



A Free Course on the History of Western Art

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Edgar Degas), *The Star*,
1876-7, Musée d'Orsay

27-04 EDGAR DEGAS

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- This is Section 27 on Impressionism and this is talk 4 on Edgar Degas. I have included him with the Impressionists even though he did not consider himself an Impressionist. He refused to paint outdoors and preferred to be called a "realist" or an "independent".

NOTES

Ten Little Known Facts about Degas

1. His family wanted him to become a lawyer. He was born in Paris on 19th July 1834 and was the eldest of five children. His mother was a ballet dancer and had to look after him growing up as his health was very weak. He had a strict bourgeois upbringing with five or six hours of formal study a day. Degas began law studies in the autumn of 1853. In 1855, following a meeting with Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Degas enrolled at the École des Beaux-Arts to study drawing. One year later, in 1856, he traveled to Italy to further his study of art and stayed three years copying works by Renaissance artists and examples from classical antiquity. This period was pivotal to his development.
2. He was a prolific but secretive sculptor. While famous for his paintings and drawings, Degas was a prolific sculptor who worked primarily in wax and clay, modeling figures of dancers and horses. These works were never meant for public viewing. He used everyday objects like wine bottle corks and old floorboards to build armatures and bulk out the figures, a technique discovered by X-raying the fragile pieces a century later. After his death, over 150 sculptures were found in his studio, and his heirs authorized their casting in bronze. The only sculpture Degas ever exhibited in his lifetime was the controversial *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, shown at the 1881 Impressionist

exhibition. It was reviled by many critics for its startling realism and mixed-media elements—the wax figure was dressed in a real tulle skirt and a human-hair wig. He made his sculptures with surprising household objects. While today we know his sculptures from posthumous bronze casts, Degas created his original works using a variety of unconventional, everyday materials. An analysis of his famous beeswax sculptures, including the original *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, revealed fillers like wine bottle corks and old paintbrushes beneath the surface. This unorthodox approach was part of his experimental process and contributed to the fragility of his wax models

3. He was a keen photographer. He took up photography to compensate for failing eyesight and often painted from photographs. As his eyesight deteriorated in the 1880s, Degas explored photography, often creating portraits of friends by lamplight to avoid harsh daylight. He considered daylight "too easy" and preferred the atmospheric challenges of artificial light. He also photographed dancers and nude women as studies for his paintings and sculptures.
4. He had family ties to slavery in New Orleans. Degas's brother, René, lived in New Orleans and had a cotton business there. Degas visited in 1872-1873, and the portraits he painted during this time, including "The Cotton Office," became well-known and brought him fame and financial success. During a five-month stay in New Orleans from late 1872 to early 1873, Degas lived with his maternal Creole family. He wrote letters describing the city's "black world" in explicitly racist and dehumanising terms. His relatives, who were involved in the cotton trade, were a part of the local white supremacist milieu. Unbeknownst to Degas, his maternal grandfather's family also had a mixed-race relative who was a prominent inventor—a connection discovered by scholars much later.
5. His art collection sold to pay off his brother's debts. When Degas's father died in 1874, it was revealed that his brother had accumulated a large debt. To save the family's reputation, Degas sold his inherited family house and his entire personal art collection to pay it off. This forced him to depend on his own artwork for income, leading to a prolific period where he produced many of his most celebrated paintings of ballerinas and café scenes.
6. He was an influential art collector. Although he had to sell his family's art to pay off debts, Upon his father's death in 1874, Degas learned that his

brother had run up massive debts. In order to preserve the family's honor, Degas took the rare step for a wealthy artist and sold his entire inherited art collection to settle the debt. The necessity of relying on his own art sales for the first time in his life prompted a new, highly productive period, during which he created many of his most celebrated paintings of ballerinas and Parisian life. Degas was an avid art collector and amassed a remarkable assemblage of works throughout his life. After his death, his collection—which was sold at auction during the 1918 bombardment of Paris—revealed his passion for artists he revered, such as Ingres, Delacroix, and Daumier, as well as his support for contemporaries like Manet and Mary Cassatt.

7. He changed his name. He was born Hilaire-Germain-Edgar De Gas, but in 1870, he changed his surname to the less aristocratic-sounding "Degas". This was likely influenced by his family's aristocratic background.
8. He didn't fully identify as an Impressionist. Although he exhibited with the Impressionists, Degas often clashed with them and did not consider himself one. He refused to paint outdoors (*en plein air*), believing that studio time was necessary to perfect a painting. Degas openly rejected the label, preferring to be called a "realist" or an "independent". He disdained the Impressionists' practice of painting outdoors (*en plein air*), famously quipping that if he were the government, he would have a special brigade of gendarmes to keep an eye on landscape artists. Degas insisted his work was the result of careful, meticulous effort in the studio, not spontaneous observation.
9. His eyesight declined dramatically. At the age of 36, Degas began experiencing visual problems that worsened over the rest of his life. This decline in sight was one reason he focused on sculpture, which allowed him to continue creating his beloved dancers without the need for perfect vision.
10. In his lifetime his pastel drawings were much more highly regarded than his oil paintings as pastels were much more popular. In his lifetime he sold over 6,000 pastel drawings and only 60 oil paintings.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

- Degas was born in Paris to a moderately wealthy family and enrolled at the Faculty of Law in Paris but did not apply himself. Two years later he was admitted to the École des Beaux-Arts and the following year travelled to

Italy for three years.

- He enlisted with the army in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, but it was found his eyesight was defective and his eyes caused him problems for the rest of his life. His father died in 1873 and he discovered his brother had huge debts, so he sold his home and his belongings to pay off the debt and from then on had to sell paintings to survive.
- As his financial situation improved he began to collect Old Masters such as El Greco and modern artists such as Ingres, Delacroix and Daumier.
- In the late 1880s he developed a passion for photography and photographed many of his friends and often painted from photographs.
- As the years passed he became isolated and he never married and believed an artist could have no personal life.
- He was famous for his hatred of dogs and they had to be locked away before he arrived.
- The Dreyfus Affair brought his **anti-Semitism** to the fore and he broke with his Jewish friends.
- He was so argumentative that all his other friends slowly left him and one of the last to leave was Renoir.
- He never married and spent the last years of his life, nearly blind, restlessly wandering the streets of Paris before dying in September 1917. As his vision failed his fame grew but this gave him little comfort.

