

DEGAS - DANCERS IN A BOX - 35-231



CAPTION ONE

The subject of this ambiguous image has been much debated. Who are these two women and where are they? Degas has chosen a high viewpoint to give us a close-up view of what seems to be a theatre-box overlooking a stage - the deep red and orange suggesting the plush velvet of the front and wall of the box. Two young women, shoulders bare and their hair pulled tightly back, are seated in the box, animatedly talking to each other and ignoring the performance.

Are these women dancers or are they wealthy society women? Until recently they have always been thought to be dancers but they might as easily be two fashionably dressed young women. We may never know, for while it was highly unlikely that dancers would be allowed to watch a performance from a box, it was equally unlikely that society women would behave in the indecorous manner suggested here.

CAPTION TWO - detail on closed fan/technique

There has been much debate about what the woman on the right holds in her hand. It has often been referred to as a stick. Degas's very deliberate drawing of her hand is reminiscent of studies he made of the ballet master Perrot leaning on his stick. Degas has no doubt lifted the motif from his studies of Perrot but intended that here we read the stick as a closed fan. The woman's left elbow rests on the top of the box, her fan, held vertically, also rests on the box.

This pastel has a wonderfully dense textured surface. Degas uses a wide variety of techniques to achieve this richness - bold, strong, cross-hatchings suggest the strong greens and blues of the stage scenery. He animates and lightens this vibrant area by taking a sharp point, possibly the end of a brush, and making vertical striations through the pastel.

CAPTION THREE - detail of woman on right/with dancer

As is so often the case with Degas's work, *Dancers in a Box* is only one of a number of drawings, pastels and prints on a particular theme, here women in a theatre box overlooking a stage. In the other works, the women with their jewels, fans and binoculars carefully concentrate on the performance taking place below them. Here, while the woman on the left turns away from the stage to listen to her friend, her friend cannot even see the stage because her fan is shielding it from her view.

Such boxes over the stage were expensive, exclusive and gave a privileged view. Here the viewer, as a spectator, is probably meant to be a wealthy male, who has either just entered the box or who is standing in it. We are spectators twice - of the stage itself with the spot-lit ballerina and of the female figures seated in front of us in the box.

CAPTION FOUR - detail of woman on left

Some of Degas's contemporaries also chose to depict young women attending performances at the theatre. There are several paintings of this subject by two of his Impressionist colleagues - Mary Cassatt and Auguste Renoir. Their paintings differ from those of Degas in that they chose to paint views of the young women from outside the 'loge' looking in, either from below, or from another box to the side - only Degas places us inside the box, looking over the stage.

It is interesting to note that during the nineteenth century attending the opera and ballet was very much a part of the upper-class Parisian's daily life. Although full-length ballets were performed, it was more usual for shorter ballet sequences to be included as interludes in almost every opera performance.