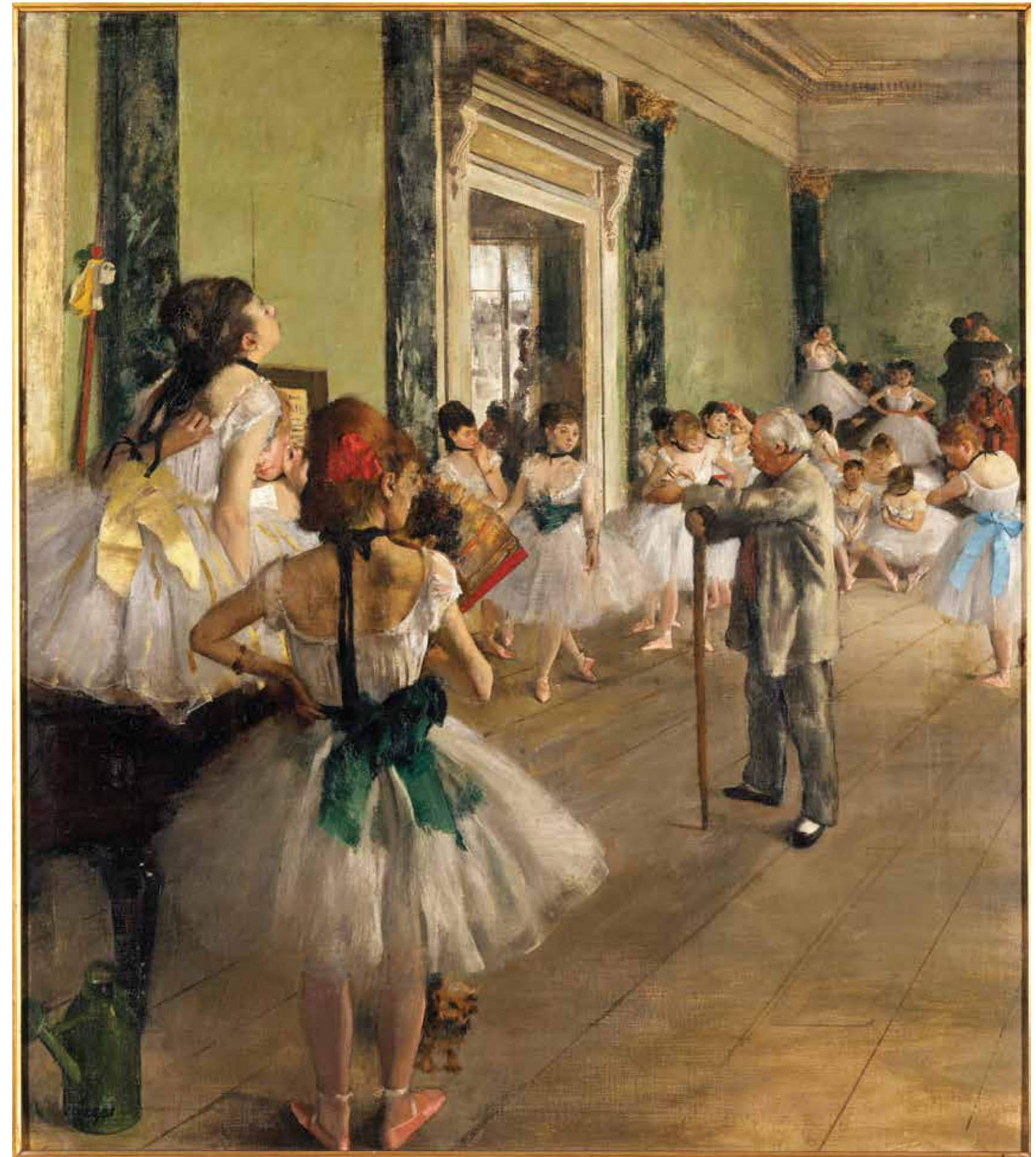


Left to right: Swaying Dancer, 1877-1879, pastel and gouache on paper, 25.2 x 14.2 inches; The Dance Class, 1873-1876, oil on canvas, 33 x 29 inches.