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Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Self-portrait*, 1855, 81.5 x 65 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Self-portrait*, 1855, 81.5 x 65 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

- This is Degas born Hilaire-Germain-Edgar De Gas (pronounced “il-air zher-man ed-gar duh gah”), note his last name was two words. He was born into a fairly wealthy family in Paris and the prefix “de” signified a noble family but Degas thought it pretentious particularly as his family did not have any aristocratic ancestors. His father was a banker with connections in Italy and New Orleans and his mother was a former ballet dancer. When he left home he simplified his name to Edgar Degas.
- As a child his health was poor and his mother had to look after him. He was fascinated by art from a young age and draw and sketched encouraged by his father who took him to museums. He had a strict bourgeois upbringing with five or six hours of formal study a day and his family wanted him to **become a lawyer**. He began law studies in the autumn of 1853 but in 1855, he was introduced to the famous, 73 year-old artist Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. Degas revered Ingres who told him “**Draw lines, young man, and still more lines, both from life and from memory, and you will become a good artist**”. Degas took his advice to heart, studied under a student of Ingres (Louis Lamothe) and enrolled at the École des Beaux-Arts to study drawing. One year later, in 1856, he traveled to Italy to further his study of art and stayed three years copying works by Renaissance artists and examples from classical antiquity. He venerated Ingres all his life and never described himself as an Impressionist as he believed, like Ingres, in the primacy of line over colour.

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Edgar Degas (1834-1917),
The Bellelli Family, 1858–
1867, 200 x 253 cm, Musée
d'Orsay, Paris

Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *The Bellelli Family*, 1858–1867, 200 x 253 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

- *The Bellelli Family* (pronounced "belle-eh-li") depicts his aunt, Laura, her husband, Baron Gennaro Bellelli, and their two daughters, Giulia and Giovanna. The painting is known for its unique composition and its subtle portrayal of domestic tension, showing the family in separate psychological spaces and reflecting Degas's studies of individual personalities.
- The work was created over several years during Degas's travels in Italy. He sketched the figures individually and assembled them into the final composition in his studio.
- Note the distance between the husband and wife with the baron physically, and so appearing emotionally separated from his family. Degas's aunt is shown in a mourning dress as her father had recently died and his portrait is hanging on the wall behind her. His aunt and the children are not looking at the Baron who appears to be sitting in the fireplace.
- The painting is an early masterpiece; Degas was in his late twenties and it shows the influence of the Realism movement, with its subdued palette and unconventional grouping of figures.

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Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Young Spartans Exercising*, c.1860, 109 x 155 cm, National Gallery, London

Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Young Spartans Exercising*, c.1860, 109 x 155 cm, National Gallery, London

- This work stands out as one of his most intriguing history paintings. The subject is based on **Plutarch's account of Lyscurgus**, the legendary Spartan lawgiver, who instituted physical training and wrestling contests where girls were commanded to challenge the boys and sometimes even exercise nude—an unusual degree of sexual equality in ancient Greek society. Sparta was an incredibly harsh society. Boys were completely removed from their family at the age of seven to undergo constant, brutal treatment. Women had more freedom than in other ancient Greek city States but they couldn't vote or hold public office, their sole role was to produce strong, healthy children.
- Degas was fascinated by classical tradition and social behaviours, which is reflected in the composition: we see groups of adolescent girls taunt their male counterparts, with older women and Lyscurgus watching, and in the distance the harsh mountains of Sparta are a reminder of the city's brutal customs.
- The painting's overt theme is **athletic competition and female agency**, but art historians have long noted how Degas **modernised the faces and postures**: originally modelled on ideal Greek beauty, these figures, after years of reworking, came to resemble **contemporary Parisian youth**, one critic (André Lemoisne) describing them as street urchins of Montmartre.
- X-ray studies reveal Degas **obsessively repainted the figures'** positions and numbers; the foreground girls famously have an **anatomical impossibility—ten legs among four bodies**—a legacy of his endless revisions and lack of concern

for strict realism, producing a scene that although it is full of energy becomes awkward on close observation. It is not clear if we are witnessing an imminent fight or a flirtatious ritual.

- It was listed for the 1880 Impressionist exhibition, but **Degas never displayed it publicly**, keeping it in his studio, perhaps due to its **controversial subject matter**: gender rivalry and nudity.

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Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Scene of War in the Middle Ages*, c.1863–1865, 32 x 46 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Scene of War in the Middle Ages*, c.1863–1865, 32 x 46 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

- This was created when Degas was still focused on **traditional historical subjects**, before he became known for his Impressionist paintings of contemporary life. He submitted it to the **Salon in Paris in 1865**, where it was accepted but largely **overlooked**. The artwork is considered his **last history painting**.
- It is known by multiple titles, including *The Misfortunes of the City of Orléans*, but the event shown is **not a specific historical battle**. The composition presents a brutal war scene with naked women being harassed by mounted soldiers in a frieze-like arrangement.
- The painting is ambiguous: no specific historical incident fits its title, and the figures drawn—**nude women pursued by armed horsemen**—suggest a **surreal allegory** rather than a realistic depiction. Some critics, after Degas's death, interpreted it as an allegory of the **violence suffered by women in New Orleans** during the American Civil War, a city closely linked to Degas's maternal family, though the artist never confirmed such a connection.[1][2][3][4][5][6]
- The scene displays brutality but is oddly calm: the mounted soldiers aim arrows but the nine terrified female nudes appear more like studio models than tragic victims. The horses are stirrupless and the weaponry is historically inaccurate, which led many to see the painting as a strange, theatrical fantasy—a deliberately “constructed” scene where violence is ritualized and the landscape suggests a stage. This provoked confusion and often shock among critics, some

of whom were fascinated by the meticulous preparatory drawings and the “immodest” poses that foreshadow Degas’s future focus on bathing women in everyday scenes. The critical response was mixed and the painting soon faded from the public eye, marking Degas’s break with history subjects. Immediately after, he turned toward contemporary life—ballet dancers, racetracks, urban Paris—which became the subjects of his mature paintings.[2][3][4][5][1]

NOTES

- Before and during the war, enslaved Black women in New Orleans were subjected to profound and routine sexual violence as an inherent part of slavery.
- In 1862, the year before this was painted, General Butler issued his infamous “**Woman Order**,” decreeing that any woman who insulted Union soldiers would “**be regarded and held liable to be treated as a woman of the town plying her avocation**”. This order threatened white Confederate women with humiliation, public arrest, and the threat of sexual assault by **equating them with prostitutes** for defiant behaviour. While the order was not a direct authorisation of rape, it was interpreted as a green light for Union soldiers to threaten and terrorise women with sexual violence. This created a climate of fear among white Southern women, who understood the threat was a significant tool of subjugation by the occupying force. Southern society, which held a woman's virtue as her most valuable asset, was deeply shaken by the threat, which made the fear of sexual violence a central part of how white women experienced the war.

