Degas – The Dance

Edgar de Gas (later contracted to Degas) was born in Paris in-1834: His father came from a family of wealthy bankers and he encouraged his son's early artistic inclinations. In 1854, Degas was trained for the École des Beaux-Arts under Louis Lamothe, which institution he entered the following year but for a short time only, finding the course too restrictive. Even in these early years, he saw himself as an artist in the classical tradition, in a direct line of descent from the ancient Greeks through the Florentine school of the Italian Renaissance. Consequently, he decided to continue his studies through travel and between 1854 and 1859 he made long and regular trips to Naples and Florence, staying with relatives and studying painting. It was around this time that he met Ingres, the most respected painter of his day and, as Director of the French School in Rome and Professor at the École des Beaux-Arts, one of the most influential. The meeting was a formative event in Degas' life and formed the basis of his favourite anecdote in which he recounted the advice Ingres gave to him: 'Draw lines, young man, draw lines.' It was under the influence of Ingres that Degas began to paint historical subjects and portraits and he contributed regularly to the Salon, the annual exhibition in Paris, until 1870.

His conviction that modern life should form the basis of any art, together with a taste for original composition, attracted him to a group of painters and writers who regularly assembled at the Cafe Guerbois. From 1874 he exhibited with this group, later termed the Impressionists, until 1886, when worsening eyesight forced him to work increasingly in new media such as pastel, monotype* and modelling till he gave up work altogether in 1909. He lived on lonely and frustrated until 1917.

Many artists have become inseparably associated with the subject of their work; none more so than Degas with the ballet. Nor is this surprising since he became popular!' known as the painter of ballet scenes as far back as 1879. Some perceptive critics, like Duranty, whose portrait by Degas is on show in the gallery, were aware that this simple label encouraged too superficial a view of his work since he was using the dance as a means of artistic expression or in his own words as 'un pretexts pour le dessin'. The reason that he is popularly thought of purely as a painter .of ballet, however, is simple enough; out of 2000 surviving works, half are devoted to the world of ballet. This statistic is even more remarkable when we learn that Degas was nearly 40 when he first attempted the subject. Yet Degas came from a musical family and had many close friends who were musicians — some were ever members of the orchestra of the Paris Opera — and so he would have been familiar with the ballet from his youth.

The explanation for this delay in tackling the subject probably lies in the absence of any tradition of painting in this area. It formed part of his search for new, contemporary, material away from Old Master-ish themes and yet at the same time satisfied his need to paint the human figure in a classical manner. When Mrs Louise Havermeyer, an American collector, asked him why he painted so many ballet dancers, he replied: 'Because, madame, it is all that is left of the combined movements of the Greeks.'

The fascination with the subject of the dance went far beyond the recording of the ballet performance itself, which occurs relatively rarely in Degas' oeuvre, but encompassed the whole view of the dancers' life as in Le Foyer de la Danse and-Dancers on a bench (in the Art Gallery Collection). Rehearsals, moments of exhaustion, dressing, waiting to go on stage, in all these activities Degas found the substance for his art. Ironically, Degas lived and worked when the art of ballet was at a low ebb. The great Romantic era of ballet was at its height when he was a child and it was not to regain its stature in France until Diaghilev brought his ballet company to Paris in 1909 when Degas was an old man. 'The famous dancers of the early 19th century, such as Marie Taglioni, had raised and placed greater emphasis on the ballerina than the male dancer, whose role was literally a supporting one to the ballerina. Consequently the male dancer makes only incidental appearances in Degas' canvasses.

Degas' favourite haunts for observing and sketching the young ballerinas included the Opera and the opera house in the Rue Le Peletier, the setting for The Rehearsal. This picture was among the last to be painted of this historic opera house before it was destroyed by fire in October 1873. It was painted not in situ, but in the studio from sketches made on the spot and completed in 1874. The figure of the dancing master can be identified as Jules Perrot, who was one of the most outstanding dancers and choreographers of his day.

