

## DEGAS - WOMAN AT HER TOILETTE 35-229



### **CAPTION ONE**

Woman at her Toilette belongs to a group of closely-related pictures produced by Degas towards the end of his career. In the other works more details of the woman's surroundings are given. One of these pictures is thought to have inspired a quote in George Moore's novel *Mike Fletcher* (1889): 'I know of a no more degrading spectacle than that of a woman washing herself over a basin; Degas painted it once.'

This unfinished pastel gives us a fascinating insight into how Degas worked. First he has used charcoal to sketch in the broad outlines of the woman's form and that of the ceramic or metal bowl she bathes over. Next he has blocked in broad areas of pastel - striking and abstract bands of blue, yellow, brown and pink.

Unusually, he has chosen an exceptionally coarse canvas to work on rather than paper.

### **CAPTION TWO - detail on head/blocks of colour**

Degas is more concerned to describe the woman's hair and her washing action than to tell us much about the woman herself. We hardly see her face - only the line of her cheek and nose. She is totally absorbed in her task and unaware of anyone present or anyone watching. This is an intimate scene, a nude woman bathing in the privacy of her own room. The subject seems innocent, but is it? As Richard Kendall has pointed out, this picture, in its relationship to Degas's other work and to the social conventions of his day, raises a number of questions.

The process of washing involves nudity, intimacy and in many of the representations of the subject in past art, sexuality. Is this woman alone and self-absorbed or does the picture imply a spectator? If another person is present, is that person a husband, a lover or an intruder? Is the woman engaged in a plausible activity or is her body displayed for our benefit? Is this an anonymous Parisian housewife, a posed artist's model or a prostitute?

### **CAPTION THREE - detail on breast/sponge**

With just a few, quick strokes of charcoal, Degas manages to suggest the fullness of the woman's breasts and the soft folds of skin on her side, as she bends forward over the basin. Woman at her Toilette and the works related to it are unusual in Degas's representations of the nude.

In The Burrell Collection's two other pastels of women bathing, Degas often conceals the female breast, but

here the breasts, supported and emphasised by the washing action, are the focal point of the composition. Although Degas avoids many of the conventions of the soft-pornographer -such as the establishment of eye-contact - he does use the licence of art to depict the nude frankly.

**CAPTION FOUR - detail on curve of hair/signature**

While we may wonder how far Degas was interested in the erotic connotations of his subject, we can be sure that he was fascinated by the abstract play of shapes and forms that it allowed him. Here the bold, exaggerated, deliberate sweep of the woman's hair is echoed by the curve of the bowl, of her right forearm, her breasts, her cheek and the line of hair on her forehead.

Like many of the works by Degas in The Burrell Collection, *Woman at her Toilette* was in the artist's studio at his death. Five sales of these works were held in 1918 and 1919. *The Jewels* was included in the second sale, organised by the Galerie Georges Petit, from December 11-13, 1918. Sir William Burrell purchased it from the dealers Adams Brothers in 1937 for £350.