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Edgar Degas (1834-1917),
*Mademoiselle Fiocre in the Ballet
 'La Source'*, 1867–68, 130 × 145 cm,
 Brooklyn Museum

Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Mademoiselle Fiocre in the Ballet 'La Source'*, 1867–68, 130 × 145 cm, Brooklyn Museum

- **This is the first of Degas's many works to focus on the ballet**, this painting depicts Eugénie Fiocre (pronounced "you-genie fee-ocre"), a celebrated ballerina, in her role as princess Nourreda (pronounced "nor-read-ah") in the ballet *La Source*.
- **Three women and a horse** are shown by a pool of water in a lush, theatrical setting. Fiocre is seated at the water's edge, gazing into a reflective pool, accompanied by a companion and an attendant. The reflection in the water adds a multi-dimensional element and speaks to Degas's interest in space and perspective.
- The painting captures a moment of **stillness backstage** and shows details like discarded ballet slippers to highlight the contrast between the magical performance world and the rehearsal's private, everyday reality.
- Eugénie Fiocre was principal ballerina at the Paris Opéra and famous for her beauty and for dancing *en travesti*, that is in male roles. In 1870, she created the role of Frantz in the ballet *Coppélia*. Rather than show her performing, Degas captures her in a contemplative, behind-the-scenes moment during a rehearsal.
- The ballet 'La Source' was choreographed by Arthur Saint-Léon and the production featured elaborate sets and costumes, a hydraulic-powered stream, and even a live horse, which appears in Degas's painting.
- Degas merges theatrical artifice with psychological realism. While Fiocre is in costume, her pink ballet slippers (visible between the horse's legs) and the

dancers' relaxed postures reveal the artificiality of the theatrical setting.

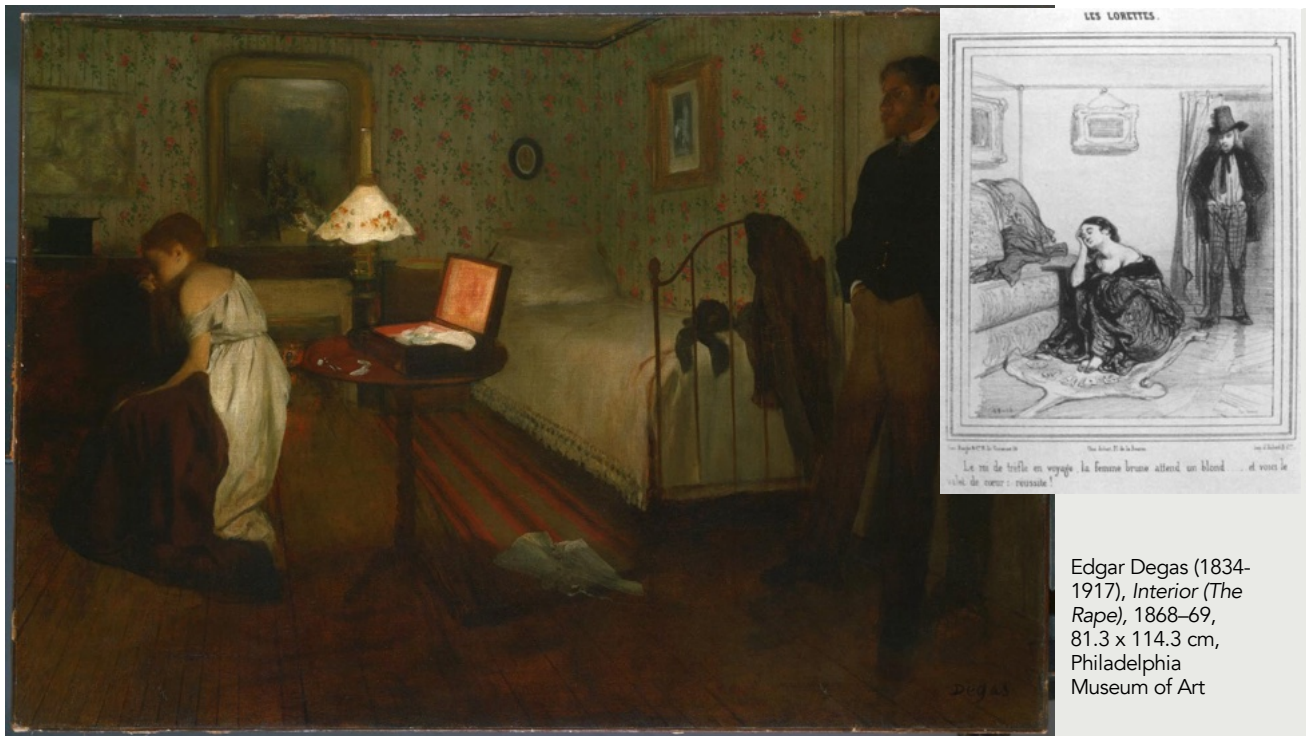
- He painted the final work in his studio using sketches he made while observing the rehearsals. The canvas combines the scale of a history painting with a modern subject.

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Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Interior (The Rape)*, 1868–69, 81.3 x 114.3 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art

Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Interior (The Rape)*, 1868–69, 81.3 x 114.3 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art

- This is one of his most enigmatic and unsettling works.
- The subject matter is deliberately obscure and it generated intense debate among critics and viewers at the time. There's no clear literary or historical source. Some early viewers and friends of Degas called the painting *Le Viol*, *The Rape*, and for decades it was widely interpreted as depicting the aftermath or threat of sexual violence—possibly a scene of rape or coercion. Details such as the woman's rumpled dress, the rigid bed, and small hints like a splash of red lent weight to this reading, while others speculated on marital discord or emotional violence. Some friends said Degas used the name *The Rape*, others said he was "incensed" by its widespread use and preferred the more general *Interior*. Degas exhibited it as *Interior* in 1905, and in a notebook, he referred to it simply as "my genre picture".
- When the painting finally exhibited publicly in 1905, critics remained divided but most agreed on its extraordinary theatricality: the figures posed like actors, dramatic lighting, and household objects laid out as if on stage. The composition's ambiguity left contemporary audiences both unsettled and fascinated; many noted its break with Impressionist themes of modern life, seeing it instead as a "genre painting" with an unsettling twist.
- A man stands threateningly with his back against a closed door, blocking the exit, while a woman sits hunched and defeated on the other side of the room. A crimson-lined sewing box lies open on the table, a detail some interpret as

symbolic of violated secrets. The scene is illuminated by a single lamp, casting deep shadows and dramatically highlighting the figures. The stark contrast and artificial light create an intimate and suspenseful atmosphere. A bed is prominently featured, yet remains untouched in the foreground. The bed, the open sewing box, and the discarded corset on the floor hint at a domestic disturbance and create a rich, if unclear, narrative.

