

# Study of roles of females in family portraits in the 19<sup>th</sup> century America

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**Research Question:** How far is the artist Lilly Martin Spencer more successful than her contemporary artist- Mary Cassatt in showcasing the changing roles of women in 19<sup>th</sup> century American family culture?

## I. INTRODUCTION

19th-century American families started evolving independently based on transformations occurring after incidents like Civil war and Industrial Revolution<sup>1</sup>. The increased employment opportunities for women, their social acceptance as breadwinners, and male participation in domestic chores were a few, reflecting the changing gender roles.<sup>2</sup> Influence of these radical movements could also be witnessed in the cultural art of America as portraying family groups including females became prominent rather than individual male figures.<sup>3</sup> Lilly Martin Spencer, an American artist, through her Genre paintings illustrated the daily life of America's evolved domestic scenes. She expressed her freedom by rejecting the typical display of family portraiture which was static and posed, instead, amalgamated the natural engagement of family members (especially women as central figures).<sup>4</sup> Later, Mary Cassatt emerged as an Impressionist in the year 1859 with a striking similarity of feminism to that of Spencer. Cassatt's sensitive display of mother-child relationships idealized the importance of both women and children possessing social utility in American families. Further, her works represented family life which collided with the social event of blue-collar workers as women started to accept social responsibilities.<sup>5</sup> As per 'Archives...Art Journal' by Elsie F. Freivogel, the diverged technique of portraying a rhythm of America's daily life in Spencer's pieces became the reason for her growing popularity allowing her art to be commissioned as decorative pieces for peoples' homes. Similarly, the article 'Modern Woman...True Womanhood?' by Norma Broude reflects Cassatt's modernist approach, focusing on

mother child relations, women empowerment which led her to become an influencer for female art scholarships; a mark establishing her success. This resemblance of the ideologies in paintings depicting the growing rate of femininity and family values by both Spencer and Cassatt led to the research question, "**How far is the artist Lilly Martin Spencer more successful than her contemporary artist- Mary Cassatt in showcasing the changing role of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century American family culture?**" Their similar converging ideas of women empowerment but variance in depictions made the essay worthy of research. It created a comparative analysis between both artists portraying growth of women in 19th century America, adding on to the existing knowledge.

The essay intends to critically analyze Spencer's and Cassatt's artworks based on social values present in 19th century America; feminism, decreasing rate of infant mortality, and acceptance of males becoming involved in the domestic periphery. It will comment on differences and similarities present in Domestic Happiness by Spencer-Children Playing with a Dog by Cassatt and Fi! Fo! Fum! By Spencer-A Woman and a Girl Driving by Cassatt, based on elements and principles of art; composition and set containing balance and symmetry, gestures, postures, forms that denote women's freedom, colors, expressions and lighting adding to women's dominance, and their attires that reflect disregard of subjugation.

The research will be conducted through a virtual visit to the MET; viewing Spencer's paintings. The Art of Refinement, a journal by Wendy J. Katz will help in analysing the impact of women empowerment circling around domesticity. Additionally, In Retrospect, an article from the American Magazine of Art by Dorothy Grafly will be used to analyze Cassatt's impressionist art, motives, and techniques. An article "Shake Hands?... Politics of art", drafted by April F. Masten, will help in understanding Spencer's

paintings aiding in the women upliftment of America (the revolution of feminism which occurred through her art). On the other hand, as highlighted by the prompt 'Mary Cassatt...Male Impressionists Couldn't' by Sarah Bochicchio, it will help in analysing Cassatt's fight against the prejudice portrayal of feminism through her impressionist techniques. Lastly, "The American...Nineteenth-Century", article by Willystine Goodsell will aid in understanding 19th Century American domestic sphere of women dominance and family culture.

#### **Changing roles of women:**

Through various waves of feminism, women gained recognizable control in the society. During the evolution of 19<sup>th</sup> century America, women became breadwinners and gained work experience outside traditional households. Married woman took control of the domestic sphere whereas single women became accustomed with the norms of social activities. Wives dominated the household and were entitled full control of their children's lives. Even men became familiar with domestic activities as they decided to participate in this change. This led to an evolved American society that had begun to respect women.