BALLET BACHELOR

EDGAR DEGAS created countless intimate depictions of women, but even as the renowned Impressionist mingled with the cultural elite of Paris he seems to have led a largely celibate life, eventually withdrawing from society. ▸

by JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN



Fine Art/Getty Images. Opposite: © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

Everybody can walk through a museum and point to the ballerinas by Edgar Degas (1834–1917). The iconic representative of the ever-popular Impressionist school is best known for his ballet scenes, and that is usually where knowledge of his career begins and ends. But dig a little deeper and the window he opens onto late-19th-century Paris takes us to the homes of his well-to-do family and friends, to racetracks and cafés, inside ladies’ boudoirs, and even into brothels. We casually encounter musicians, dancers, cabaret singers, shop girls, and laundresses as they go about their work, and we witness the private routines of bathing women as if seen through a keyhole.

THE CONTROVERSY

Even in his day connoisseurs relished the exquisite skill and refinement of Degas’ virtuoso draftsmanship and marveled at his mastery of myriad media. He handled charcoal, pastel, gouache, and oil with equal skill, often combining them to achieve his entrancing effects. The pastels, in particular, are hailed for their bravura rendering of light and motion and the delicacy of their lustrous palettes, their surfaces likened to the powder on butterfly wings. He also was one of the great sculptors of his day, a talent often overlooked perhaps because he exhibited only one statue during his lifetime. Collectors lust after every sheet of paper, canvas, and lump that he touched and pay millions for the privilege of owning a work. Most belong to museums that regularly feature them in special exhibitions all but guaranteed to be blockbusters.

But if we know and love the works of Degas, the man himself remains far more elusive. A lifelong bachelor who shunned the limelight, his penchant for privacy yielded as much myth as biography. He had a reputation as celibate, aloof, and somewhat unpleasant, and by the last decades of his life the white-bearded artist had lost his sight and receded from society. In the century since his death our understanding of his attitudes and activities has expanded to recover a more complicated and social being, one who preferred to remain in his studio but nonetheless maintained close ties to his family and a circle of friends. He dined at their homes, participated in artistic and literary salons, attended the opera and cabarets, and traveled in France, Italy, England, Spain, and America, where he visited family in New Orleans soon after the Civil War.

Yet a vexing question hovers about Degas, namely his relationship with women. As his work demonstrates, his fascination with the fair sex bordered on obsession, but he never married or had a long-term intimate relationship. His unconventional lifestyle led to speculation that he was impotent, misogynist, gay, or sublimated prurient interest in women, either voyeurism—as Picasso



believed—or a more deviant passion. Manet said Degas was “incapable of loving a woman,” and Van Gogh, who emulated the elder artist’s asceticism, wrote, “Degas lives like a little lawyer and does not like women, for he knows that if he liked them and went to bed with them too often he would become intellectually diseased and would no longer be able to paint ... He looks on while the human animals, stronger than himself, get excited and screw around, and he paints them well, exactly because he doesn’t have the pretension to get excited himself.”

Gary Tinterow, an expert on the artist and director of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, which is currently hosting a retrospective (see sidebar), rejects the innuendos. “I think he was a full-blooded heterosexual,” says Tinterow. “We know that he fell in love with women because in his notebooks and letters there are traces of unrequited crushes, certainly on dancers and opera singers whom he idolized. And we know that he had sex with women. When he was going on a trip to Spain with his painter friend Boldini, he advised him to bring condoms and provided the address of a purveyor. ‘Since seduction is a distinct possibility in Andalusia, we should take care to bring back only good things from our journey,’ Degas wrote. So he fully expected to have some adventures there.”

According to Tinterow, Degas never married because “he had a horror of domesticity. You can imagine him as a figure from your own life, the bachelor uncle who

went from one relative’s house to another for holidays and dinners, and lived his own separate life free of any responsibility. He doted on his friends’ families, loved their children, and made portraits of them and his high school buddies. He would make engagement portraits of the girls, and once they married he would make marriage portraits. He was very devoted to the families of his close friends and his own brothers and sisters. But he once said that for him the absolute nightmare was to have a wife who would come up to his studio at the end of the day and ask, ‘Oh Edgar, what pretty thing have you made today?’”

