



Mary Cassatt

(1844-1926)

Sara in a Dark Bonnet

c. 1901

no signature or date

oil on canvas

h 67.2 cm x w 56.2 cm

WRM Dep. FC 697





Brief Report

This charming portrait of little Sara, the granddaughter of Emile Loubets, a former president of the French Republic, is one of more than 50 drawn or painted studies that Mary Cassatt made of the girl within the space of a year. It is most similar to a pastel now in the Fred Jones Museum in Norman, Oklahoma [Breeskin 1970, entry 369]. In the collection of the Wallraf-Richartz Museum & Fondation Corboud it is very much a special case, which only became apparent as a result of closer technical examination. For the painting, on a grey-primed canvas which Cassatt bought from the Paris dealer Dupré, as can be seen from two markings verso on the fabric and stretcher respectively, is in a curious condition (figs. 4, 5). There are traces of scraping by a trowel or palette knife and drips and run-marks of a liquid, indicating that the paint-layer was subjected to rough treatment over the whole area of the picture before it was completely dry. (figs. 7-12).

The time and manner of this treatment mean that the only possible culprit is the artist herself. In many places the paint was removed down to the ground, while the surface of the paint layer shows signs of rubbing, in fact looks as though it has been washed down, so that the present condition can only be described as fragmentary. This form of revision suggests a critical confrontation with her work on the part of the artist, and that she reduced the paint layer in order to re-work the picture once more. For reasons unknown, this was never done, however. The reason for Cassatt's dissatisfaction is not apparent today: while the figure of the girl was evidently well advanced, peripheral areas have been left sketchy and unworked (fig. 6). In Cassatt's oeuvre dating from 1890 to about 1903 there are other individual paintings which, to judge from illustrations, appear to be in a similar condition (Breeskin 1970, entries 183, 263, 388, 405, 436, 507).



Picture support canvas

Standard format	close to size F15 (65.0 x 54.0 cm)
Weave	tabby weave
Canvas characteristics	vertical 20, horizontal 17 threads per cm; fabric of medium thickness with threads of uneven thickness ranging from 0.2-0.6 mm (vertical), 0.3-0.4 mm (horizontal), Z-twist
Stretching	original attachment with nails preserved; turnover edge after stretching (or at a later date) cut back by c. 1.7 cm on all sides along the thickness of the stretcher; stretch-marks at the top and bottom edges
Stretcher	stretcher with centre-bar
Stretcher depth	2.0 cm
Traces left by manufacture/processing	the bars are chamfered recto towards the picture by about 4 mm, all the outer edges verso are likewise chamfered over a breadth of 1.4 cm by about 4.0 mm
Manufacturer's/dealer's marks	<p>two manufacturer's or dealer's marks verso of identical content but differing in typography and technique (dealer still exists today at same address as exclusive stationer's):</p> <p>"F. DUPRE/ 141, Faubourg Saint-Honoré/ Au coin de la Rue de Berri, PARIS" [start of 2nd and 3rd lines reconstructed]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. stencilling in dark blue paint on the centre bar of the stretcher 2. burnmark(?) on the verso of the canvas centrally near the top (fig. 4)



Ground

Sizing	not determined
Colour	grey (relatively dark)
Application	one to two coats before stretching and cutting-to-size
Binding medium	presumably oil
Texture	very even, homogeneous thin layer; microscopic examination reveals variously sized particles of a black pigment, very large lead-white particles and here and there large particles of yellow ochre, a few of red ochre and fine blue particles (fig. 5)

Composition planning/Underpainting/Underdrawing

Medium/technique	cannot be determined
Extent/character	–
Pentimenti	–



Paint layer

Paint application/technique and artist's own revision

after the first sparse and sketchy strokes to outline the form, Cassatt laid in the figure of the girl on the canvas in rapid, vigorous strokes; the sequence can be reconstructed as follows: flesh, bonnet, dress, arm-rests, finally the background and back of the chair; the paint was evidently applied wet-in-wet; the work retains a sketch-like character in the peripheral areas (fig. 6); at an unknown point in time, the already well-advanced, but not yet dry painting was treated in the manner described above: particularly affected are the face, arm and dress; the condition becomes very clear in illustrations made in raking or transmitted light (figs. 7, 8, 12)

Painting tools

brushes of different widths, strokes predominantly 0.7-1.4 cm in width, occasionally also 0.4 cm; subsequently revised by the artist with a palette knife or trowel and solvents(?) (figs. 7, 8, 10, 12)

Surface structure

while the original brushwork can still largely be traced, the treatment mentioned above means that pronounced impasto areas are largely absent apart from the region in the bottom right-hand corner; all the structures were levelled down; in some places only remnants of paint are present in the crevices of the primed canvas; microscopic examination reveals individual pigment particles standing proud of the paint layer, a result of the treatment with solvents (fig. 12)

Palette

hues revealed by visual microscopic inspection: white; pale yellow; medium brownish-red; dark red lake; dark orange; dark green; medium green; pale yellowish green; dark blue; dark brown; black (only as admixture);

VIS spectrometry: cobalt blue, ultramarine, viridian, copper green pigment(?), barium chromate(?), para red (di-azo colorant), iron oxide red; iron oxide yellow

Binding mediums

presumably oil

Surface finish

Authenticity/condition

unvarnished



Signature/Mark

When? no signature present

Autograph signature –

Serial –

Frame

Authenticity uncertain; it is an historical frame whose manufacture and present condition suggest that is the authentic frame or at least a very early one

State of preservation

The authentically fragmentary condition was only slightly improved by a presumably fairly recent restoration involving reticent retouching (fig. 3).

