

## DEGAS - WOMAN IN TUB 35-235



### CAPTION ONE

This pastel is one of a series in which Degas shows a woman bathing in a shallow metal tub. With her back to us, she seems oblivious of our presence. We see her from on high and close up and because of this we are given little information about the room she is in. We are encroaching on a time of quiet, intimacy and solitude - are we in the room with her or are we peeking at her through a key-hole?

This pastel was included in the 8th and last Impressionist exhibition held in Paris in 1886. The catalogue indicates that Degas exhibited ten pastels -although he might only have shown seven - of women bathing, washing, drying themselves, doing their hair or having their hair done. Degas did not give any of these works titles but, from the reviews of the exhibition, art historians have been able to work out which works were included in the show. Our work was number 25 in the catalogue.

### CAPTION TWO

Degas's contemporaries were well aware that he tackled traditional subjects in a new way. A woman bathing had been a much-loved subject in the history of Western European art - but usually the woman was represented as Venus, Diana or as a classical nymph. Degas's bathers, like those of Courbet, Manet and Renoir, were undoubtedly modern women.

These women were of a particular class - they were working class. Degas's high viewpoint, while giving his work a sense of immediacy and originality, also helped distance the artist from his subject. Like a 'fly on the wall' he observes this woman, but seems to have no contact with her. His high viewpoint emphasises the fact that she is literally, and metaphorically, beneath him.

### CAPTION THREE - detail of right elbow and leg

As in many of Degas's pastels we can see numerous pentimenti - literally, changes of mind. Degas uses dark, contouring lines to describe the woman's form but few of these lines are fixed. In this work we can make out different positions for all her limbs. An early line, cutting across from her right shoulder to her right elbow reveals that her right arm was originally lower down. Degas has deliberately altered the contour of this arm to coincide with, and to continue, the curve of the tub.

Degas could have made an attempt to hide these pentimenti but more often than not he does not. He allows them to become part of the surface pattern of the pastel, themselves suggestive of movement and change. Similarly he does not always alter the rest of the woman's form to take account of changes he has made. An example of this is clearly seen here in the woman's right leg. Her thigh, which is heavy and wide, is suddenly and unrealistically reduced to a much thinner form at her knee.

#### **CAPTION FOUR**

How were this group of nudes received by the critics of the time? Interestingly, most of the critics avoided discussion of meaning. Instead they praised the virtuosity of Degas's draughtsmanship and admired his having experimented with the pose and the positioning of the women's bodies. As the critic Mirbeau wrote: 'the terrifying sense of women under torture, of anatomies twisted and deformed by the violent contortions to which they are submitted.'

Some critics found the pastels rather dark and monotone, one complained about the 'heavy, smoky tonality' which can certainly be seen here. Only a few critics voiced alarm at Degas's choice of subject, one finding them 'in perfect bad taste and totally lacking artistic qualities,<sup>1</sup> another complaining of 'the subject's rather excessive intimacy.<sup>1</sup>

#### **CAPTION FIVE**

There has been much discussion about the subject of these nudes and of Degas's intentions in drawing them. Was Degas being voyeuristic? Is he a misogynist, ridiculing and debasing the women he depicts? Some of Degas's contemporaries evidently thought so. The critic Mirbeau detected in the pastels 'a ferocity which clearly states a contempt for women and a horror of love.'

The writer and critic Huysmans pointed out that the action of bathing in itself indicated the presence of filth and wrote that, in his opinion, Degas was giving these women only the despised status of an erotic toy. Yet, it is difficult to see these pastels inspiring passion or sensual desire as the nudes are often, as here, in modest poses, their backs turned from us. As Richard Thomson argues, their meaning is complex, Degas producing 'images of the intimate world of the toilette which mingle a bachelor's curiosity about women's privacy with an artist's obsession with forms in movement.'

#### **CAPTION SIX**

As we can see clearly here Degas first sketched in the broad outlines of his composition using charcoal before using pastel. He has then added colour using careful, thin strokes, allowing the paper support to show through -especially in the flesh of the nude herself. We know that Degas was working on this pastel in 1884 because he has both signed and dated it.

Notice too that he has added further layers of pastel over his signature. This suggests that he signed the work for exhibition and that when the work returned, after exhibition, to his studio, he did further work on it. This pastel was included in the first sale of works from Degas's studio in 1918 when it sold for 10,000 French francs. It was nearly twenty years later that Burrell bought it from a Parisian dealer for £186.1.11.