- For over a century, art historians have tried to find a definitive meaning, proposing several theories for the tense domestic encounter.
 - **Zola's novel:** The most widely accepted theory is that the painting illustrates a scene from Émile Zola's 1867 novel *Thérèse Raquin*. The scene is thought to be the traumatic wedding night of Thérèse and her accomplice Laurent after they have murdered her first husband.
 - **Prostitution:** Another theory suggests the painting is a depiction of a prostitute and her client in a hotel room, possibly following sexual violence. (CLICK) This aligns with Paul Gavarni's 1841 lithograph *Les Lorettes* (a type of Parisian courtesan), which featured a similar composition of a prostitute (CLICK).
 - **Marital discord:** Other readings focus on the scene as a depiction of marital dissatisfaction, power dynamics, and the psychological conflict between a husband and wife.
 - **Ambiguity:** No single interpretation is universally accepted, which is a key element of the painting's power. It masterfully uses specific details and an unsettling atmosphere to create a "sexual menace" without a concrete explanation, allowing viewers to project their own understanding onto the scene.
- After painting it, Degas kept *Interior* in his studio for 36 years. It is now housed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

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Orchestra Musicians, c. 1870, 55
 x 46 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Orchestra Musicians*, c.1870, 55 x 46 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

- *Orchestra Musicians*, also known as *The Orchestra at the Opera* is famous for its unusual composition, which places the viewer in the orchestra pit, a perspective not typically explored in art. In the painting, the musicians fill the foreground, while only the cropped legs and tutus of the ballerinas on stage are visible in the background.
- The musicians featured are portraits of Degas's friends. The bassoonist prominently depicted in the center is Désiré Dihau (pronounced "dee-oh"), a friend of the artist who commissioned the painting. Degas also included other acquaintances in the orchestra, such as composer Emmanuel Chabrier (pronounced "shab-ree-ay").
- The painting is an early example of Degas's great interest in the world of opera and ballet and his shift away from historical painting. His repeated depictions of dancers in the decades to follow would become a defining part of his work.
- The painting remained with Désiré Dihau and later his sister, Marie Dihau, for several decades before being acquired by French museums in 1923. It was ultimately moved from the Louvre to the Musée d'Orsay in 1986.

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 France

Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *The Cotton Office*, 1873, 74 × 92 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Pau, Pyrenees, France

- I have mentioned the family was associated with New Orleans. It had ties to slavery as Degas's brothers, René and Achille ran an import/export business called "De Gas Brothers". Their uncle, Michel Musson, was a partner in a separate cotton firm and after the American Civil War René joined his uncle's business.
- Edgar Degas's family was directly involved in the institution of slavery in New Orleans, as well as the cotton trade that depended heavily on enslaved labor. Members of the Musson and Degas families owned slaves and were significant players within the Confederate-supporting elite of Louisiana. Degas's mother, Célestine Musson, came from a wealthy Creole family in New Orleans whose wealth was partly augmented by the sale of enslaved people, including a young enslaved girl whose sale contributed to her dowry.
- Degas visited in 1872, and the portraits he painted during this time, include this work *The Cotton Office*. During his five-month stay he lived with his maternal Creole family. He wrote letters describing the city's "black world" in explicitly racist and dehumanising terms. His relatives, who were involved in the cotton trade, were a part of the local white supremacist community. Unknown to Degas, his maternal grandfather's family also had a mixed-race relative who was a prominent inventor—a connection discovered by scholars much later.
- It shows Degas's uncle, Michel Musson, examining cotton, while Degas's brother René reads a newspaper and another brother, Achille, leans against a

window. Other employees are engaged in business throughout the office.

- Degas uses an off-center perspective, placing the viewer in the corner of the room, with a strong beam of light illuminating the scene from the left. The work is noted for its realism and detail in portraying the men's activities and the commercial setting.
- The painting was exhibited in the Impressionist exhibition of 1875 and was the first painting by Degas, and the first by an Impressionist, to be acquired by a public museum, which was a major step toward financial stability for the artist.
- After Degas returned to Paris he discovered that René and Achille, had accumulated large debts connected to their cotton brokerage business. To preserve the family's reputation and financial stability, Degas sold his house and an inherited art collection to pay off his brothers' debts.
- This financial strain was pivotal as it forced Degas for the first time to rely on the income from the sale of his art. This pressure coincided with his highest artistic productivity period in the decade after 1874, during which he became a key figure in Impressionism.

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Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Ballet Rehearsal*, 1873, 67 x 46 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Ballet Rehearsal*, 1873, 65 x 81.5 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

- For this painting called *Ballet Rehearsal* he has chosen a high viewpoint, to one side. We see a rehearsal in progress and in the foreground the ballerinas are resting, one sitting on a bench. In the background they are practising movements together.
- The paint is thin and so we can see Degas's reworking, for example, the ballerina's feet bottom left and near the seated man there was another figure collapsed in a chair.
- It was immediately noticed at the first Impressionist exhibition in 1874. The painter Giuseppe De Nittis wrote to a friend: "**I remember a drawing that must have been of a dance rehearsal [...] and I can tell you it was extremely beautiful: the muslin costumes were so diaphanous, and the movements so true to life that it has to be seen to be believed; it is just impossible to describe**". It was seen as a drawing because of the subtle, delicate tones.