Additional remarks

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Literature

- Budde/Schaefer 2001: Rainer Budde, Barbara Schaefer, *Miracle de la couleur* (Ausst.kat. Köln Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud, 8. September - 9. Dezember 2001), Köln 2001, cat. no. 15, p. 58 ff., with figs.
- Adelyn Dohme Breeskin, *Mary Cassatt, A Catalogue Raisonné of the Oils, Pastels, Watercolors, and Drawings*, Washington 1970, entry 371, p. 155



Source of illustrations

Fig. 4 (right half): Dupré Octante, Catalogue n° 5, beaux-arts/édition novembre 1979, Cover (Reprint Janvier 1899 – Supplément au Catalogue Général)

All further illustrations and figures Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud

Examination methods used

- | | |
|--|--|
| ✓ Incident light | ✓ Visible spectrometry |
| ✓ Raking light | – Wood identification |
| – Reflected light | – FTIR (Fourier transform spectroscopy) |
| ✓ Transmitted light | – EDX (Energy Dispersive X-ray analysis) |
| ✓ Ultraviolet fluorescence | – Microchemical analysis |
| ✓ Infrared reflectography | |
| – False-colour infrared reflectography | |
| – X-ray | |
| ✓ Stereomicroscopy | |

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Fig. 1
Recto



Fig. 2
Verso



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Fig. 3
Recto under ultra-violet
radiation



Fig. 4
Verso; the dealer's
stamps on the stretcher
and the canvas; for
comparison, the cover
title of Dupré's near-
contemporary catalogue
(1899)



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Fig. 5
Grey ground,
microscopic photograph
(M = 1 mm)



Fig. 6
Detail of the bottom
right-hand corner of the
picture, sketchy painting



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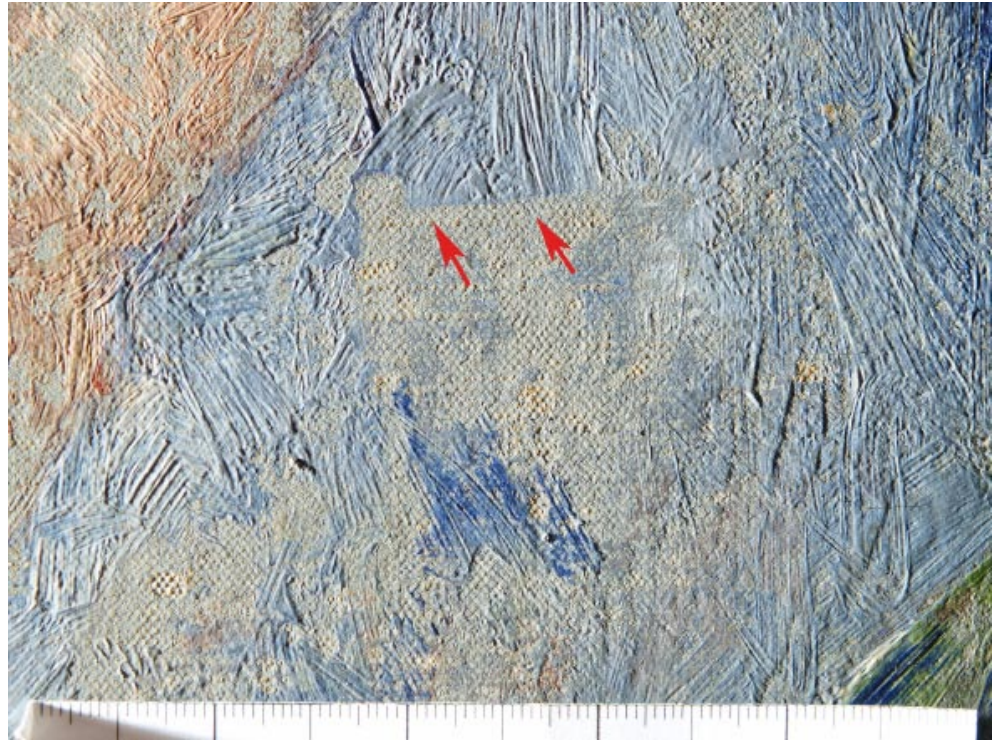


Fig. 7
Detail in raking light:
trace of scraping by a
palette knife; paint was
removed before it had
had time to dry



Fig. 8
Traces of scraping; the
tool, a trowel or palette
knife, was drawn from
bottom to top (arrows);
microscopic photograph
in raking light
(M = 1 mm)



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Fig. 9
Detail of flesh colour

