

Degas Family and the Transatlantic Slave Trade

The artist Edgar Degas, and his family, had deep links to the American French colonial southern states which economically benefited from the transatlantic slave trade during the nineteenth centuries.

The exhibition will contain a graphic text panel that introduces Degas's links for the transatlantic slave trade.

Glasgow Museums and Anti-Racism

Glasgow Museums is committed to being an anti-racist organisation thus it was crucial to be transparent about Degas's links to the transatlantic slave trade in the exhibition.

Glasgow Museums Anti-Racism statement can be found here:

<https://www.glasgowlife.org.uk/museums/the-collection/anti-racism>

A glossary of key terms related to slavery and empire and their legacies created by Glasgow Museums can be found here: <https://www.glasgowlife.org.uk/museums/glasgow-life-museums-blogs/legacies-of-slavery-and-empire/legacies-of-slavery-and-empire-glossary>

The following information gives additional context to Degas's family and their links to the slave trade and white supremacy in USA.

Degas Mother & Father

- Degas's mother was Marie-Celestine Musson, born in New Orleans in 1815.
- She married L.P. Auguste-Hyacinthe De Gas in 1832.
- Auguste's father, Rene-Hilaire Degas owned a bank in Naples. Auguste opened a branch of this bank in Paris, meeting Celestine there.

Maternal Grandfather: J.B. Germain Musson

- Born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti in 1787.
- Haiti was colonised by the French in the seventeenth century and was one of the most successful plantation colonies in the Americas, using enslaved African labour to produce commodities such as sugar and coffee. The colony was known as Saint-Dominque.
- From 1791-1804, there was a successful revolution led by the enslaved people of Saint-Dominque, which eventually won them independence from France and the establishment and renaming of the area as Haiti.
- Germain Musson fled Haiti at this time in 1804 and went to New Orleans in 1810. In New Orleans he met and married Marie Céleste Désirée Rillieux (Degas's maternal grandmother) from a prominent French-Creole family.
- Germain Musson established himself as a successful cotton merchant in New Orleans.

Degas's Siblings

- First born was Edgar Degas, b. 1834, Paris
- Achille, brother, b.1838, Paris
- Thérèse, sister, b.1840, Naples
- Marguerite, b.1842, Naples
- René, brother, b.1845, Paris

Degas's mother, Celestine died in 1847 – Degas was 13 years old.

Additional Resources:

<https://www.degaslegacy.com/index.html>

Degas's Grandparents, Degas Legacy Website,
<https://www.degaslegacy.com/2degasgrandparents.html>

Degas's Parents, Degas Legacy Website, <https://www.degaslegacy.com/3degasparents.html>

New Orleans Heritage

- Degas's mother, Celestine, and her brother Michel were born in New Orleans and descendent from French colonial settlers. Until 1803, Louisiana was a French colony until it was sold to the United States of America (known as 'The Louisiana Purchase').
- Degas often called himself a "*fil de Louisiane*," - a "son of Louisiana."
- Degas's maternal family would have referred to themselves as being 'French Creole'.
- The word 'creole' is complex in its meaning and can vary in context dependent on time, place, and community.
- In the nineteenth century, in New Orleans, it was used to individuals who were born and raised in the colonies. The word was not used distinctly as a racial signifier as people who were white European, African American, or mixed heritage could be referred to as 'creole'.
- Today, some one who identifies as 'creole' in New Orleans is likely to be a person of mixed racial ancestry, with local roots.

Additional Resources:

<https://www.lauraplantation.com/creole-history>

<https://www.neworleans.com/things-to-do/multicultural/cultures/creoles/>

Degas's Visit to New Orleans, 1872-1873

- In 1872-73, Edgar Degas stayed in New Orleans, Louisiana to visit his family living there, including his brothers René and Achille – it was his first and only visit to New Orleans.
- Degas resided at the home of his maternal uncle Michel Musson. Their home was on Esplanade Avenue, the house still stands today. Esplanade Avenue was known as

'millionaires' row' were wealthy French-colonial descendent residents of New Orleans lived.

- Degas's brother, Rene had gone to for his uncle, Michael Musson in his cotton firm, Musson, Prestidge & Co. in New Orleans. Rene also looked after his deceased mother's cotton plantation estate, near New Orleans.
- In 1866, Rene, with his brother Achille, established their own cotton and wine export business known as the " De Gas Brothers ".
- Degas's brother René had married Michel's daughter Estelle (his cousin).
- Both Degas's uncle and brothers worked in the cotton trade as cotton brokers - sellers of cotton crops and textiles for white cotton planters.