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Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *The Dance Class*, 1874, 85 x 75 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris



Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *The Dance Class*, 1874, 83.5 x 77.2 cm, The Met

Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *The Dance Class*, 1874, 85 x 75 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *The Dance Class*, 1874, 83.5 x 77.2 cm, The Met

- Degas produced approximately 150 paintings, pastels, and drawings focusing on ballet classes, rehearsals, and performances out of a total of roughly 600 paintings, 1,200 drawings and pastels, and hundreds of sculptures and prints. So it was a major subject for him.
- I thought I would show you two similar works both called *The Dance Class* and both produced the same year.
- Twenty-four women, ballerinas and their mothers, wait while a dancer executes an "attitude" for her examination. An "Attitude" in ballet is a classical dance position where the dancer stands on one leg while the other leg is lifted and bent at the knee, usually at about a 90-degree angle.
- Jules Perrot, a famous ballet master, conducts the class. The imaginary scene is set in a rehearsal room in the old Paris Opéra, which had recently burned to the ground. On the wall beside the mirror, a poster for Rossini's *William Tell* pays tribute to the singer Jean-Baptiste Faure, who commissioned the picture and lent it to the 1876 Impressionist exhibition. (The Met)

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<https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/artworks/la-classe-de-danse-1151>

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/438817>



Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Woman Ironing*, 1873, 54.3 x 39.4 cm, The Met

Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Woman Ironing*, 1873, 54.3 x 39.4 cm, The Met

- Degas was not just fascinated by the movements of dancers, he was also intrigued by the repetitive, specialised gestures made by laundresses and ironers as they worked often in gruelling conditions. This painting is the first of three versions of the composition, is distinguished by its dramatic chiaroscuro, with the woman silhouetted against a luminous white backdrop. Purchased by the singer and collector Jean-Baptiste Faure, the canvas was returned so that Degas could rework it. The artist, however, kept the picture and lent it to the 1876 Impressionist exhibition, receiving praise for his "**rapidly done silhouettes of laundresses**." (The Met) [1][2][3]
- Laundresses were among the poorest women in Paris and received low wages for difficult and exhausting work. They were also regarded as morally suspect as they delivered clean clothes to wealthy men's apartments.
- Degas's interest was in capturing the unique physicality and rhythm of their work rather than commenting on their ambiguous social position. [2][3][4]
- Although it conforms with the Impressionist's interest in everyday subjects it stands out because of its focus on a solitary figure rather than a fleeting social scene. Critics admired how Degas elevated the mundane to a dignified subject, marking a shift from traditional grand subjects to modern life's realities. [3][1][2]

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- [1](<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436174>)
- [2](<https://gwallter.com/art/edgar-degas-and-the-art-of-ironing.html>)
- [3](<https://www.nga.gov/artworks/53532-woman-ironing>)
- [4](<https://allenfisher.edublogs.org/files/2019/01/Degas-Women-Ironing-initial-analysis-pp5r4p-ymery5.pdf>)
- [5](http://art-degas.com/degas_1870_52.html)
- [6](<https://www.artchive.com/artwork/woman-ironing-edgar-degas-c-1882-c-1886/>)
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Edgar Degas (1834–1917),
Lady with a Dog, c. 1875-80,
39.4 × 47.8 cm, National
Museum of Art, Architecture
and Design, Norway

Edgar Degas (1834–1917), *Lady with a Dog*, c. 1875-80, 39.4 × 47.8 cm, National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Norway

- This is *Lady with a Dog*. Degas was famous for his hatred of dogs and they had to be locked away before he arrived. As the years passed he became isolated and he never married and believed an artist could have no personal life.

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https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edgar_Degas_-_Lady_with_a_Dog_-_NG.M.01170_-_National_Museum_of_Art,_Architecture_and_Design.jpg

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Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Ballet / The Star / Dancer on the Stage*, 1876-7, 58 x 42 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

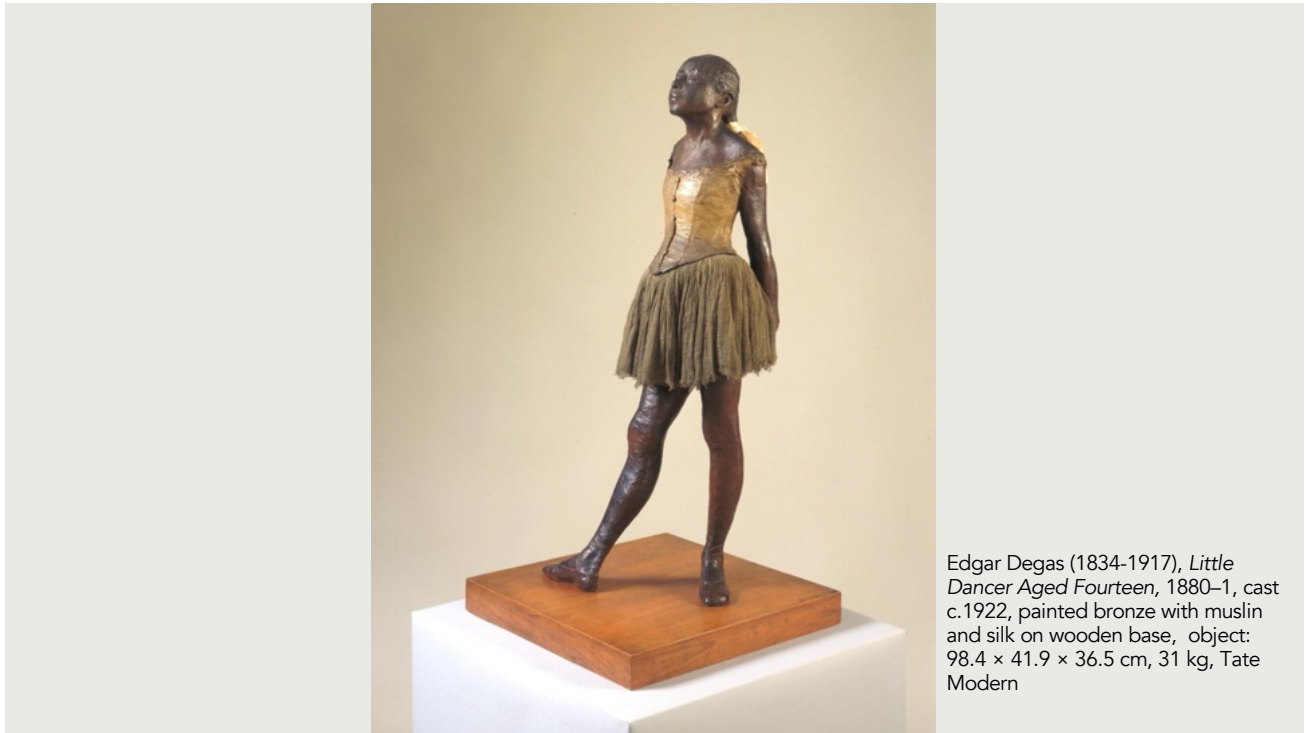
Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Ballet / The Star / Dancer on the Stage*, 1876-7, 58 x 42 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

- *The Star (L'Etoile)* captures a ballerina taking a bow on a brightly lit stage, viewed from the high vantage point of a private box, giving us a privileged perspective looking down on the stage. This creates a sense of immediacy and draws us into the performance.
- The pastel medium allows for soft, atmospheric colours and vibrant light effects, perfectly capturing the brilliance of the stage lighting. The impressionistic style is characterised by visible, rapid brushstrokes that lend a sense of movement to the work.
- Beyond the graceful depiction of the dancer, some interpretations suggest a more somber undertone. The dark figure of a man lurking behind the curtain has been seen as a representation of the ballet's seedy backstage reality, where dancers were often dependent on male patrons for their financial security and their patrons took advantage of their position of power.

