

THE HIDDEN DEGAS

Miss Hamilton began by explaining that the absence of some Degas' pictures during the last few months was the result of a request from the Liverpool Tate to borrow ten for an exhibition in September - "Degas' Images of Women". Six of the ten requested would go, and Miss Hamilton proposed to show the meeting slides of five works of art, some going and some not, and explain the thinking behind the decisions. Detailed slides had already been taken, and it was hoped to have some microscopic slides before September.

A Canadian research project had sparked off other research on Degas' pastel work which comprises 50% of his oeuvre, and because of the Liverpool exhibition the Burrell was further on than elsewhere in Britain. The collaborator on the research was Richard Kendall, a Degas scholar, who is putting together the Liverpool exhibition, and this research may change received views on how Degas worked and on the dating of the works. Questions were arising, such as how Degas used pastel, which 's quite complex; are the works finished; and is there a difference between what Degas intended the work to look like and how it actually looks today?

The first use of pastel was in the 15th century when it was documented by Leonardo by 'the dry method of applying colour'. It was used as a secondary medium to add colour to a charcoal drawing or as a study before an oil. From the 17th century on experiments began to be carried out, e.g. Carriera used a mixture of wet and dry, pre-figuring Degas. Chardin turned to pastel late in his career when his eyesight gave him problems. To Degas line was important, so using pastel, drawing and painting simultaneously, was the perfect technique. In the 1870s and 80s there was a revival of interest in pastel and in the Salon there was an area kept apart for watercolours and pastel. Millet and Fantin Latour used pastel and influenced Degas in the use of hatching and strong, sharp colour.

Degas began to use pastel in the 1870s. He returned from New Orleans in 1873 and until 1881 70% of his work was done in pastel. He began applying pastel to prints and in a series of monotypes in the 1870s added colour in the forms of gouache, distemper, pastel, and peinture à l'essence, which is the oil removed from oil paint and turpentine substituted, resulting in a thin wash of colour. The portrait of Duranty is a mixture of media.

Degas was never prepared to say a painting was finished and with oil it has to be left to dry, before work can be recommenced. Pastel is already dry and can be fixed, and another layer added. The early pastels were all small, finished quickly, cheap to produce and easy to sell. He did not start in an innovative fashion. For example the Portrait of Therese in 1869 looks back to Ingres.

Soon however he found out the beauties of pastel, e.g. 'Dancers in the wings', which was painted on ten separate pieces of paper. The paper was extended by asking the manufacturer to add another layer, and a few of the works are almost collages. There are various techniques of wet and dry, the latter producing the strong stroke. Where wet pastel is used it is pulverised and mixed with gum arabic, and rubbed on with a brush, the hands or burnished with agate on a stick. Alternatively it can be applied dry and a vaporiser used to apply boiling steam and give a smoky effect. This gives a variety of texture.

In later works Degas made a consistent use of hatching. He put on one layer, fixed it, then another layer, fixed that, and hatched without fixative as he did not want the last layer to lose brilliance. This makes the works dangerous: to move as the unfixed last layer can be shaken off with vibration. The pastel could be applied to thick paper, and by burnishing the pastel became pressed into the paper and the resultant pitted surface can be seen under a microscope. This was illustrated by a slide of a dancer picture from Princeton, dated 1895-190f), where the colours are stronger and darker and the strokes much more noticeable.

Rouart, whose father was one of Degas' assistants, wrote in 1945 on Degas' techniques, and some of the modern findings are most interesting, when compared with this information. Degas did not use the usual fixative which stops colour from smudging and blending, but kept his formula a secret.

When considering what could be lent lots of questions arose. Had the pastels been fixed; what was the surface like, flat or with fibres which would render it unable to be moved; what is the support, canvas, paper, and what type? Degas used all sorts of supports from coarse to very fine paper, which he seemed to prefer, but which is very fragile and affected by light. The light where the Degas' are displayed at present is too strong for the paper. Pastel is not fugitive, but certain pigments are, and Degas would expose some earthy colours to light to get rid of the fugitive quality.

Miss Hamilton then went on to show several works, discussing why some could be lent and others not. E.G. the oil 'au Tuileries' was on canvas and if, good condition, therefore presented no problem. 'Les Bijoux' and 'Women Bathing' were pastels on paper and well rubbed,- so could be lent. In discussing 'The Laundresses' it was pointed out that there was a fear of the strong blue in the dress not being fixed, therefore great care would have to be taken in packing. There is a suggestion that this work illustrates *u Sola uovei*; the wedding ring \pm s there for a reason. There is also evidence of *pentimenti* beneath the surface. This work is also entitled 'Reading the Letter' but there can be speculations as to what one of the women is holding in her hand. It is signed 'Degas 188?' and seems to have been worked over, suggesting Degas changed his mind after he signed it.

Miss Hamilton then illustrated from 'The Green Dress' that it was ineligible for loan. It was painted on tracing paper, which is yellow and brittle, laid on heavier paper and on board, with the pastel lying on the surface. There is evidence moisture was used, lots of paper allowed to show through, and *pentimenti* on the bend of the knee and the other leg.

When looking at 'Girl at Toilet' and 'Les Bijoux' it was pointed out that the apparent Degas signature was in fact an atelier stamp, applied after his death. Both pictures were uncompleted on his death and this is particularly evident in 'Les Bijoux' where the outline of a third figure can be seen.

Mr. Kinnaird thanked Miss Hamilton for this fascinating look at Degas' techniques and the resultant detective work occasioned by them.