#### **COMPARING-DOMESTIC HAPPINESS BY SPENCER AND CHILDREN PLAYING WITH A DOG BY CASSATT**

##### **Composition:**

The composition of both paintings consists of realistically drawn figures placed closely in a small group, in a domestic interior bringing out the 19th century culture of close-knit nuclear families.<sup>7</sup> However, in Cassatt's piece, the father-figure is absent, unlike Spencer's. This makes the group appear incomplete whereas the presence of the male in Spencer's artwork completely balances the family portrait, creating a sense of harmony. Nonetheless, Cassatt includes a dog, attempting to create balance. In Spencer's painting, the family has an implied circular form depicting a complete loop of familial bond, however, in Cassatt's composition, the implied triangular form perhaps highlights the missing role of a husband which has narrowed the bonding but still brings out a sense of stability. Spencer also strengthens the composition by depicting herself in the painting.

Furthermore, both artists use symmetrical balance in their compositions. Spencer divides her composition uniformly: vertically and horizontally; parents occupying the upper half and the kids placed in the lower portion depicting togetherness.

Comparatively, the central line of axis in Cassatt's painting not only puts equal weight on both sides but also links the woman and the dog which can be viewed as a symbol of loyalty, further emphasizing a woman's role. In both artworks, children's form is centralised. The focus appears to be on them, to highlight a radical preview of cordial lifestyle that supported women as household leaders and nurturers.<sup>9</sup> This is further emphasized in 'Domestic Happiness' as the woman is positioned in front of the man, giving her more authority over him. In Cassatt's case, the woman's domestic independence is linked to the absence of a male, presenting her as the sole charge; hence positioned at back as a pillar of support.

##### **Lighting and Expressions:**

In Spencer's artwork, light appears to be intentionally added in a spotlight effect bringing focus on children and woman, which renounces sentiment of hope as infancy rates were rising and women were gaining empowerment.<sup>10</sup> The light, through deep shadows, adds volume and embarks on bringing out the supple built of the figures, heightening the expression of jubilation reflecting their nourished backgrounds. Additionally, the man is comparatively less highlighted (with a patch of light on his forehead and hand resting on the pillow behind the children) than the mother and babies, appearing slightly merged with background darkness, depicting gender reversals in domestic realm. In contrast, Cassatt's painting, instead of manipulating the lighting, has allowed natural sunlight to descend upon the mother and children from the window, rendering her painting more realistic. The overall subdued light probably reflects the society's gradually gaining acceptance of women's growth, although slightly altered but majorly limited to the households. However, even her aim like Spencer remains to emphasize the well-being of children as they look healthy and actively playful under the watchful eyes of their mother.

In Spencer's painting, where both the children can be seen entangled within their liveliness, in Cassatt's, the little boy seems to be in awe of his sister with his agape mouth and the girl seems to be casually touching him while hugging the dog.

The leading lines of leniency and affection as reflected through the soft, tender, yet focused gaze of the parents add to the warmth present in both the paintings, emphasizing on children being central to women's role as mothers. In both the pieces, the mothers are provided with a subtle smile as if enjoying their role as the nurturer and proudly

basking in the glory of being successful at it.

#### **Color palette:**

Spencer's colour palette has dual blends; a dark colour scheme for background and parental figures along with light shades to bring out the focus on children in their comfortable positions. The intensity of the dark colour scheme: red, Viridian, umber, and raw sienna in the backdrop allows light shades of peach and ochre to reflect from the lower center of the painting where children are placed, highlighting their importance regarding family growth<sup>11</sup>, reflecting the woman responsibly completing her duties. Cassatt manages to maintain a subdued pastel colour palette, however, the use of reds, pinks, sienna, yellow, and greens (albeit slightly faded), remarkably remain similar to Spencer's palette. The hues highlight tender nature of the woman and her affection towards her children. In Spencer's artwork, there is unity created through the use of red in the female's dress and drapes in backdrop. This brings out her command in domestic areas. Further, her peachy pink complexion (a shade lighter than the father) unites with that of the kids, reflecting upon her role as a mother. Similarly, Cassatt brings out this unity of skin colour amid her figures establishing a mother-child relationship (maternal significance). In 'CPD', green colour in mother's dress compliments the pink of the girl's frock, reflecting her role as someone who brings joy (symbolized by pink) into the family, and is responsible for their healthy growth (symbolized by green). Unlike 'CPD', the dominance of cream and off whites in 'Domestic Happiness' add vibrancy, making the figures appear glowing and angelic, depicting the divine bond that was developing in 19th-century American family culture. Further, the golden-yellow of the bed brings out their financial status. Cassatt too, through a rich red cushion, reflects upper-middle-class culture.<sup>12</sup>