We may never know precisely the underlying reasons for Degas’ bachelorhood. His biographer Henri Loyrette, former director of the Louvre and organizer of the Houston show, concludes that Degas led “an emotional life which—though it remained mysterious—was clearly unsatisfactory [and] left him taciturn when not indeed peevish or embittered.” Tinterow acknowledges Degas’ well-known acerbic wit but notes that “he was deeply involved with his family, wrote affectionate letters to his nieces and nephews, and had many close friends from school, including the novelist and librettist Ludovic Halévy and the industrialist and collector Henri Rouart. His close circle also included the families of Edouard Manet and Berthe Morisot, as well as the poet Stéphane Mallarmé. His milieu was the creative elite of Paris at the end of the 19th century.” ▸



“Degas lives like a little lawyer and does not like women, for he knows that if he liked them and went to bed with them too often he would become intellectually diseased and would no longer be able to paint...”
— Van Gogh

Clockwise from top left:
Woman in a Tub, 1883, pastel on paper, 27 x 27 inches;
Self-Portrait, 1854–1855, oil on canvas, 32 x 25 inches;
Self-Portrait in Library (Hand to Chin), 1895, Gelatin silver bromide print, 8 x 11 inches.





EARLY LIFE

Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas was born in Paris in 1834 to a middle-class French-Italian family. His paternal grandfather was a baker's son who excelled in the grain trade and after the French Revolution moved to French-ruled Naples. He married into a trading family, gained a license to lend money, and sent his son—Degas' father—to open a branch of the bank in Paris. He soon married a Creole woman, born in New Orleans and raised in Paris, whose French family financed slave trading in Saint Domingue (today Haiti) and later set up a cotton business in Louisiana. She died when Edgar was 13, leaving him with two younger sisters and two younger brothers.

Degas grew up in style and was exposed to culture early on. His father collected 18th-century French pictures, hosted musical performances in their home, and took his son to private collections of works by Watteau, Boucher, Chardin, Fragonard, and Rembrandt, among others. Fluent in French and Italian, Degas

attended an all-male lycée where he studied Greek and Latin and French literature, but he would rush home to draw portraits of his family. Despite his father's wish that he study law and join the bank, after graduation he obtained a permit to copy in the Louvre, sought instruction with established artists, and enrolled in the École des Beaux-Arts, scoring 33rd on the entrance exam. Perhaps because of his wealth, he opted to not complete the rigorous course and instead, at age 22, he embarked on an extended trip to Italy.

A high school friend's father had introduced him to the great neoclassical French painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, who advised the novice, "Draw lines, lots of lines ... Never from nature. Always from memory and after the engravings of the masters." Degas followed his advice in Naples, where he stayed in his grandfather's palazzo, reconnected with cousins, and haunted the museums. In Rome he found lodgings in the French Academy at the Villa Medici, where he audited



Clockwise from left:
Racehorses at Longchamp, 1871, possibly reworked in 1874, oil on canvas, 13 x 16.5 inches; *At the Races: The Start*, 1860-ca. 1862, oil on canvas, 13 x 18.5 inches; *Two Studies of Riders*, 1875-1877, brown ink with gouache highlights on chamois paper, 9.5 x 13.5 inches.



Degas returned to Paris in 1859 and worked on paintings of ancient history that he submitted for exhibition in the Academy's annual group show, the Salon. His works were accepted beginning in 1865, and two years later included the recently completed *Belleville Family*—at more than 8 by 9 feet, the largest he ever painted—but they received little attention and Degas never again participated in the official Salon. No longer bound to the ancient themes preferred by the Academy, he began to consider other subjects. Visiting a high school friend in Normandy he discovered the world of horse racing, and though he never rode himself, he

life-drawing classes. He copied ancient sculpture and Old Masters, made portraits in the manner of Ingres and Renaissance artists, and met the painter Gustave Moreau, who likely introduced him to pastel and watercolor. Proceeding to Florence he lived with his father's sister and her unemployed husband, Baron Gennaro Bellelli, an unhappy family that would become the subject of his most ambitious painting to date.

Painted equestrian scenes that revel in the pageantry of jockeys and racehorses readying to compete on verdant fields. In Paris he frequented Longchamp racetrack in the Bois de Boulogne, where he made sketches for works completed in the studio, referring to high-speed photographs of horses in motion, by Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey, to correctly depict the elusive placement of galloping legs. ▷

Clockwise from top left: Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource, NY; © Harvard Art Museum / Art Resource, NY; © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.