REFERENCES

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Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, 1880–1, cast c.1922, painted bronze with muslin and silk on wooden base, object: 98.4 × 41.9 × 36.5 cm, 31 kg, Tate Modern

Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, 1880–1, cast c.1922, painted bronze with muslin and silk on wooden base, object: 98.4 × 41.9 × 36.5 cm, 31 kg, Tate Modern

- Degas was a secretive sculptor. While famous for his paintings and drawings, he was a prolific sculptor who worked primarily in wax and clay, modelling figures of dancers and horses. These works were never meant for public viewing. He used everyday objects like wine bottle corks and old floorboards to build armatures and bulk out the figures, a technique discovered by X-raying the fragile pieces a century later.
- After his death, over 150 sculptures were found in his studio, and his heirs authorized their casting in bronze which is the way we see many of his sculptures today. The only sculpture Degas ever exhibited in his lifetime was the controversial ***Little Dancer Aged Fourteen***, shown at the 1881 Impressionist exhibition. It was **reviled by many critics** for its startling realism and mixed-media elements—the wax figure was dressed in a real tulle skirt and a human-hair wig.
- The model for this sculpture is ballerina in training Marie van Goethem (1865–c.1900), then just 14 years old. Her defiant pose and expression were described by critics as a “**face marked by the hateful promise of every vice**”. I think the critics were projecting their own thoughts onto the young ballerina.

NOTES

- Materials. This is *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* by Edgar Degas and it is the only piece of sculpture he exhibited in his lifetime. The original was made from a sort

of reddish-brown wax consisting of clay and oil, a bit like Plasticine™. This bronze version was cast a few years after his death [in c. 1922]. Before starting the original he made drawings of the young ballerina and then made a nude model in wax which he clothed in muslin and silk and gave a horsehair wig. He coloured the exposed flesh to make it more realistic and added real ballet shoes and a ribbon in its hair. He then smeared the bodice and shoes with wax to blend them into the body.

- Critical reaction. When it was first exhibited the unprecedented realism shocked the critics although many critics appreciated his representation of the pain and stress of ballet training. There was a darker side to the work indicated by the way some critics compared the dancer to a rat or a monkey and one referred to her as a **'flower of precocious depravity'**, with a face **'marked by the hateful promise of every vice'** and **'With bestial effrontery she moves her face forward, or rather her little muzzle - and this word is completely correct because the little girl is the beginning of a rat.'** The reason is that the adolescent dancers were known as *petits rats* and it was known that lecherous old men would prowl backstage looking for young girls. Germaine Greer described dancing as a 'one-way ticket to prostitution'.
- Model. The dancer was Marie van Goethem and she was admitted to the Paris Opera Ballet the year this was made. She came from a very poor family and her father had died sometime in the previous ten years. The family lived a few streets from Degas and he had started to paint, draw and sculpt her two years previously. We know she was dismissed from the ballet school the following year for failing to attend classes and for visiting a local tavern. No further trace of her life is known but her younger sister [Charlotte] became a dancer of distinction and later taught at the dance school during her 53-year career.
- Bronze. After Degas's death his heirs decided to cast 29 bronze copies of the original and in these copies, everything is bronze except for the tutu and the silk ribbon. The foundry also attempted to copy the tones of the 40-year old sculpture by rubbing wax on the bronze and applying pigment and animal glue to the tutu. The result we see here is close to the wax original, now in America [in the National Gallery of Art, Washington].
- This is one of the most brilliant examples of what is called 'Realism', the accurate and honest depiction of modern life with all its ugliness and beauty. Critics commented on the pale, sickly face contorted with the

suffering necessary to become a ballet dancer. The combination of beauty and suffering caused one critic to write, 'I experienced in front of this statuette one of the most violent artistic impressions of my life'. Another critic described it as 'the only truly modern effort in sculpture that I know of.'

- Marie van Goethem (1865 – ?) mother was a laundress and her father a tailor who died when she was young. Her elder sister Antoinette was an extra at the ballet and a prostitute and her younger sister Charlotte became a successful dancer and went on to become a teacher. Marie was fired by the ballet in 1882 for poor attendance and all trace of her after that has disappeared.
- The figure was found 'peculiarly disturbing'. One wrote, 'The lecherous little snout on this barely pubescent young girl, this little flower of the gutter, is unforgettable.' He continued, 'Why is she so ugly? Why is her forehead, half covered by her hair, marked already, like her lips, with a profoundly vicious character?'
- As Germaine Greer has written, 'today's public is not likely to make a lecherous interest in the body of a child the fault of the child herself' and, Greer adds, she is 'an undernourished child for whom dancing was a one-way ticket to prostitution'.
- The original wax version is in the Paul Mellon collection and 23 bronze versions were cast.

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<http://www.artnews.com/2013/06/05/the-degas-debate/> detailed analysis and picture of the original. Also has an X-ray photograph showing the internal armatures and material structure of the wax model. The article is concerned with the 74 controversial Valsuani plasters.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/jan/12/degas-women-germaine-greer>

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[and.html](#)

<http://artdaily.com/news/95797/Stair-Sainty-exhibits-Edgar-Degas-s--Little-Dancer-Aged-Fourteen-#.WRFtevnymE>

Dr Gregory Hedberg argues in his book *Degas's Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen: The Earlier Version That Helped Spark the Birth of Modern Art*, that he found a plaster cast of the original wax model as it was exhibited and before it was changed by Degas.

