

I ALWAYS LOVED YOU - Mary Cassatt and Edgar Degas as seen through the eyes of a novelist

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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Robin Oliveira always dreamed of going to Paris. What she couldn't have known, however, is that the time she and her husband spent in The City of Lights would inspire her second book, "I Always Loved You."

"When I got there, I was enthralled," Oliveira said during a telephone interview from her home in Seattle. "I was in love, as anyone who goes to Paris becomes."

During their 10-day trip, Oliveira and her husband made it their mission "to see every single piece of art work in the city."

While there, the author learned that American artist Mary Cassatt (1844-1926), who lived and worked in Paris during the Belle Epoch period (1871-1914), had burned all the letters she had written to Edgar Degas right before she died.

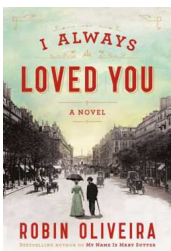
"That was so interesting to me because she didn't burn any other letters," Oliveira said. "That was the beginning. I had to find out why she burned them and what their relationship was like."

According to Wikipedia, Mary Stevenson Cassatt "was an American painter and printmaker. She lived much of her adult life in France, where she first befriended Degas (1834-1917) and later exhibited among the Impressionists. Cassatt often created images of the social and private lives of women, with particular emphasis on the intimate bonds between mothers and children."

Cassatt enjoyed a privileged upbringing near Pittsburg. Her father was a successful stock broker and land speculator. Her mother's family were bankers. Her grand tour of Europe, thought of at the time as a finishing school for young women, lasted five years. She learned French and German and studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

Stifled by the constraints placed on women at the academy, Cassatt moved to Paris in 1866 and continued her study.

According to Wikipedia, "Cassatt augmented her artistic training with daily copying in the Louvre (she obtained the required permit, which was necessary to control the "copyists", usually low-paid women, who daily filled the museum to paint copies for sale). The museum also served as a social meeting place for Frenchmen and American female students, who, like Cassatt, were not allowed to attend cafes where the avant-garde socialized."



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Oliveira, whose first book was 'My Name is Mary Sutter,' says the novelist in her was very excited at the prospect of telling Cassatt's story in a historical novel.

"I had to see what was going on," she said. "What I've learned is so much more."

Cassatt was influenced and championed by Degas.

"They had a deep relationship," Oliveira noted. "It was complicated."

The author said she had a working knowledge of Degas, but "mostly just of his ballet paintings."

"I had no idea he had this whole other subgenre of women's paintings – less flattering pictures that labeled him as a misogynist for all these years, which I think is, by the way, wrong," she declared.

Oliveira says Degas was "mysterious to everyone."

"He's so opaque," she noted. "I had to work really, really hard to understand his public and private reputations. In doing that, I become completely fascinated by him."

Although born to wealth, Degas' family fortune was lost when he was a young man. He spent years paying back his father's debts.

"The loss of that fortune was a huge blow to him," Oliveira explained. "He was not obligated to pay everyone back, but he did. He was a man of honor."

Degas suffered from poor eyesight. Part of Oliveira's research included a trip to the Musée d'Orsay to view artifacts from his studio which, by a stroke of good luck, included a special viewing of Degas' death mask.

"I had no idea I'd get to see it," she said. "I don't want to make it too Victorian, but I almost swooned. It was organic, partly because I knew that clay had touched his face."

Degas' public persona was thorny.

"People use the adjective 'irascible,'" she noted. "It's hard to know how much his struggles changed his character and his feelings about the world. I think he had an artist's temperament."

Degas was part of a group we call the Impressionists. Although wildly popular now, that wasn't always the case.

"The Impressionists banded together because they were outsiders," Oliveira said. "But they weren't best friends. They were peacocks."

In the book, Cassatt meets some of the most influential Impressionists at a gathering, called a salon, at the home of Edouard Manet's mother. Guests at the Thursday night events included artists Claude Monet and his wife, Camille, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, and writer and art critic Émile Zola.

Cassatt is invited to join the group, who recognize her talent, and develops a special relationship with Degas – one that lasted until his death in 1917.

"I think she remained confounded by him for her whole life," Oliveira concluded. "I don't think she ever, ever came to any resolution about that relationship. She was still writing letters to a friend when she was in her 60s complaining about how cruel he could be to her."

Oliveira is currently at work on a novel set in St. Petersburg, Russia, and Paris a tad later at the end of the 19th century.

"Even if another book of mine never got published, I don't think I'd stop writing," she confessed. "It is the thing that makes me who I am in many ways."

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Oliveira will be at the Dallas Museum of Art on Tuesday, Feb. 18, at 7:30 p.m.

“I get to speak with Cathy Marie Buchanan, who wrote ‘The Painted Girls,’ the author explained. “We split Paris. I took the upper class. She took the lower class. Her writing is quite special. She has Degas as a character in her book. I think we wrote him a little differently.”

According to the Penguin, the publisher of “The Painted Girls,” the book is “is a tale of two remarkable sisters rendered uniquely vulnerable to the darker impulses of ‘civilized society.’ In the end, each will come to realize that her salvation, if not survival, lies with the other.”

Tickets for the event are \$35 for non members, \$30 for members and \$15 for students. Visit www.dallasmuseumofart.org. Click on visit and then calendar for more information.