



"A painting requires a little mystery, some vagueness, some fantasy. When you always make your meaning perfectly plain you end up boring people."

Degas

SYNOPSIS

Always remembered as an Impressionist, Edgar Degas was a member of the seminal group of Paris artists who began to exhibit together in the 1870s. He shared many of their novel techniques, was intrigued by the challenge of capturing effects of light and attracted to scenes of urban leisure. But Degas's academic training, and his own personal predilection toward Realism, set him apart from his peers, and he rejected the label 'Impressionist' preferring to describe himself as an 'Independent.' His inherited wealth gave him the comfort to find his own way, and later it also enabled him to withdraw from the Paris art world and sell pictures at his discretion. He was intrigued by the human figure, and in his many images of women - dancers, singers, and laundresses - he strove to capture the body in unusual positions. While

critics of Impressionists focused their attacks on their formal innovations, it was Degas's lower-class subjects that brought him the most disapproval.

KEY IDEAS

- Degas rejected the typical subjects that were made popular by the academies, such as scenes from history and myth, and instead he explored modern life. Like the **Realists** and **Impressionists**, he often painted images of middle class leisure in the city.
- Degas' academic training encouraged a strong classical tendency in his art, which conflicted with the approach of the Impressionists. While he valued line as a means to describe contours and to lend solid compositional structure to a picture, they favored color, and more concentration on surface texture. As well, he preferred to work from sketches and memory in the traditional academic manner, while they were more interested in painting outdoors (*en plein air*).
- Degas' enduring interest in the human figure was shaped by his academic training, but he approached it in innovative ways. He captured strange postures from unusual angles under artificial light. He rejected the academic ideal of the mythical or historical subject, and instead sought his figures in modern situations, such as at the ballet.
- Like many of the Impressionists, Degas was significantly influenced by Japanese prints, which suggested novel approaches to composition. The prints had bold linear designs and a sense of flatness that was very different from the traditional Western picture with its perspective view of the world.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Childhood

Edgar Degas was the eldest of five children of Célestine Musson de Gas, an American by birth, and Auguste de Gas, a banker. Edgar later changed his surname to the less aristocratic sounding 'Degas' in 1870.

Born into a wealthy Franco-Italian family, he was encouraged from an early age to pursue the arts, though not as a long-term career. Following his graduation in 1853 with a baccalaureate in literature, the eighteen-year-old Degas registered at the Louvre as a copyist, which he claimed later in life is the foundation for any true artist.

After a brief period at law school, in 1855 he was admitted to the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, where he studied drawing under the academic artist **Louis Lamothe**, a former pupil of **Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres**. That same year, the *Exposition Universelle* took place, and Degas was enthralled by **Gustave Courbet's** Pavilion of Realism. It was also at the Exposition that Degas first met Ingres, a painter several years his senior, whose personal guidance was valuable.

Early Period and Training

In 1865, when Degas was aged 22, he traveled to Naples, Italy, to visit his aunt, the Baroness Bellini and her family. This three-year trip was an important moment in his development, and resulted in the Realist portrait *The Bellini Family* (1859). He spent countless hours combing the museums and galleries of Italy, carefully studying Renaissance works by **Michelangelo**, **Raphael** and **Titian**, among others.

In 1864, while copying a picture by **Velázquez** at the Louvre, he met **Édouard Manet**, who by chance was copying the same painting. His friendship with Manet was instrumental in the development of Impressionism. The following year, Degas exhibited at the Paris Salon, the first of six consecutive showings, showing works such as *Édouard Manet and Mme. Manet* and *The Orchestra of the Opera* (both 1868-69), paintings that subtly blurred the lines between straight portraiture and genre painting.



While Degas was serving with the National Guard in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), he realized that his eyesight was defective during rifle training. Evidence of this genetic defect can be seen even in his most celebrated paintings.