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/degas-little-dancer-aged-fourteen-n06076>



Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *The Tub (Le Tub)*, 1888-9 cast 1920, 21.6 x 45.4 x 42.2 cm, bronze, The Met

Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *The Tub (Le Tub)*, 1886, 60 x 83 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *The Tub (Le Tub)*, 1886, 60 x 83 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *The Tub (Le Tub)*, 1888-9 cast 1920, 21.6 x 45.4 x 42.2 cm, bronze, The Met

- He created two notable works titled *The Tub (Le Tub)*: this pastel drawing from 1886 and
- (CLICK) this later sculpture. Both pieces depict a woman bathing in a shallow tub, but they are different works of art and are housed in separate museums. Originally it was a mixed-media sculpture created with dark-red beeswax for the figure, plaster for the water, and a real sponge and lead basin. After Degas's death, it was cast in bronze. (CLICK)
- This pastel shows a woman bent over in a zinc bathtub, viewed from an unconventional, elevated perspective. This "blown-off-roof" perspective is a technique inspired by Japanese art and gives the viewer an intimate, almost voyeuristic look into a private moment. The toilet articles on a shelf in the background appear flattened, contrasting with the curves of the figure and tub.
- It was part of a series of bathing nudes that Degas exhibited at the final Impressionist exhibition in 1886. It was a departure from traditional nude art, which typically featured idealised, mythical figures like Venus. Instead, Degas focused on the unglamorous, everyday acts of real women.
- He has been described as **misogynist** as some see his nudes as objectifying women and his brothel scenes as prurient but other critics find empathy in his intimate, un-idealised renderings of working women.

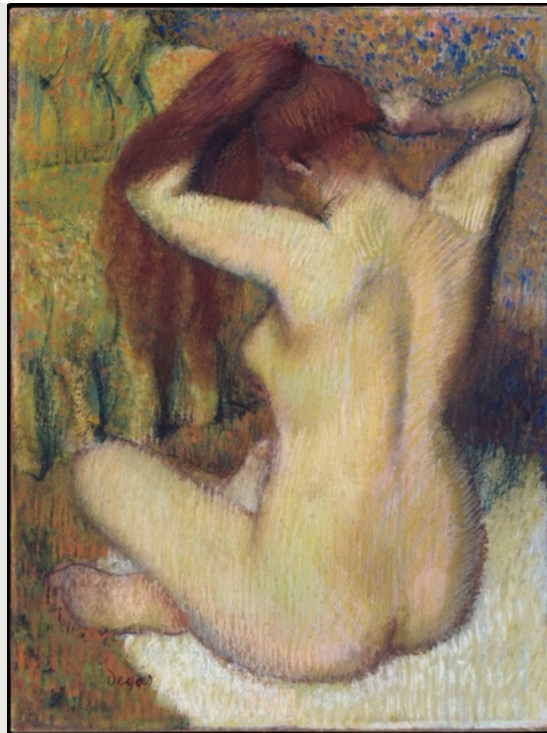
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Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *After the Bath, Woman Drying Her Back*, 1896, photograph, 16.5 x 12 cm, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles



Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Woman Combing Her Hair*, 1886-87, 65 x 81 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Woman Combing Her Hair*, 1886-87, 65 x 81 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *After the Bath, Woman Drying Her Back*, 1896, photograph, 16.5 x 12 cm, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

- This is the second of two variants of a composition that Degas created about 1885, the other is in the Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. In this version, he used a new technique of applying pastel in many layers so that the fibers of the paper were loosened and now project from the surface.
- Degas also emphasised anti-natural chartreuses and greens in modeling the figure's pink flesh, perhaps inspired by the play of complementary colour contrasts in the work of such younger contemporaries as Seurat or Van Gogh. (The Met)
- (CLICK) He was a keen photographer. He took up photography to compensate for failing eyesight and often painted from photographs. As his eyesight deteriorated in the 1880s, Degas explored photography, often creating portraits of friends by lamplight to avoid harsh daylight. He considered daylight "too easy" and preferred the atmospheric challenges of artificial light. He also photographed dancers and nude women as studies for his paintings and sculptures. This is an example in the Getty Museum. (CLICK)
- As I said, he never married, and as he got older he became more argumentative and his former friends slowly left him until one of the last to leave was Renoir.
- His eyesight slowly deteriorated and he spent the last years of his life, nearly blind, restlessly wandering the streets of Paris. As his vision failed his fame grew

but it gave him little comfort.

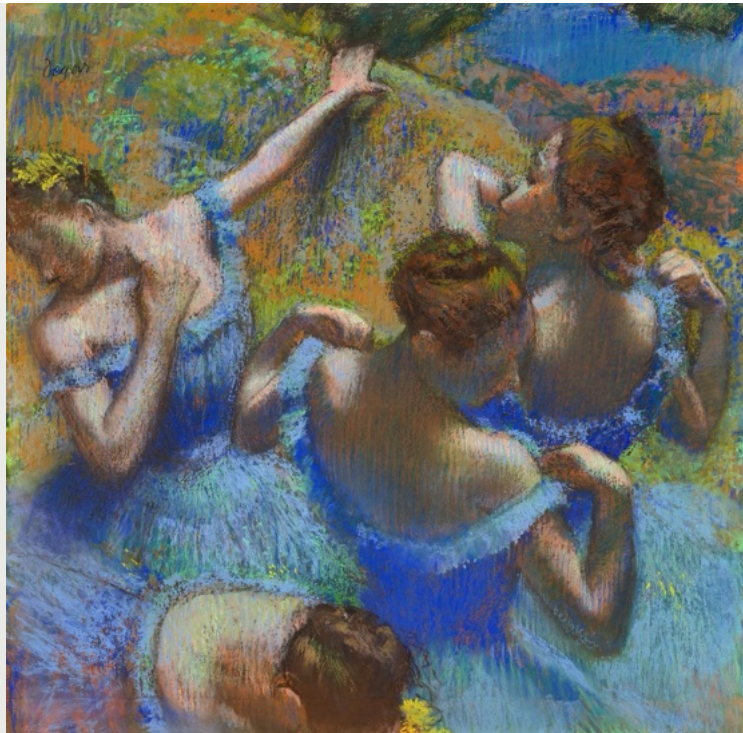
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[Also see this later work:](#)

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<https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/1045YG>



Edgar Degas
(1834-1917), *Blue Dancers*, c. 1898,
67 x 67 cm,
Pushkin Museum,
Moscow

Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Blue Dancers*, c. 1898, 67 x 67 cm, Pushkin Museum, Moscow

- *Blue Dancers*, by Edgar Degas, is a famous pastel drawing from 1897 depicting four ballerinas in vibrant blue and lavender costumes. A masterpiece from Degas's late career, it is noted for its rich colour and texture, capturing the dancers in a backstage moment rather than during a performance.
- It dates to the late stage of Degas's career, around 1897, when his eyesight was failing. Because of his vision problems, he began to work with broader, less detailed strokes and large blocks of color, which gave priority to the overall decorative composition.
- As was common in his later career, Degas used pastels for this work. The medium allowed him to explore a balance between painting and drawing, creating a luminous, textured quality that perfectly captured the dancers' diaphanous tutus and the stage lighting.
- In 1894 the Dreyfus Affair broke. This was a political scandal that was not resolved until 1906 and it divided the French public. Alfred Dreyfus was wrongly convicted of treason for supplying French military secrets to the Germans. The Affair brought out Degas **anti-Semitism** and he broke with his Jewish friends. Later, when the real culprit was found and the forged Army documents exposed the Dreyfus affair came to symbolise modern miscarriages of justice and antisemitism.

