

## DEGAS -THE TUB 35-236



### CAPTION ONE

In this striking pastel Degas depicts a nude woman, seen from behind and close to, bending to the right, about to bathe with the sponge she holds in her right hand. She is standing in a shallow metal tub whose predominant tones of blue complement the vibrant orange background of the surrounding space.

Some fifteen years earlier Degas had already been acknowledged, in avant-garde Parisian circles, as the leading artist of the nude. The female nude was the central subject in his art. Approximately one fifth of Degas's output - in paintings, pastels, drawings, prints and sculpture - was of the nude. It dominated the last twenty years of his career.

### CAPTION TWO

This rather awkward, angular nude is based on one of several works depicting a bather in a shallow tub that Degas executed in the mid-1880s. It is closest to *Woman bathing in a shallow tub* (Hiroshima Museum of Art). The pose in both works is similar but the Hiroshima pastel - which was probably begun in the mid 1880s and then reworked in the 1890s - shows that we are in the woman's bedroom and gives more precise details of the fabric of the carpet and curtains.

Although Degas re-uses an earlier pose how would he have worked on the pastel? Would he have referred back to the earlier works, would he have worked from memory or would he have used a model to pose for him? It is difficult to know for certain. Although late in life Degas was fond of asserting that a good artist should be capable of working from memory, there is plenty of evidence - from his friends and his models - to show that Degas worked from life right up until the end of his career.

### CAPTION THREE

From the early 1880s the medium Degas preferred to work in was pastel. This was a natural choice for a skilled draughtsman because it allowed him to draw with colour using varied and gestural strokes. Degas seems to have enjoyed the breadth and amplitude of line that pastel allowed him and also the jagged, raw quality of each stroke. In addition, pastel allowed Degas, the perfectionist, to change his mind.

Unlike oil, which needs scraping down if a mistake is made - and which eventually takes on a muddy appearance if too many such changes are made - pastel allows the artist to work over the surface in a series of layers, making alterations as necessary, it is also possible that Degas preferred to use pastel because of his deteriorating eyesight. He suffered from myopia, an irregular field of vision and an intolerance of bright light.

### CAPTION FOUR

If in the 1880s Degas's pastels remained essentially faithful to local colour, by the following decade, as can be seen here, he was increasingly using exaggerated - and not necessarily realistic - colour combinations. Here Degas has used strong directional strokes of bold colour - blue, green, orange, pink, white - which have been laid over heavily stumped, darker, ground colours.

Degas began by delineating the contours of the woman's body with dark lines, and then used hatched strokes of mint green and pink to establish the flesh tone. Quick, jagged strokes of orange and yellow suggest the

form of the woman's right breast and equally hasty strokes of yellow imply the form of her right thigh. The woman's surroundings are blocked in in confident, bold areas, forming, like her, square and rectangular forms which contrast with the shape of the oval tub.

#### **CAPTION FIVE**

Contemporary critics admired Degas's nudes for their realism - for Degas's accurate observation of the imperfections of the flesh. These critics appreciated his works because they found them truthful, unlike the 'whitened, pinkened, souffle-like flesh of [the] academic formula' they so despised. The critic Geffroy, for example, insisted that Degas's nudes represented 'a real naked woman' expressed with 'sincerity and truth'. Critics also discussed the abstract qualities of these nudes. In this pastel, Degas's rich tactile handling, bold colouring, geometric forms, anti-illusionistic use of space and his lack of narrative detail and experimentation with the woman's pose could indeed lead us to conclude that the subject itself has almost disappeared. Is it truthful? Is it abstract? What is of interest to Degas here? Near the end of his career, Degas told his friend Jeannot: 'Women can never forgive me; they hate me, they feel that I am disarming them. I show them without their coquetry.'

#### **CAPTION SIX**

Like so many of the works by Degas in The Burrell Collection this pastel was left in Degas's studio at his death. Is this a work that Degas would consider finished or is it a work still in progress? It is difficult to know. The eminent Degas authority Jean Sutherland Boggs has written: 'the ambiguous surfaces of these late pastels often render it difficult to assess the degree of finish, partly because Degas never exhibited his late work, and because he continued to experiment with pastel right up to the end of his career.' She continues: 'the simplified, raw appearance of The Tub may indeed suggest that it is an abandoned work-in-progress, but the assured handling of the orange sectors that surround the finely modelled nude point equally to the possibility that Degas may not have intended to return to it.'<sup>1</sup>