Mature period

Although the 1860s was a productive period in Degas's career, his most renowned body of work was created in the 1870s. By this time he had discovered his true muse - Paris. He drew inspiration from its boulevards, cafés, shops, dance studios, drawing rooms, theaters and operas. And he became well known for his close observation, devoting much time to capturing the detail of surrounding human beings. Perhaps for this reason he rejected the label 'Impressionist', believing it implied something accidental and incomplete.

Evidence of this can be found in seminal works such as *Foyer de la Danse* (1872), *Musicians in the Orchestra* (1872) and *A Carriage at the Races* (1873). Each of these pictures also exemplify how Degas assumed unconventional point-of-views, suggesting the perspective of a distracted spectator. Yet unlike contemporaries like Renoir and Monet, Degas was not a *plein air* painter, preferring instead the light and reliability of the studio. Incidentally, his few outdoor scenes were produced from memory, or conjured in part from his imagination.



From 1872 to 1873, Degas made an extended trip to New Orleans to visit his brother René and other family members, including his uncle, who operated a failing cotton exchange. During this trip, he produced a number of important paintings, including *A Cotton Office in New Orleans* (1873), the only one of his works to be purchased by a museum in his lifetime. Following his return home the French Impressionists held their first group show at the Café Guerbois, in which Degas was included. Despite this association, Degas always held the other members at arm's length. He admired their work and shared many of their ideals, but he never entirely adhered to their philosophy. Nevertheless, he showed work in all but one Impressionist group show, including the final 1886 exhibition. As well, he single-handedly recruited more artists to exhibit at these shows than any other member. Degas remained a bachelor throughout his life, and had few, if any, romantic entanglements. This has fueled speculation about the rationale for his unusual and generally unflattering images of women. His intent may have been to suggest the figures caught off-guard, though feminist critics have pointed out that the effect is often degrading.

Late Period

As the 19th century came to a close, Degas's pace of work waned, and he began spending more time collecting the works of other artists he admired. He purchased work by contemporaries such as Manet, Pissarro, van Gogh, Gauguin and Cézanne, as well as older artists who had informed Degas as a young man, like Delacroix and Ingres. Late works, like the bronze *Woman Rubbing Her Back with a Sponge* (1900), is a testament to Degas's continued devotion to capturing the

female form, but nothing he created in this period matches the power of his early work.



Although Degas abandoned oil painting later in life, he continued to work in a variety of media, including pastels and photography, yet sculpture became his preferred medium as his eyesight deteriorated. He increasingly became a recluse, and most of his friendships with artists like Manet and Renoir, eventually dissolved. These ruptures were hastened by Degas's outspoken anti-Semitism, which was amplified by his stance during the infamous Dreyfus Affair. He died in 1917.

LEGACY

Although Degas suffered criticism during his lifetime, by the time of his death his reputation was secure as one of the leaders of late 19th century French art. His distinct difference from the Impressionists, his greater tendency toward Realism, had also come to be appreciated. His standing has only increased since his death, though since the 1970s he was been the focus of a lot of scholarly attention and criticism, primarily focused around his images of women, which have been seen as misogynistic.

*Original content written by **Justin Wolf***

ARTIST QUOTES

"I would have been in mortal misery all my life for fear my wife might say, 'That's a pretty little thing,' after I had finished a picture." - Degas responding to a question on why he never married

"It is all very well to copy what one sees, but it is far better to draw what one now only sees in one's memory. That is a transformation in which imagination collaborates with memory."

"One must do the same subject over again ten times, a hundred times. In art nothing must resemble an accident, not even movement."

"No art is less spontaneous than mind. What I do is the result of reflection and study of the great masters."

Major Works:



Title: The Bellini Family (1859)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Description: This portrait, with its subdued palette and its unconventional grouping of figures, such as the man having his back to the viewer, demonstrates the impact of Realism on the young Degas. He created it over the course of several trips to Italy, spanning 3-4 years. Each family member—his aunt, her husband and his two young cousins Giovanna and Giuliana—was sketched individually, and then organized into a family portrait, becoming more of a study of individual personalities than a study of them as a group. The father is suggested to be emotionally distant from his wife and daughters, while the mother stands dignified and decisive. Giovanna on the left is clearly the mother's favored daughter, while Giuliana, with one leg poised, is positioned just so to suggest a division in her allegiance.