#### **Postures and gestures:**

Both mothers have their heads tilted slightly to the left as they look down towards their children. It adds intimacy in the artworks since their loving gaze reflects their aspirations and protectiveness for their children. It brings out their commitment as both are entirely focused on their children, highlighting the role that a mother was entitled to during 19th century. However, contrast in gestures is visible as Spencer incorporates the mother in such a manner that she can be seen gently displaying boundaries through raising her hand, reflecting her domiciliary dominance. Her posture reiterates that she is responsible for her

children's welfare, and by putting up a hand to her husband, she is redefining her strength and creating a safe space for them. However, she also lays her head on his shoulder to reassure him that she is dependent on him to financially support the family, however, the domestic sphere is her reign. Although she does not touch the children, her right hand gently touches her bosom, bringing out a sense of possessive-nurturing.

Contrastingly, Cassatt has placed baby in the mother's lap reflecting her support for the child. This reiterates strong affection as she acts both as a mother and father in children's upbringing. Her form also supports the weight of the girl shown leaning on her. Although she lacks the robust and confident attitude possessed by Spencer's mother, her tender gestures reflect true essence of motherhood i.e. empathy and compassion. Although there is no one present to depict her control, her hands placed on the baby's stomach depict how she is strongly oriented to look after their nourishment without the presence of her husband. Through rule of thirds, it can be seen that in both works, hand gestures of the female fall into a central box of division, highlighting how the two artists have similarly brought down the focus on women's defying stance and their gained self-reliability. The artists, through gestures and postures of children also bring out a bonding probably instilled by the balance that the two women create in a domestic household as part of familial leadership.

Conclusively, through composition, lighting, expressions, colour palette, gestures, and postures, both artists bring out changes in females roles in the family culture of 19th century America; by depicting them dominating the family circle. Both are successful in portraying the maternal roles as a domestic ideal and reflecting the importance of children in the family. However, Spencer seems to be more successful since she brings out the aspect of men being involved in the domestic spheres where women are the leaders, as compared to Cassatt who has removed male figures, tilting the painting towards a negative remark on the family aspect of 19th century America.

#### **COMPARING- FI! FO! FUM! BY SPENCER & A WOMAN AND A GIRL DRIVING BY CASSATT**

##### **Expressions:**

'Fi! Fo! Fum!' by Spencer and 'AWGD' by Cassatt are both representatives of strong female roles. Spencer brings out rhythm of quality family time through the use of vivid expressions. 'Fi! Fo! Fum!' is a phrase featured in a nursery rhyme and

is also reiterated in the story of Jack and the Beanstalk.<sup>14</sup> Judging through the surprised and amazed expressions of the daughters, it renders the idea that their father was narrating the tale of Jack and the Beanstalk, attempting to aid in domestic chores as an evolved man of 19th century America.<sup>15</sup> The astonished, quizzical, and animated expression (making the recitation interesting) of the daughters and the man respectively, create a contrast to that of their mother's since she can be witnessed with a subtle smile, encouraging the efforts of her husband. This accentuates the leisure and apprenticeship appeal of the painting since the mother seems to enjoy that her children were interestingly learning morals of life. She was also relieved that her husband was paving the right track for their daughters (since conducting household activities was new for him); a vital role for women as they were to look after the children, their education, and moral upbringing. In Cassatt's case, there is a drastic drift from Spencer's, as the figures remain expressionless. They seem devoid of excitement, even in their leisure period or if analysed alternatively, leaving for work and school. The stern looks on the woman's face reflect determination and neglect, perhaps to display her open rejection of women not being able to drive, and determination to construct her image as a courageous woman rejecting patriarchal dominance. Similarly, the young girl's gaze remains unfazed, possibly reflecting her upbringing as someone who knows her limitations but is not afraid to challenge society for women's equality. She mirrors the same expression as that of the elder woman, creating unity, reflecting the image of a mature person despite being young. It seems she has instilled the same values to the young girl that she learned, highlighting the changing feminine roles. Contrasting to these neutral expressions, Cassatt's painting is devoid of male expressions. The turned-back boy exaggerates that the woman was disregarding all-male opinions establishing her ascendancy outside her circle of comfort, acting as a role model to the girl who falls under her apprenticeship. In this manner, while Spencer displays a comforting aspect of learning and playfulness in her regime, Cassatt displays the importance of learning the decorum of being a fearless and confident woman in a practical atmosphere.