CAREER MAKING

In 1862, while copying in the Louvre, he met Édouard Manet, known as the leader of the avant-garde. Manet introduced Degas to the future Impressionists Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Berthe Morisot, as well as to Edmond Duranty and Émile Zola, writers who championed the movement. Frequent calls at the homes of Manet and Morisot became part of a weekly routine that included musical and literary evenings at his father's house, and regular hours at the artist hangout Café Guerbois, where he mixed with Manet coterie, which included Paul Cézanne and other artists and writers. His circle would later encompass the painters Henri Fantin-Latour, Puvis de Chavannes, Gustave Caillebotte, Frédéric Bazille, Camille Pissarro, James Whistler, and the German Adolph Menzel, among others.

In 1871 war broke out with Germany, the French were defeated, and the Second Empire collapsed. The next

year he and his brother sailed from Liverpool to visit their family in New Orleans. He stayed five months with his mother's brother in a large city house on Esplanade Avenue in the Vieux Carré, half of which survives today. His in-laws owned a plantation in the delta and exported cotton, while his brothers had relocated to the city to run a wine-import business. Degas—the only French Impressionist to work in North America—painted portraits of the household as well as one remarkable picture of the interior of the cotton office, a bustling scene of commerce in which 14 figures, including his uncle and brothers, assay cotton and conduct business. (It became the first Degas acquired by a public collection when it entered the museum in Pau in 1878.) His initial fascination with the stifling Reconstruction port soon wore off and Degas returned to Paris.

With the French economy in shambles, he traveled



Opposite: The Interior of the Cotton Bureau in New Orleans, 1873, oil on canvas, 29 x 36 inches; Above: Ballet Rehearsal on the Stage, 1874, oil on canvas, 25.5 x 32 inches.

to London and met the dealer Paul Durand-Ruel, who acquired some of his works and began exhibiting them at his galleries in London and Paris. The renowned dealer would remain Degas' principal representative for the rest of the artist's life. Degas had painted mainly portraits of his family and friends, and, plagued with self-doubt about the significance of his work, he was reluctant to part with them and left many unfinished. His father lamented that his son would never make a career. "Our little Raphael is always working away but has yet to complete anything," he chided. Only a handful of pictures had sold when a reversal of his family's financial situation led Degas to reconsider his aversion to the market.

It was at this time that he commenced the ballet pictures that would be crucial to his commercial success. His father had subscribed to the opera, and

engendered Degas' love for 18th-century French music, Gluck and Cimarosa in particular. His own immersion in opera had begun in his mid-30s while backstage developing a portrait of his friend, the bassoonist Désiré Dihau. He became a regular, often returning for multiple performances of his favorite pieces, including Prevost's *Manon Lescaut* and the comic ballet *Coppélia*, which he saw 13 times. Even after his attendance flagged, for decades he continued to invent new ballet pictures based on existing compositions and from memory. His preoccupation with the theme eventually resulted in some 1,500 works, constituting more than a third of his total oeuvre. ▷



DEGAS AND IMPRESSIONISM

When Degas was 40 years old, his father died bankrupt, and Degas, motivated perhaps by financial need, decided to join Monet, Pissarro, and others planning an exhibition that would challenge the official Salon. He participated in all but one of the independents' eight shows over the next 12 years, and became one of the main organizers of the group, which a derisive critic—borrowing from the title of Monet's painting *Impression, Sunrise*—soon labeled the “Impressionists.” Despite his central role, Degas rejected the term in relation to his own work. Whereas his colleagues quickly painted landscapes en plein air, he was a student of the Old Masters and disciple of Ingres who worked indoors perfecting his figures. He considered his approach “realist.” “No art was ever less spontaneous than mine,” he said. “What I do is the result of reflection and of the study of the great masters. Of inspiration, spontaneity, temperament, I know nothing.”