Title: Édouard Manet and Mme. Manet (1868-69)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Kitakyushu Municipal Museum of Art, Japan

Description: This unconventional portrait of Manet and his wife provides a wonderful example of Degas as the “distant spectator,” capturing a moment of solitude that the subjects might prefer go unnoticed. However, a riddle surrounds it. Degas painted it as a tribute to his friends, and it originally showed Mme. Manet playing the piano. However, some time after he had presented the portrait to them, he visited their house only to discover the painting had been mutilated and the right of the picture had been cut away. Degas was furious and removed the picture, though it was never repaired. Why Manet cut the picture down remains unknown.



Title: Foyer de la Danse (1872)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Louvre, Paris

Description: There is something unique and alluring in all of Degas's studies of ballerinas, of which there are many. In *Foyer de la Danse* he presents us with one of the unconventional perspectives that are so typical and distinctive in his work. Rather than evoke the light and atmosphere of the scene, as some of his Impressionist peers might have done, Degas has chosen to create a striking arrangement of space, one which echoes the experiences his contemporaries might have had throughout the new modern city. To achieve this, rather than compose the figures in a more orderly and centered fashion, he has dispersed them about the canvas, leaving a chair incongruously placed in the center foreground. Instead of viewing the room as a traditional box-like container for the figures, he paints it at an angle, suggesting multiple vantage points, almost as if this were an early blueprint for Cubism. The approach is characteristic of his modern, realist approach to composition.



Title: A Cotton Office in New Orleans (1873)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Musée des Beaux-Arts, Pau

Description: Like his earlier study of the Bellini family, *A Cotton Office in New Orleans* is the result of several individual sketches and careful attention to detail over a length of time. In the center, reading a newspaper, is Degas's brother, Rene, and in the foreground, somberly handling a ball of cotton, is Rene's father-in-law, Michael Musson, who operated the cotton exchange. Its complex handling of deep space and multiple figures is testimony both to Degas' skill in composition, and his love of striking perspectives, something that makes his work stand out from that of many of his peers among the Realists and Impressionists. He manages to knit together the fractured space by stretching areas of white across the center of the picture, letting our eye move from the cotton on the left, through the newspaper, to the shirt of the figure on the right.



Title: Little Dancer of Fourteen Years (1881)

Materials: Bronze with cloth accessories

Collection: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Description: Originally cast in wax, with a skeleton comprised of paint brushes, Degas' study of the young ballet student Marie van Goethem was eventually cast in bronze in 1922, five years after the artist's death. In fact, 27 bronze sculptures were made. It is characteristic of a number of wax sculptures he produced after the 1860s. When he exhibited this figure at the sixth Impressionist exhibition of 1881 (the only such figure to be publicly shown), viewers were shocked by its realism. It is highly unusual in incorporating a miniature gauze skirt, silk bodice and fabric slippers, and in this respect prefigures the introduction of real objects into sculpture in the 20th century.



Title: La Toilette (Nude Arranging Her Hair) (1884-86)

Materials: Pastel on paper

Collection: Pushkin Museum, Moscow

Description: *La Toilette* is typical of Degas' many nudes, and typical of an approach to the nude that made this body of work particularly controversial - both among his contemporaries and among latter day critics. It demonstrates his tendency to capture the figure from behind, while washing; to show only a fragment of the figure in order to suggest the whole; and to place the figure in shallow space, allowing her contours to produce the strong linear design that balances the picture. Degas' interest in the nude might have been encouraged by his academic training, though his posing suggests the modern innovations of the Realists and Impressionists. Indeed when Degas exhibited a suite of pastel nudes such as this at the sixth Impressionist exhibition of 1886, critics attacked their unusual posing. The picture also demonstrates the artist's use of pastel, which he devoted more time to in later years.