#### **Setting:**

In Spencer's artwork, the composition is a tightly packed family gathering within the interiors contrasting to Cassatt's, which is a formal family

outing(exteriors). Spencer's composition draws the family together, albeit the mother who although is at the back, seemingly detached (due to the back of the chair acting as a partition) from the three figures. However, she is patiently near enough to demonstrate her authority over the man, who is in front but does not appear to have the liberty to lead the conversation to his preferences under the woman's attentive glare. Further, the female's hand on the chair can be deciphered as a restraining element that is perhaps assisting the interaction between the father and kids. This brings out female's role as an educator in her children's lives during the 19th century. Moreover, the positioning of the female in 'Fi! Fo! Fum!' can be alternatively interpreted as that of an avid learner herself (apprenticeship being another transformation in women's role at that time).<sup>16</sup> The partial closeness visible in Spencer's painting directly contrasts with the detachment reflecting from the figure-alignment in Cassatt's painting. Her rigid composition heightens the feeling of accomplishment that Cassatt displays as the woman breaks the traditional barriers of domesticity by driving a buggy in a public space and owning a horse (earlier women could not possess assets under their names). The strong grip of the female's hand holding the reign shows her to be in control of her own as well as her children's lives. Her focused front gaze reflects her progressive attitude as women became professionally inclined (especially single women). Moreover, Cassatt creates familiarity by depicting her sister, Lydia, in the painting<sup>17</sup>, providing a radical perspective to the family culture. It is noticeable that the left side contains three figures, and the right side contains the mother. This was perhaps Spencer's intention to highlight that a woman is on the same length of equality as a man, even though they have divided spheres of authority. In Cassatt's composition, the balance is entirely weighted on the right side, bringing the figures into focus, cutting out the surroundings. The intention is to perhaps highlight the woman's courage of defying gender norms and establishing her sense of individuality beyond the domestic sphere. Further, like Spencer depicts a girl to bring out feminist ideologies and educated women being key to a bright future, Cassatt places the girl on the front seat and the boy at the back, portraying forward growth and advancement in a woman's life.

#### **Form:**

Spencer's artwork depicts a homely and comforted family of realistically painted human forms through their slouched backs which

highlight their time of leisure. The female is shown resting her chin on the chair since they are letting go of their hectic routine and relaxing. However, even though the mother has a resting front, she is awkwardly bent which indicates that even during idle hours, she is bound to her duties of looking after her family. The woman providing support from behind and the engulfing position of the children with their father (making them appear active) implies that they are equally engaged with their parents. This highlights their virtuous breeding, emphasizing the woman's accomplishment in her task of elevating her children. Furthermore, their supple healthy forms with flushed cheeks reflect their nourished state. This is similar in Cassatt's piece where the three figures appear to be supporting each other's back despite the seat coming in between (similar to the chair's back placed in between Spencer's figures). However, in contrast to the domestic understanding in 'Fi! Fo! Fum!', Cassatt portrays her figures with straight backs and vertically uptight postures which indicate a sense of respect (making the painting appear stoic). Even during their spare time/ time spent outside, they maintain a reputable stance which empowers the woman as her intrepid personality reflects through it. The slight separation from the children perhaps indicates how she was tutoring them to be independent in the outdoors as well. Her poised form is attentive and mature as she handles the buggy, reflecting her strong-willed personality, further accentuated through her chiselled face and firm jaw. The little girl's face is cherubic and chubby, the only factors demarcating her child status in an otherwise mature appearance.