A tension arose between Degas' “realist” faction and artists whose loose brushwork sought to capture fleeting visual impressions, but in some ways his subject matter was the more cutting-edge. Contemporary writers Charles Baudelaire, the de Goncourt brothers, and Joris-Karl Huysmans had set about portraying the unvarnished reality of Parisian modern life. In his 1876 manifesto, *The New Painting*, the critic Duranty

Clockwise from bottom left: Singer with a Glove, 1878, pastel and liquid medium on canvas, 20.75 x 16 inches; Interior, 1868 or 1869, oil on canvas, 32 x 45 inches; The Little 14-Year-Old Dancer, 1880-1881, cast ca. 1922, painted bronze with muslin and silk on wooden base, 38.5 x 17.25 x 14 inches.

had called on painters to likewise “express the moral life, costumes and décor of their times [to] compose a record of their era.” Degas' principal rival on this mission was Manet, whose large painting of a naked prostitute with her fully clothed clients, *The Luncheon on the Grass*, caused a sensation when it was exhibited in 1863.

Degas was not far behind. His *Scene from the Steeplechase: The Fallen Jockey*, shown in the 1866 Salon, was among the first major paintings to break with the academic tradition. A few years later he painted *Interior*, a dimly lit woman's bedroom in which a more affluent man leans against the door with his hands in his pockets as the partly undressed girl seated in the center turns away, having abandoned her mending on the table where a lamp illuminates the pink lining of her sewing box. One scholar links the scene to a passage in Zola's novel *Thérèse Raquin* in which a couple meets a year after murdering the title character's husband. Degas referred to the canvas as “my genre picture,” suggesting that it was unique among his works, but it was one of many of his modern subjects. His portraits represent bourgeois types and dwellings, and his concerts, café scenes, shop saleswomen, and laundresses recorded various women going about their daily work.

In 1876 he began a series of monotypes of prostitutes in brothels. The images bring us into a gentleman's club alongside men in top hats and tails and semi-clad women gaily proffering their bodies on upholstered banquettes beneath mirrored walls and chandeliers. As most men of his time, Degas frequented such establishments and reportedly confided to a model that he had a venereal disease. He had done sketches for Edmond de Goncourt's naturalist novel of prostitution, *La Fille Elisa*, but as Loyrette observes, Degas' brothel is “a male fantasy rather than a satire etched in disgust or a pamphlet on the sexual misery and exploitation of womankind.” The same could be said of his ballet pictures. Ballerinas rehearsing and resting backstage was a sight familiar to men who loitered in the wings seeking favors from the impecunious young performers.

But Degas' portrayals of ballet included one work whose naturalism surpassed even the most shocking portraits of modern life: his sculpture *The Little 14-Year-Old Dancer*. Modeled after the daughter of a Parisian laundress and tailor, the two-thirds-life-sized figure was made of colored wax and a wig of human hair. She wore a real muslin tutu, stockings, and dance shoes, with a ribbon in her hair and a matching choker. Leaning back with her hands behind and her right foot forward, she raises her head with an air of naïve availability. When



Degas displayed *The Little 14-Year-Old Dancer* in the 1881 Impressionist exhibition he set her on a wood platform within a bell jar, like a scientific specimen. The naturalism was too much for a public used to idealized figures in pristine marble. Some critics recognized the sculpture's groundbreaking modernity, but most condemned the rat de l'opéra as “the very type of horror and bestiality,” reviling her “little snout” and overtly vulgar moral character. A *succès de scandale*, *The Little 14-Year-Old Dancer* was the only sculpture that Degas would show publicly in his lifetime. Since then it has been acknowledged as a masterpiece, possibly the first modern sculpture to make use of found objects, a practice later expanded by Picasso and Duchamp.

Degas presented more than two dozen works in some of the Impressionist exhibitions, but few sold and he constantly bemoaned the difficulty of making a living. He loathed making what he called “items” or “products” for sale, and complained of having “to do some small pastels” to “earn my dog's life.” Nevertheless, to meet the demands of the market, he continued to make lovely pictures of dancers as well as female nudes glimpsed in private moments bathing and grooming. He included the new works in the last Impressionist show in 1886, and they were well received, but the exhibition also included Georges Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grand Jatte*, and the enormous canvas was the star of the show. ▷

Clockwise from bottom left: Bettmann/Getty Images; The Philadelphia Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY; Tate, London / Art Resource, NY.