Additional Resources:

Degas's Aunt and Uncle, Degas Legacy Website

<https://www.degaslegacy.com/4degasauntanduncle.html>

Degas' Cousin and Brother, Degas Legacy Website,

<https://www.degaslegacy.com/5degascousinbrother.html>

Object Lesson: *Portrait of Estelle Musson Degas* by Edgar Degas, April 20, 2020, New Orleans Museum of Art, <https://noma.org/object-lesson-portrait-of-estelle-musson-degas-by-edgar-degas/>

Cotton Production in New Orleans

- In the nineteenth century, New Orleans was one of the largest slave markets in the Southern states and considered a centre for the selling of cotton, playing a dominating role in the Southern US economy.
- During the American Civil War, cotton, and the transatlantic slave trade of which support the production of this commodity, played a pivotal role in the Confederacy's or Southern states diplomatic strategy.
- The American Civil War (1861-1865) was fought between the Union (the North) and the Confederacy, 11 Southern States that has broken away from the rest of the USA to maintain a system of white supremacy and continue the slave trade.
- The war was fought over slavery – the Union wanted the criminalization of slavery, whereas the Confederacy wanted to expand. Cotton production at this time support 59% of the USA economy. The Southern states, where most cotton production was undertaken, were dependent on enslaved labour to produce cotton. Their military and government during the Civil War were funded from cotton production revenue.
- During the American Civil War, René Degas, Michael Musson, and Degas's father, Auguste, supported the Confederacy, investing in Confederate bonds, and both families owned enslaved people. Edgar Degas also invested in Confederate bonds.
- The Confederacy lost the civil war, surrendering in 1865. The war left the southern states economically devastated. Slavery was criminalised in the United States.
- Despite the period of Reconstruction of the Southern States after the American Civil War and the legal emancipation of enslaved people, the main work force for Southern cotton plantations – including that of New Orleans - was black farmers, subjected to continued persecution, and inhumane working conditions. Degas family

continued to use black farmers for their cotton business, are were complicit in upholding racial hierarchies and economic systems at this time.

Additional Resources:

'The Other "Undocumented" Workers': Illegal free Black labor in antebellum New Orleans', John Barnes, November 30, 2023, 64 Parishes, <https://64parishes.org/the-other-undocumented-workers>

A Cotton Office in New Orleans, Edgar Degas, 1873



NB: This painting will not be part of the 'Discovering Degas' exhibition.

- Degas often visited and spent time in his brothers' cotton brokerage offices - in November 1872, he wrote in a letter: *"Achille and René are partners; I am writing to you on their office notepaper. They are earning very nicely and are really in an exceptionally good position for their age. They are much liked and respected here and I am quite proud of them."*
- In letters to his friends back home in Paris, Degas noted how important cotton was to everyday life in New Orleans: *"One does nothing here, it lies in the climate, nothing but cotton, one lives for cotton and from cotton."* (5 Dec 1872, New Orleans, to Henri Rouart)
- Whilst in New Orleans, he painted his brothers, uncle Michel and their cotton broker associates in their main offices, engaging customers, quality checking cotton, and undertaking daily business activities - *A Cotton Office in New Orleans*, Edgar Degas, 1873, currently held in the Musée des beaux-arts de Pau, Pau, France.

- Michel Musson can be seen sitting at front of the painting, examining piece of raw cotton for quality.
- Rene, sit behind, reading the paper – The Daily Picayune, a New Orleans newspaper.
- Achille reclines by the office window, watching William Bell, another cotton broker, and associate of Michel Musson, holding out cotton to a customer – the table before him piled with sea of white fluffy cotton.
- Bookkeepers can be seen to the right of the painting, and in the background, shelves hold cotton bales wrapped in brown paper.
- The painting gives no acknowledgement to the black farmers who would have grown and produced the cotton for brokers like the Degas brother and Musson.
- In his letters, Degas acknowledges the use of black work force for cotton production, and the presence of black people as servants to white families in New Orleans. His language in these letters is racist and upholds the continues racial hierarches present in New Orleans at this time:

Letter, 27 Nov 1872, To Lorenc Frölich:

“the contrast between the lively hum and bustle of the offices with this immense black animal force”

5 Dec 1872, New Orleans, to Henri Rouart

“New things capture you fancy and bore you by turns. The beautiful, refined Indian women behind their half-opened green shutters, and the old women with their big bandanna kerchiefs going to the market... The orange gardens and the painted houses attract too and the children all dressed in white and all white against black arms, they too attract...”

The White League

- In 1874, René Degas and Michel Musson joined The White League, a white supremacist organisation that through military violence, brutality, and murder, intimidated African American freedmen into not voting.
- The White League organised themselves openly in communities, engaging with the press and leading members were known.
- The White League took part on several massacres of black freedmen in Southern communities, and were responsible for the murder of Julie Hayden, a 17-year-old African American schoolteacher.
- Degas family were leading members of The Battle of Liberty Place, New Orleans, in 1874, an insurrection against the ruling elected government in which 5000 White League members overwhelmed 3500 troops of the Metropolitan Police and state militia. The insurrection was based on white supremacist ideas; to stop the local government from giving additional freedoms and civil rights to black people.