

DEGAS - PORTRAIT OF DURANTY - 35/232



CAPTION ONE

In this portrait Degas shows his friend, the art critic and novelist, Edmond Duranty seated in his study, literally surrounded by the books which were the tools of his trade. With the exception of the bottle of ink and the two magnifying glasses, the picture comprises nothing but Duranty and his books and pamphlets. As the first Keeper of The Burrell Collection wrote: 'all that is not Duranty is books and all that is not books is Duranty!'

CAPTION TWO - detail of Duranty

Degas's Portrait of Duranty was included in the Fifth Impressionist exhibition (1880) where it was reviewed by the Naturalist novelist and art critic, J.-K. Huysmans: 'M. Duranty is shown amidst his prints and books, seated at his writing-table, his slender, nervous fingers, his keen and mocking eye, his searching, piercing look, his expression as of an English comedian, and his dry little laugh into the stem of his pipe, pass before me again as I look on this canvas where the character of this curious analyst is so well rendered.'

Huysmans then noted Degas's use of complementary colours - the forehead streaked with pink, the beard flecked with green and the yellow fingers outlined in bishop's violet. He continued: 'Near to, it consists of a hatching of colours which are hammered out and split up and appear to encroach one on the other; but at a few paces everything is in harmony and melts into the exact flesh-tone - flesh which palpitates and is alive, such as no-one in France until now has known how to paint.'

CAPTION THREE - fuller detail of Duranty and books

The writer and critic George Moore said of Degas's portraits: 'With marvellous perception he follows every curve and characteristic irregularity, writing the very soul of his model upon his canvas. He will paint portraits only of those whom he knows intimately, for it is part of his method only to paint his sitter in that environment which is habitual to her or him.'

Moore continues: 'With stagey curtains, balustrades, and conventional poses, he will have nothing to do. He will watch the sitter until he learns all her or his tricks of expressions and movement, and then will reproduce all of them and with such exactitude and sympathetic insight that the very inner life of the man is laid bare.'

CAPTION FOUR - detail of Duranty and hand, face-alone

Edmond Duranty (1833-80) was a close friend of Degas. The two men probably met in 1865 at the Cafe Guerbois, where Manet was another regular. Already in 1856 Duranty had edited the short-lived periodical *Le Realisme*, in which he defended Courbet and other Realist painters and writers. He also wrote reviews of the Salon and articles on a wide variety of art matters. Manet so strongly objected to one of Duranty's reviews that he challenged the writer to a duel - fortunately both men survived.

Today, Duranty's reputation rests on his essay *The New Painting*, published in 1876. In it Duranty discussed the evolution of a new stylistic approach to painting with subjects drawn from modern life but he

deliberately avoided the use of the term Impressionism. Many of the ideas in the pamphlet were close to those shared by Degas and for a time some people even believed that it had been Degas, and not Duranty, who had written it. Degas's portrait of Duranty perfectly sums up the guiding principles of the new painting as expounded in Duranty's essay.

CAPTION FIVE - detail of hand on book

The unusual and distinctive gesture of Duranty's right hand again communicates something of the writer's penetrating and restless intelligence that Degas wanted to convey to the viewer. No correspondence between Degas and Duranty seems to have survived and so it is difficult to trace the progress of their friendship. In the last months of his life Duranty, reviewing the Impressionist exhibition of 1879, wrote:

The astonishing artist, Degas, is- at this exhibition with all his brilliance, his whimsy, his caustic wit. He is a man apart, a man who is beginning to be very highly esteemed, and who will be particularly revered in the years to come, a man to whom twenty other painters who have been in contact with him owe their success. It is impossible even to be near the man without taking on some of his lustre.

CAPTION SIX - detail of ink and bottles

Despite the fact that this is a finished painting - signed, dated and exhibited -it remained unsold during Degas's lifetime. It was included in the first sale of works from Degas' studio in May 1918 when it was sold for 95,000 French francs. Alex Reid's son, McNeill Reid, recounted how, in 1922, he saw the portrait in the window of the Galerte Barbazanges in Paris. The asking price was £1,100 and armed with a photograph Reid jnr. returned to Glasgow to ask for his father's approval to buy it.

Alex Reid was against the purchase believing that the portrait would be difficult to sell if Burrell didn't buy it. McNeill Reid cancelled his deal. A few months later the dealer Lefevre saw the painting, bought it, and included it in a show of important paintings by French 19th century artists in his London gallery. Burrell paid £1,900 for the portrait and acquired two other works by Degas at the same time!

CAPTION SEVEN - detail of books

Duranty's first and best-known novel *Le Malheur d'Henriette Gerard*, serialised in 1858, deals with the love of a young couple thwarted by a selfish mother. He published two more novels in 1862 and 1872. He wrote numerous short stories and 4 plays, none of which was staged during his lifetime. He also pioneered a marionette show in the Tuileries Gardens which ran for several years.

Duranty's journalistic career included working for periodicals as diverse as *Paris-Journal* and the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*. He wrote articles on topics ranging from politics and archaeology to literature and art. He had been commissioned to write a history of art in several volumes of which only one was completed at the time of his death, and he had published articles on Egyptian, Assyrian and Greek art. His hard work never brought him a fortune and he lived in near penury. He sold the most important books from his library, and after his death the sale of the remainder raised only 3,382:50 francs.

CAPTION EIGHT - detail of book with Degas signature

Degas's portrait of Duranty was one of several portraits of male sitters that Degas completed in 1879. It is interesting to compare our portrait with that of Diego Martelli, also a writer and art critic, which is in the collection of The National Gallery in Edinburgh. In both works the sitter is shown seated in his own professional environment. Degas noted on his preparatory drawings 'chez Duranty 25 mars 1879' and 'chez Martelli 3 avril 79.'

There are only two preparatory studies for the portrait of Duranty — one of Duranty and one of his bookshelves. It is likely that, since Degas knew the writer so well, he had less need to make many preparatory studies. There was once a third drawing, originally on paper of the same size as the other two. Degas worked up this drawing with pastel, adding a large strip of paper at the top, making it an independent work. It was almost certainly completed for inclusion in Duranty's posthumous sale (28-29 January 1881). This pastel is now in a private collection in Washington.