LATE CAREER

In his 50s Degas was showing at Durand-Ruel in London and earning enough to buy his first painting by Ingres and a season ticket to the Paris Opéra. In 1886 he showed with Durand-Ruel in New York, the first presentation of French impressionism in the United States. (His first American museum show took place at Harvard’s Fogg Art Museum in 1911.) In 1889 he traveled through Spain with the Italian painter Giovanni Boldini, and the following year drove by carriage through the French countryside with the sculptor Albert Bartholomé, creating monotype landscape images from memory that were exhibited in 1892. But Degas’ faculties were declining, specifically the vision problems that began in the 1870s and now began to impact his ability to work. He replicated existing works by drawing onto tracing paper to obtain new compositions without relying on his sight for new material.

As if seeking a mechanical substitute for drawing, he took an interest in photography. He used a large-format camera on a tripod, developing the presensitized glass plates himself, and making his own 3-by- 4-inch contact prints, sometimes cropping and enlarging images with the help of assistants. Malcolm Daniel, curator of photography at the MFA Houston and a specialist on Degas’ photographs, says Degas would compose his image, but owing to his failing eyesight needed someone to focus or to make the exposure for his self-portraits. Most of his 50-odd surviving photographs were made in the homes of friends. Daniel Halévy, the son of Degas’ high school classmate, recalled that after dinner Degas would go to his studio to get his equipment, then return and order people to take poses. Anyone unwilling to do so was told to leave. “One had to obey Degas’s redoubtable will, his artistic ferocity,” Halévy wrote. “All his friends speak of him in terror. If you invite him for the evening, you know what you’re letting yourself in for: two hours of military obedience.” The poet Paul Valéry, to whom Degas gave a copy of a portrait of Renoir and Mallarmé in the Paris parlor of Manet’s niece Julie, inscribed in the margin, “nine gasoline lamps, and a terrifying quarter-hour of utter immobility, were the conditions for this sort of masterpiece.” The ghostly nocturnal photograph is tinged melancholy, an effect he deliberately sought.



“One had to obey Degas’s redoubtable will, his artistic ferocity,” Halévy wrote.

“Daylight happens all by itself, whereas what I want is quite hard, the atmosphere of lamps or the moon.”

The 1890s were a depressing period for Degas. In addition to his deteriorating eyesight, he lost many friends as well as endured the deaths of both his brother Achille and his sister Marguerite. He became a pariah owing to his anti-Semitic stance in the so-called Dreyfuss Affair of 1894, which ended his friendships with Halévy, a Catholic of Jewish descent who had been his dear friend for 40 years, and he broke also with the Jewish painter Pissarro and many others. “He became brutal and unyielding,” says Loyrette, fueling his reputation as a nasty deviant.

Degas apparently descended into depression. He had written to his sister Marguerite, living in Buenos Aires, “I want, more than anything else, to remain alone; to work as calmly as possible with my pitiful eyes and, in order to obtain this supreme good, this repose, to condemn myself to die alone too.” He remained mainly in his three-floor studio where models came to pose. Daniel Halévy reported that the artist worked in charcoal, which was easier to see than pencil, drawing for an hour then lying down for long stretches with closed eyes and the door locked. He also sculpted, standing up “to follow the line of a hip or the insertion of a muscle, which his thumb then modeled.” When using a compass to measure his



models he sometimes clumsily pricked their skin, and he would ask them to hand him pastels of particular colors that his enfeebled sight could not identify. “While the model was resting, he dozed in his armchair, ‘only opening his mouth to complain of his poor sight and bladder infection that kept him awake at nights. Now, in a very low voice, he spoke of death and the ‘atrocious fear’ it inspired.”

His eyes developed floaters so dense that he said he saw “as if through a colander.” He was forced to read with a magnifying glass, and fitted with metal-lens glasses that blocked the right eye and provided only a slit for the left eye. His condition may have led him to focus on the tactile medium of sculpture, and contributed to the less meticulously drawn high-keyed color of late works such as *The Milliners* and *Russian Dancers*, which the artist aptly described as “orgies of color.” But Loyrette says that academic precision was not what Degas valued in art, and “it would be erroneous to attribute any essential part of Degas’s genius ... to the physical aberrations of his sight.” The late-career works are now seen as adumbrating modernist expressionism and abstraction.

