

Mary Cassatt (American, 1844–1926)

*The Child's Caress*, c. 1891

Oil on canvas

Gift in memory of Wilhelmina Tenney by a group of her friends, 1953 (1845.1)

Mary Cassatt was the only American—and just one of two women—who worked and exhibited with the French Impressionists. She is best known for paintings, pastels, and prints that capture intimate moments between women and children in settings that range from domestic interiors to secluded gardens. These compositions, like the one on view here, evoke religious imagery of the Virgin Mary with an infant Jesus. Cassatt, however, has modernized the subject and removed the spiritual symbols of the Christian faith to focus instead on the secular relationship between a woman and a child. The people in Cassatt's later works were usually not related; rather, they were artists' models hired to sit for the painter and play the role of a loving pair. As a result, paintings like this one are not informal portraits of a family but visual studies of human interactions.