#### **Attires:**

Both the paintings contain specific attires that reflect their socio-economic status and traditional culture. In both artworks, formal attires bring out duties played by each figure. In 'Fi! Fo! Fum!' the daughters are wearing off-shoulder dresses which are perhaps an indication of their knowledge of modern fashion trends and independence to embrace them, bringing out the confidence taught by their mother as they dress according to their will. Although partially visible, it can be figured that the man is wearing formals under a printed silk housecoat, indicating his arrival from work in the evening and how the family has gathered together for a story session. The woman at the back eases into her traditional household clothing, ironically since it is also her work attire as the house is her workspace. Her composed figure within the attire, even though she

is slightly uncomfortable in her posture, reiterates her determination to look after her children even during discomfited situations. The attires in Spencer's work possess a rich texture achieved through realistic blending and well-defined folds and smooth creases. Similarly, Cassatt has displayed the detriment of an empowered woman through her choice of crisply starched clothes; dressed in formal clothes and a hat which reflect her strong background. Although the formality of appearance remains the same, the woman in Cassatt's painting has a drive to her clothing since she addresses her respected stance in the society. Through gentle brushstrokes, the woman's dress appears to be ironed and crumple-less, highlighting the importance of Victorian dresses as a means of establishing authority. The stiff hat matches her poise and perhaps acts as a symbol of power since her opinions rest within it, through which she is determined to change the image of women outside their domestic apparel. It also partially covers her hair bun, providing a man-like appearance to the woman, which resonates the idea of equality and women's strong sustenance. The young girl is no different from the woman as she too carries the stride of authentic clothing; frilled frock and hat complete with socks and shoes, while her blonde waves flow through her shoulders. The neat nature of her dressing style makes her appear bold, even sharper in her thoughts and newfound perspectives. Her open hair also complements the idea of her liberty. The boy (perhaps a teenager) is dressed in the potent clothes of upper middle-class men and their hat, strengthening the woman's appeal as even though she has a male to drive her cart, she refuses to acknowledge it and proves her self-standing outlook.

While both Spencer and Cassatt are successful in depicting growing roots of women dominance in the fields of apprenticeship and social responsibilities, Cassatt's approach towards the social utility of women in 19th century America appears as a potent one since she denies the prejudice of male dominance by challenging the society, as compared to Spencer who limits herself to the domestic supremacy of women. This highlights Cassatt to be the more successful in the combination through her amalgamation of setting, forms, expressions, and attire.

## **II. CONCLUSION:**

The evolving roles of women during 19th century America were fragmented: family culture, motherhood, subsistence, social utility, and apprenticeship. Both Spencer and Cassatt display these changes through their artworks. While

Spencer focuses more on the domestic appeal of women's gradually empowering roles, Cassatt brings about their social status of respect and responsibility which they seem to approach. Spencer appears to be more successful in portraying the changing roles of women because she addresses the present improvements which accompany the domestic strength of women such as involvement of males while women command their stance. Cassatt, who although portrays women's unyoked nature, has a radical approach since her paintings are bereft of males resulting in incomplete family depiction, making them unaligned to domestic appeal (further reflecting her vacillating stance between professional and personal matters). Moreover, Spencer reflects herself in the paintings, enhancing the bond of understanding since she was the breadwinner, which creates a bias portrayal. However, Cassatt depicts generic roles of women which renders Spencer to be more successful as Cassatt's paintings reflect a sense of detachment. Thus, through an overall analysis, Lilly Martin Spencer is delivered to be more successful than her contemporary artist Mary Cassatt due to her realistic approach of women's enhancing roles in the society, contrasting to Cassatt who uses a reforming perspective to heighten the same concept.

#### Unresolved Question:

It could be analysed further why Cassatt had a radical viewpoint displayed in her paintings. The complete removal of males suggests that she was assuming the coming changes whereas women during that era had only begun to enjoy their independence. Why did she not involve men?

#### Limitations:

It was difficult to create comparison between the personal aspect of both the artists since Spencer displayed herself in the paintings however, Cassatt incorporated her relatives, limiting the essay to be less detail orientated as their personal incorporation could not be analyzed.

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Fig 1. Domestic Happiness, Lilly Martin Spencer  
 Year: 1849  
 Medium: Oil on canvas  
 Detroit Institute of Arts Museum



Fig 2. Children Playing with a Dog, Mary Cassatt  
 Year: 1844-1926

Medium: Oil on canvas Private auction



Fig 3. FI! FO! FUM!  
 Lilly Martin Spencer  
 Year: 1858

Medium: Oil on canvas Private Location



Fig 4. A Woman and a Girl Driving, Mary Cassatt  
 Year: 1881  
 Medium: Oil on canvas  
 Philadelphia Museum of Art