dream to make European art accessible for Americans and with this friendship they cultivated a mutual love of European master works. The collection grew into an expansive catalogue, much of it now housed at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. As both pioneers of their time, they created and collected important art that influenced generations of artists (Mathews, Cassatt, & Cantor, 2008).

### What is a Portrait and How are They Made?

Portraits often capture the person’s physical features but they can also capture emotion. The facial expression of the sitter can convey inner thoughts and feelings. Portrait artists will also use the sitter’s favorite piece of clothing, items that are important to them, or their favorite place to help convey their personality.

When we traditionally talk about portraits we think about a formally composed image done in oil paint on canvas with a very formal composition, but a portrait can be created using a variety of materials on any surface. Portraiture requires a sitter, or the subject for the work. This could be a person or an animal. And, it requires a setting, or a background. The artist can place the sitter in a particular place, or the background can be soft or blurred.

# Family and Friends Portraits: All Levels

## ACTIVITY!

For this activity we will begin by looking closely at Mary Cassatt's pastel *Louisine Havemeyer and her Daughter Electra*, 1895. After looking closely at facial and body expressions as well as composition, we will create our own portraits of loved ones, either from a photograph or live.

Look closely at the two sitters' faces. What do their expressions tell you? Now look at their body language. Cassatt depicted Electra and Lousine in a close embrace. Think about how you might depict someone important to you. Will they be standing or sitting? Will you want to place them in a composition with some of their beloved possessions?

Use of media is extremely important when creating a portrait. Different paints and drawing tools will give an artist a different effect. Cassatt liked to use chalk pastel when creating portraits because it softened the shape of the human form giving them an airy feeling. On the other hand, you could choose to use oil paint applied thickly to give texture and weight to a work. Materials are powerful tools that can enhance the overall feeling of the piece.

### Materials:

- Pencil
- Eraser
- Paper
- Ruler (optional but can help with creating even lines)
- Pastels (chalk or oil) If you do not have pastel use colored pencils or crayons.

### Practice Drawing a Face

Did you know that most faces are about the size of your hand!? Portraiture and capturing likeness rely on the ability to break the face down into sections, then filling in the areas using light and shadow to create depth. Follow the steps below and look over the drawing guides on the next page.

#### Step 1

To begin, let's place our hand on the center of a piece of paper and draw a circle around the circumference of your hand.

#### Step 2

Divide the circle down the center using a very light dash line. You may want to use a pencil so you can erase.

#### Step 3

Once you have your center line, turn your page 90 degrees and draw another light dash line down the center. You will now have a circle divided into four equal sections.

#### Step 4

Next, draw a light dashed line one inch above your center line. This is the space where you'll draw the eyes. Lastly, draw a light dash line halfway up from the bottom of the circle. This is the location for the lips. The upper lip will be above the dashed line and the lower lip below.

Once you have mastered facial spacing you can begin your final composition! Think about how you can use color. Refer to Cassatt's portrait. She used color to create volume in the clothing as well as details in Electra and Louisine's facial features.

# Family and Friends Portraits: All Levels