Writing to his dealer in 1904 he lamented having “managed to grow old without ever having found out how to earn money.” That year, when the Rouart collection sold and his oil *Dancers Practicing at the Barre* (1876–

77) went for 478,000 francs, a record price for a living artist, he told a journalist that he felt like “a racehorse that has won the Grand Prix and gets nothing more than its ration of oats.” His finances enabled him to pursue his passion as a collector, and he scoured the auctions and galleries for works by Ingres, Delacroix, Cézanne, and younger artists including Van Gogh and Gauguin, assembling a large and important private collection that filled his home.

When the apartment was to be demolished he was forced to move in 1912, and no longer able to navigate familiar surroundings he seems to have stopped working. In decline, with a wizened face and long white beard, he told Valéry, “I look like a dog.” A short film from around this time shows him walking with a woman on a Paris street, wearing his characteristic frock coat and hat and using an umbrella as a cane. He was known to take long strolls and to ride the bus to the end of the line, then return the same route. In 1915, the year after the onset of the First World War, his brother described Degas as isolated and nearly blind, but added that he did not appear to suffer. He died in 1917 at the age of 83 and was buried in the family vault at Montmartre Cemetery. He had requested that no speeches be read at his funeral and that his headstone state that he loved drawing very much. ▸



From left: *The Millinery Shop*, 1879-1886, oil on canvas, 39 x 44 inches; *Dancers Practicing at the Barre*, 1877, mixed media on canvas, 29.75 x 32 inches; a relief portrait of French artist Edgar Degas on his grave at Montmartre Cemetery, Paris.

From bottom left: Fine Art/Getty Images; Francis G. Mayer/Getty Images; Amy T. Zielinski/Getty Images.



Degas' Private Collection

Degas amassed an enormous art collection with the intention of creating a museum to show his work alongside artists he admired. The inventory included 20 paintings and 88 drawings by Ingres, 12 paintings and 129 drawings by Delacroix, 1,800 Daumiers, 2,000 Gavarnis, and paintings by Manet, Corot, Pissarro, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne, Cassatt, and dozens of other artists he respected. Notably absent are Monet, Seurat, Toulouse-Lautrec, the Nabis, and the Fauves. He kept favorites on display, with a Delacroix visible from his bed and a grand salon that was like a mini museum in his home. A vitrine reportedly contained an album of Japanese prints, casts of the hands of Japanese women, a plaster cast of Ingres' hand holding a pencil,

and Neapolitan dolls. Known only to Degas' intimate friends, the trove was a revelation when it was sold after his death, along with several thousand of Degas' own works. The series of auctions, which took place in Paris in 1918 and 1919 and were interrupted by German bombardment, dispersed dozens of works that are now fixtures in the world's great museums. The Metropolitan bought pendant portraits by Ingres and 10 works by Degas; the Art Institute of Chicago has works by Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Ingres; The National Gallery in London has Ingres' *Roger Freeing Angelica* and Manet's *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian*. *Interior* is in The Philadelphia Museum of Art, and *The Bellelli Family* went to the Musée d'Orsay along with Manet's pastel of his wife on a blue sofa.

From left: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY; Leon Neill/Getty Images.



From left: *The Bellelli Family*, 1858-1867, oil on canvas, 78.75 x 98.5 inches; *Dancer in Repose*, 1879, pastel and gouache, 23.25 by 25.25 inches, displayed at the Sotheby's auction house in London.

The Degas Market

Degas was a devotee of the Old Masters and an old-fashioned conservative in matters of politics, but his drive to discover new means of expression made him one of the more radical artistic innovators of his day. His works consistently achieve prices in the tens of millions of dollars. The record is \$37 million for *Danseuse au Repos* (*Dancer in Repose*; ca. 1879), a roughly 2-foot-square pastel-and-gouache that Sotheby's NY sold in 2008. The same picture was auctioned for \$27.9 million a decade earlier. "Of all his wide-ranging themes, the studies of ballet dancers on and off stage are really the most sought after," says James Mackie, head of Impressionist and Modern art at Sotheby's London. Another pastel, gouache, and charcoal drawing of