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Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Woman Rubbing Her Back with a Sponge*, modeled probably ca. 1888-92, cast 1920, bronze, 49.5 x 26.7 x 23.5 cm, The Met

- In 1911 he attended a 1911 retrospective of Ingres's work and Degas sight had failed so he traced the canvases with his hands to "see" them, demonstrating the lasting significance of his early meeting with Ingres in 1855.
- By the last years of his life, Degas was nearly blind due to a degenerative eye condition and had largely ceased producing art. Following the demolition of his longtime home and studio in 1912, he moved to new quarters on Boulevard de Clichy. He became increasingly reclusive and spent his final years wandering the streets of Paris.
- Though his personality had estranged him from some friends, others, such as fellow painter Mary Cassatt, remained in contact. He died in Paris on September 27, 1917, at the age of 83. The cause of death is believed to have been a brain aneurysm.
- Degas was an avid art collector and amassed a remarkable assemblage of works throughout his life. After his death, his collection—which was sold at auction during the 1918 bombardment of Paris—revealed his passion for artists he revered, such as Ingres, Delacroix, and Daumier, as well as his support for contemporaries like Manet and Mary Cassatt.
- Degas requested that his funeral be a simple and quiet affair, with no speeches. He was buried in the family tomb at Montmartre Cemetery in Paris. His friend the painter Jean-Louis Forain reportedly delivered the only eulogy, simply stating, "If there were speeches, you know that the first would be from me, but

it is better this way".

NOTES

- Upon Degas's death in 1917, more than 150 figurative sculptures were found in his studio. Most were made of fragile wax, clay, and plastiline (a wax- and oil-based modelling material). Many had deteriorated. Only a few were preserved in copies that had been cast from them in plaster. Except for the wax Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer (Washington: NGA) none of these sculptures had been publicly exhibited during the artist's lifetime.
- Although Degas had not favoured reproducing his sculptures in more permanent materials, his heirs authorised that copies be cast in bronze in order to preserve the compositions and to sell them as finished works. Paul-Albert Bartholomé, a sculptor and Degas's longtime friend, prepared 72 of the figures for casting, a process executed by the distinguished Paris foundry A.-A. Hébrard et Cie. The quality of the Degas bronzes was tightly controlled and their edition was limited. Only twenty-two editions of the series of 72 figures were cast. Each bronze within the series was assigned a number from one to seventy-two. The first twenty editions were assigned a letter from A-T. In most cases these numbers and letters were incised on the individual bronzes.
- The series of 72 bronzes was completed before May 1921 when it was exhibited in Paris. Edition A, comprising the first and best casts of the series, was reserved for the important Impressionist collector Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer. She later acquired the first bronze cast of the Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer (lettered A, but not numbered), which had been omitted from the initial series. In 1929 Mrs. Havemeyer bequeathed Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer and 70 of the 72 Edition A Degas bronzes to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

REFERENCES

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/196443>



27-04 EDGAR DEGAS

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE

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- Degas has been described as a misogynist, a racist and an anti-semitic for reasons I have outlined.
- He was also one of the most innovative and complex artists of his generation and an important link between the classical tradition and modern art. He possessed superb draftsmanship, which he applied in innovative ways to modern subjects. Unlike some of his Impressionist peers who focused primarily on colour and light, he focused the sophisticated use of line and structure.
- His exacting and experimental approach to drawing influenced later artists like Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, who admired his ability to depict the human form in motion.
- That is all for now, thank you for your time and attention

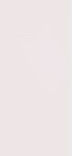
NOTES

Degas's Legacy

- **A radical perspective on modern life.** Degas's work provided an incisive look at contemporary Parisian life, portraying both its glamour and its grit.
- **Unflinching realism:** Degas captured the quiet drama of everyday moments, from the exhausted postures of ballerinas and the private grooming of women to the casual interactions in a New Orleans cotton office.
- **Depiction of movement:** His obsession with capturing the human figure in motion is perhaps his most iconic contribution. He produced approximately 1,500 works of dancers, showing them both on stage and in candid, unguarded

moments during rehearsals.

- **Influence of new technologies:** He abstracted and incorporated the off-kilter perspectives, cropping, and sense of spontaneity found in photography and Japanese prints, which was considered radical at the time.
- **Experimentation with media.** Never content with a single medium, Degas continually pushed artistic boundaries throughout his career.
- **The pastel innovator:** He was a pioneer in using pastel, developing new techniques for layering and blending to create luminous effects that evoked movement and atmosphere.
- **The wax sculptor:** As his eyesight failed later in life, he turned to sculpture. Works like the groundbreaking *Little Dancer of Fourteen Years* (1881) broke from tradition with its combination of realistic and synthetic materials.
- **The experimental printmaker:** His lively, scientific interest extended to printmaking, where he created innovative and complex compositions using techniques like etching, monotype, and lithography.
- **A complex and polarizing reputation.** Despite his immense talent, Degas's legacy is marked by paradoxes that continue to fuel debate.
- **Traditionalist yet modern:** He participated in the Impressionist exhibitions but viewed himself as a realist. He looked to the Old Masters for inspiration while pioneering a new modern realism.
- **Misogynist yet empathetic:** Feminist critics have debated his portrayal of women, with some viewing his studies of unguarded nudes as objectifying and his brothel scenes as prurient. Other critics find empathy in his intimate, un-idealized renderings of working women.
- **Racism and connections to slavery:** Recent scholarship has highlighted his family's involvement in the racist cotton trade and the dehumanizing language he used to describe Black people during his 1872–1873 visit to New Orleans. In a letter to a friend he referred to Degas described the Black population as an "immense black animal force". In a letter to his friend the artist James Tissot he described the colour contrast between the black nurses and the white babies they were holding. His brother was involved with a white-supremacist organisation called the White League. Degas largely avoided depicting Black subjects. All suggests the prejudice and privilege that shaped his attitudes.



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