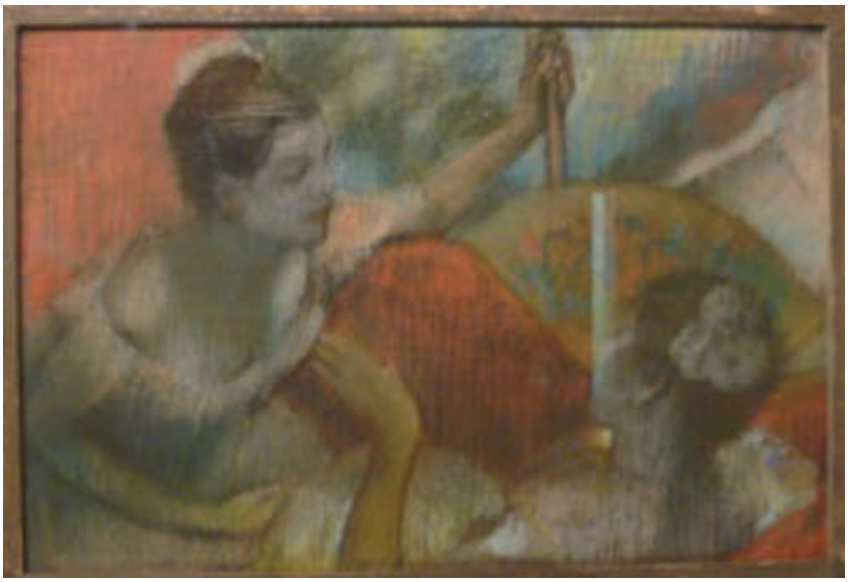
Degas would spend hours at the practice sessions to familiarise himself with every detail of movements and dress. The-girls were christened 'les rats' by Mon. Roqueplan, Director of the Opera from 1849 to 1854, who described them as the waifs of the theatre, wearing other people's discarded clothes, insufficiently fed and always begging money for sweets. For the most part they came from poor families and had to earn their keep as soon as possible and although some achieved critical and financial success the failure rate was high.

Degas was fascinated by the graceful stylized movements of the dancers. He found similar disciplined forms in the movements of thoroughbred racehorses and in his. handling of both these subjects he was able to combine factual accuracy with artistic expression. The Rehearsal is an excellent illustration of this synthesis whereby the ballerinas who are actually rehearsing are relegated to the back of the picture and the artist concentrates instead on unrelated images such as the spiral staircase on the left and the group of dancers at rest on the right. Furthermore Degas' observation of the ballerinas is accurate even to the point of portraying them in need of further practice! The dancers are engaged in an 'adage', a term given to a slow balancing exercise done in the centre without the support of the barre and the central figure is in a faulty position, which is a cross between an ‘arabesque croisée’ in the placing of the arms and an ‘attitude’ in that her raised leg is bent. This is a distinction of which Degas would certainly be aware. There are many drawings executed actually in the rehearsal room and on which Degas has written his comments. The charcoal drawing The little Dancer is inscribed: 'Echappe sur pointes à la seconde à la barre'. Sometimes these drawings carry not only the name of the position, thus demonstrating his familiarity with technique, but also certain criticisms on posture. One writer, Edmond de Goncourt, amusingly recorded how Degas would even mime various ballet positions in the privacy of his studio.

Despite the lengths to which Degas went to ensure that his pictures were factually accurate, many rely for their success as works of art on other visual considerations. The Dancers in a Box of c.1883-85 is deliberately ambiguous in its treatment of space. The concern here is not so much the dancers as in creating an unusual composition almost to the point of incomprehension. Where, for example, is Degas actually positioned to record such a scene and are the stage and the bowing dancer on the same level as the other dancers? This spatial abstraction was of greater interest to Degas than the subject itself. He believed that the crucial link between everyday life as lived and pure art lay in composition and design, which in turn depended on drawing. Degas understood and shared the Impressionists' general interest in light but it was subordinated to drawing of the greatest delicacy and precision. As his style evolved, Degas naturally turned to pastel which appealed to him precisely because it allowed him to use colour without losing any emphasis in line. In other words he could draw and paint simultaneously. In many ways this was fortunate for his

rapidly deteriorating eyesight made oil painting increasingly awkward for him. The English painter Sickert observed of Degas' attitude:

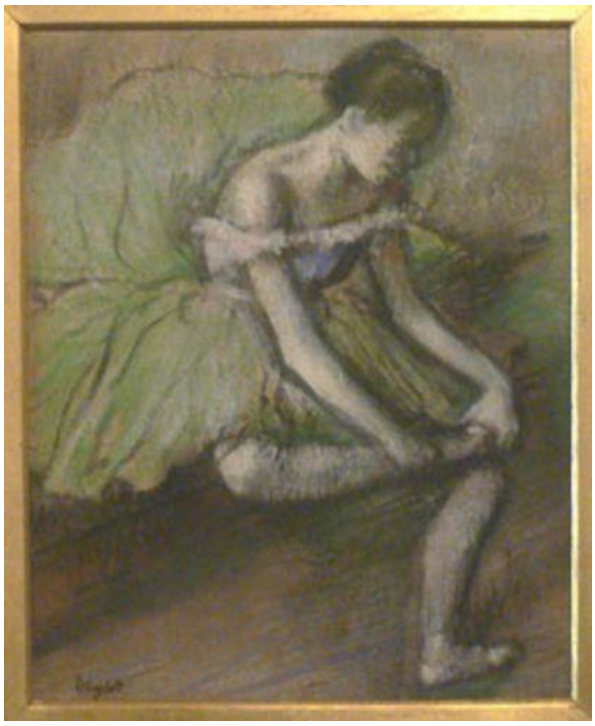
'A larger scale became necessary … A very natural dread that the afflictions might grow made, of the necessary delays that oil painting exacts, an intolerable anxiety. A paste is always ready to be got on with.'



In Dancers in a Box the advantage of pastel is clearly evident where the strokes of the paste apply colour and at the same time describe the shapes.

Degas believed that the visible world was only the starting point of a work of art and it had to be interpreted through the hands and mind of the artist. This led him to . produce work not directly from nature but from his imagination. It was a philosophy that he outlined in his description of the art of drawing:

'It is all very well and good to copy that which one sees; it is much better to draw the picture the memory retains. It is a transformation in which the imagination collaborates with the memory. You reproduce only that which strikes you, that is to say, the necessary. From there, your recollections and your fantasy are liberated from the tyranny that nature exercises.'



The Green Dress is an example of Degas' method of working from memory. He had familiarised himself with' the subject through patient study to such an extent that he was able to simplify the forms to their bare minimum, so that details of fingers and drapery are only hinted at. This pastel is one of five closely related variants, for he worked and reworked the same theme and pose, learning not from nature but his previous drawing. He would finally arrive, as here, with a simple grandeur which he saw as having its echo in the simplified forms of classical art.

His failing sight meant a broader style, which involved further drastic simplification of forms and a summary ' treatment of light and shade. In this late pastel, The Three Dancers of around 1905, Degas has outlined the figures in charcoal and the pastel has been used merely to block in the colour, sometimes using the side of the stick rather than its point. Although his later works display a certain roughness of manner there is ever present an interest in capturing the fragmentary aspect of vision. Degas had been influenced by Japanese prints, which became popular during the 1860s and from them had learnt how to achieve balance through asymmetry or making blank areas act as counterpoints to figures. Notice here how part of the stage scenery forms a major element in the composition acting as a foil to the curves in the figures.

The very last pictures that Degas produced were of ballet subjects. He was inspired by the visit of Diaghilev's Ballet Russes which Degas saw in their Paris season of 1909. Thereafter he gave up art altogether. Until his death in 1917, he remained an irritable and melancholy figure, who was frequently to be seen shuffling along the Paris boulevards, tapping his cane and feeling his way, a sad end to a distinguished career. His mastery of his art and his treatment of the dance was so complete that even today it seems that Degas has said the last word on ballet.

*monotype — a simple method of printmaking where by printer's ink is applied to a smooth surface and the paper is pressed against.

FURTHER READING:

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