two dancers at the barre (1880) sold for \$26.5 million at Christie's London in 2008, and an 1878 pastel sold last year at Sotheby's NY for \$17 million. "The pastels are the most prized and hold the highest prices," says Mackie. "They were extremely radical pictures in their time and people still recognize that. And the dazzling color and the extraordinary explosive affects he was able to achieve have enduring appeal." Another factor is that important oil paintings have not appeared at auction since the early 1990s. Other Impressionists worked mainly in oil, but Degas excelled in many media and produced fewer oils, particularly later in life. Three of the top four auction prices for Degas have been for pastels, along with a bronze cast of *Petite Danseuse*

de Quatorze Ans (*The Little 14-Year-Old Dancer*) that sold for \$24.9 million at Sotheby's London last year. Another 1922 cast sold in 2009 for \$19 million, but bronzes of his smaller wax dancers, bathers, and horses command far lower prices, and the appearance of unknown casts of Degas sculptures requires that buyers take special care when considering a work. One that recently came to light is a large plaster variant of *The Little 14-Year-Old Dancer* that its owners present as the model for the wax figure that Degas exhibited. They note that the wax, today in the National Gallery in Washington, was revised by Degas and others before it was sold after 1900. Tinterow rejects the attribution of the previously unknown work. "In my opinion, that large plaster of >

The Little 14-Year-Old Dancer does not look to me like a work made by Edgar Degas," he says, citing the lack of provenance, the absence of contemporary descriptions, its omission from the comprehensive inventory of Degas' studio, as well the fact that the plaster apparently has none of the fingerprints found on other Degas sculptures, and an uncharacteristic armature that seems to be modern. "I look at that plaster and at the way it has been modeled, and I look at that dancer's face, and I can tell you it was not modeled by the Edgar Degas whom I know," he concludes.

Many of the smaller-scale works on paper that regularly appear at auction first entered the market in the Degas estate sales. Mackie notes that perhaps Degas would not have regarded them as commercially viable, but today they are highly valued. "The most interesting are the monotypes [prints lifted by pressing a dampened sheet of paper onto a painted support] that he would modify with pastel and highlights. That aspect of changing the atmosphere is absolutely central to him as an artist, and when they come up they bring very strong prices, from \$1.5 [million] or \$2 million," he says.

The identity of buyers at auction remains confidential, but Mackie says the profile of Degas collectors is quite broad. "The core collectors remain in North America and Europe, but we have seen participation at a high level of a small number of buyers in China and other emerging markets," he says, adding that a small bronze of a female nude offered in London this year drew bids from America, Europe, South America, and China.

Within the Impressionist market Degas and Monet achieve the highest prices—the record for Monet is \$81.4 million for an 1891 grainstack painting sold at Christie's NY in November—but their works rarely approach the \$100 million prices paid for works by Picasso, Modigliani, Bacon, deKooning, and other modern and postwar artists. Mackie says this is because the market for the later period is deeper, with more people competing. But he predicts that the Impressionist market may rise as new markets continue to introduce new buyers, and he is certain that Degas will always be in demand in the traditional markets, as well.



Clockwise from top: Old Absinthe House, New Orleans, Louisiana, where Degas drank; *Self-Portrait*, 1857, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; the house on Esplanade where Edgar Degas lived in New Orleans.

Degas: A New Vision

In recent years museums have mounted exhibitions about Degas and ballet, his stay in New Orleans, his monotypes, and numerous other themes, but there had not been a large retrospective survey for nearly three decades. Now, coinciding with the centennial of the artist's death, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, is hosting a comprehensive survey. On view through January 16, 2017, *Degas: A New Vision* includes more than 200 paintings, drawings, photographs, prints, and sculptures, with loans from 12 countries. As the title suggests, the exhibition offers a fresh perspective on Degas, celebrating the more abstract nudes and expressive dancers from late in his career. Critics had deemed these works the product of an old man losing his faculties, and preferred the more precise pictures from earlier in Degas' life. Now the late works are presented as fully realized and innovative creations that were a source for modernists from the Expressionists to Picasso. The exhibition is co-organized by Henri Loyrette, former director of the Louvre and the world's leading expert on Degas who wrote the excellent catalogue, and MFAH Director Gary Tinterow. They produced the last Degas retrospective as well, back in 1988 when Loyrette worked at the Musée d'Orsay and Tinterow was a curator at the Metropolitan. The current show is a collaboration with the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, where it appeared last year. Houston is the only North American venue. For further information, visit mfah.org. ♦

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