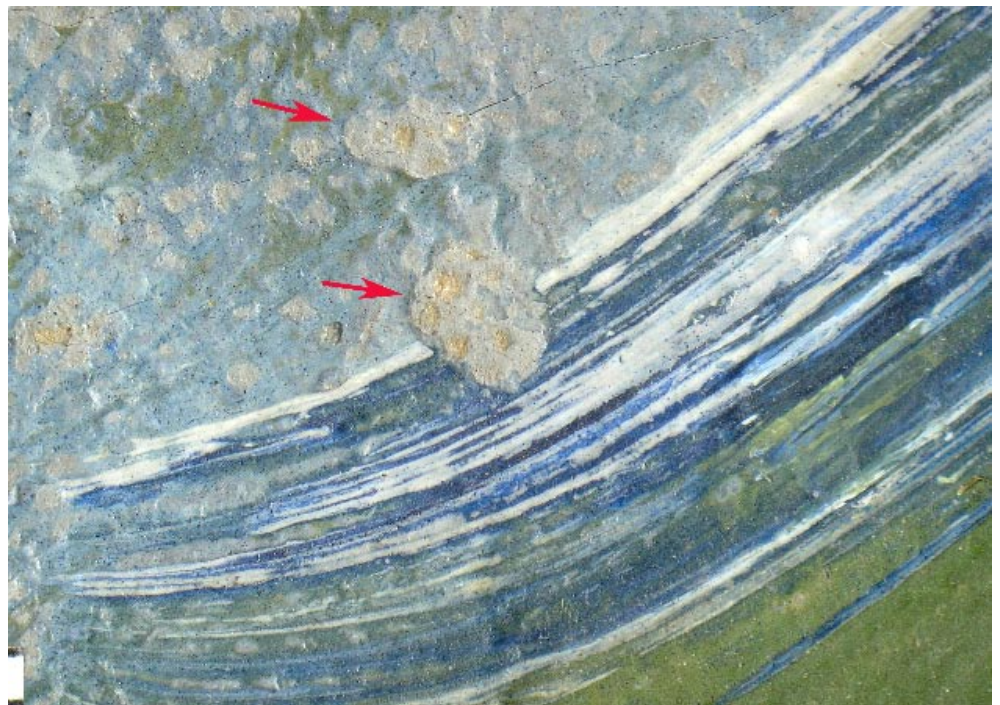


Fig. 10
Blue and white paint applications mixed wet-in-wet; the trail of drips shows the use of solvent to reduce the thickness of the paint layers; microscopic photograph (M = 1 mm)



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Fig. 11
Detail of the arm:
incident light

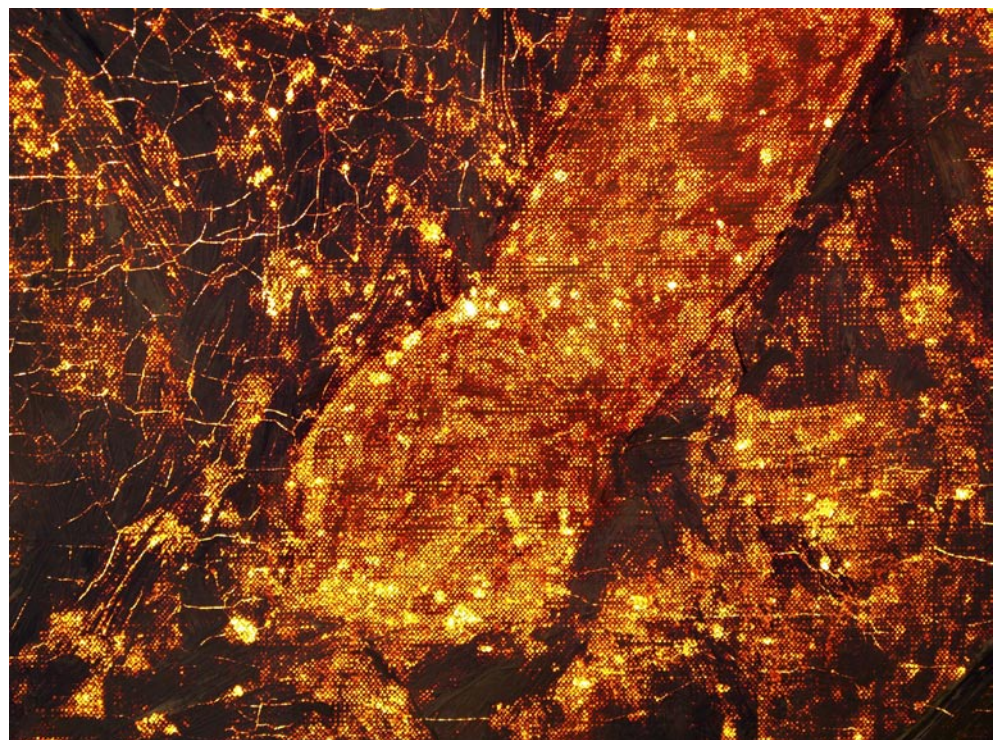


Fig. 12
Detail of the arm; the
transmitted light shows
the highly variable
thickness of the picture
layer resulting from the
treatment the painting
received; thus the areas
thinned by the solvent
right down to the
ground appears pale
yellow