

Degas and Antisemitism

NB: This document contains quotes used by historical individuals that are antisemitic in content which may be upsetting or disturbing.

Diego Martelli (Diego Martelli), 1879

- Degas became acquainted with the Italian art critic Diego Martelli (1839–96) in 1878, whilst the writer was on a 13-month stay in Paris.
- Martelli was an advocate of the Impressionists, as well as of the Italian Macchiaioli – a group of artists who were interested in the effects of light and colour in nature.
- Letters from Martelli reveal the pair's friendship, describing Degas in a curious turn of phrase as someone 'with whom I am in danger of becoming a friend'. In 1878 he wrote to their mutual friend, artist Telemaco Signorini (1835–1901), 'He [Degas] is a very pleasant man, with whom I pass extremely happy hours'.
- Degas produced two oil paintings of him and six related studies. These drawings, executed in charcoal, chalk or graphite, show Degas's careful study before committing his designs to canvas.
- The second portrait, now in the National Museum of Fine Arts in Buenos Aires, was made at a similar time as the Edinburgh version. More elongated in format, the writer is cropped at the knees, and less of the apartment is visible. The format of the Edinburgh painting is comparable to Degas's portrait of Edmond Duranty. This similarity, along with the generally comparable style of the portraits, makes it likely that they were conceived of as a pair. Both pictures illustrate the central tenets of Duranty's belief that portraiture, as espoused in his seminal essay *La Nouvelle Peinture*, should show a sitter surrounded by objects analogous to their everyday living.
- Describe objects: Martelli sits in his rented apartment on a folding chair. A table covered by a patterned cloth of Prussian blue, matching a plush sofa, supports an array of items strewn haphazardly: a pipe, an inkwell and papers of different shapes and sizes. Two red objects – perhaps a handkerchief and a fez hat – echo the scarlet lining of two slippers in the foreground. The writer faces away from the busy clutter of objects, his arms and legs folded, and a distant expression occupying his face. The picture on the back wall, previously proposed as an illustration of colour theory, shows a map of the newly rebuilt Paris.
- Martelli wanted this painting for himself, and asked a mutual friend to try and obtain it from Degas. The artist refused, because **Duranty** had criticised the way that Degas had depicted Martelli's foreshortened legs. This perceived fault could also be the reason that the painting was not exhibited during Degas's lifetime.

Portrait of Edmond Duranty, 1879

Edgar Degas

- Edmond Duranty (1833–80) was an art critic and novelist, whose important essay *La Nouvelle Peinture (The New Painting)* was published on occasion of the second Impressionist exhibition, 1876. In his 38-page pamphlet, Duranty set out what he regarded to be the most important aspects of this new movement, including the revolutionary depiction of light and a focus on modern, everyday life.

- Duranty strongly advocated draughtsmanship and realism, two concepts closely aligned with Degas. Furthermore, although he didn't mention the artist by name, the painting themes that Duranty referenced – such as opera, cotton office and laundry – were specific to Degas. This led some to think that Degas had penned the essay himself, or else hired Duranty to review the exhibition.
- Degas's portrayal of the writer perfectly illustrates Duranty's advice regarding portraiture, as described in *La Nouvelle Peinture*:

What we need are the special characteristics of the modern individual – in his clothing, in social situations, at home, or on the street [...] It is the study of the relationship of a man to his home, or the particular influence of his profession on him, as reflected in the gestures he makes: the observation of all aspects of the environment in which he evolves and develops.

- Answering this: Duranty is pictured surrounded by aspects of his profession, with books and papers all around him. A bottle of ink and magnifying glasses further indicate his role as a writer. His gaze is distant, as if lost in thought. The two fingers of his left hand, highlighted in vivid lilac and pressed against his face, form a gesture that is literally central to the composition. This draws our attention to -his head, the mind of key importance to his role as a thinker.
- In the fourth Impressionist exhibition, 1879. Degas showed it again a year later in the fifth Impressionist exhibition, just days after Duranty's untimely death. It received critical acclaim, particularly from those who knew the writer. The critic Huysmans exclaimed:

His slender nervous fingers, his bright mocking eye, his acute searching expression, his wry English humourist's air, his dry joking little laugh – all of it [was] recalled to me by the painting.

Degas and Duranty got to know each other in the 1870s at the Café Guerbois, and later at the Café de la Nouvelle Athènes, two of Paris's best-known contemporary hotspots for intellectual discussions and debates. The two men's friendship was such that, together with the writer **Émile Zola**, Degas acted as co-executor of the writer's estate. Furthermore, the artist arranged for a sale of artworks in support of Duranty's widow, including three of his own pictures.

But while they may have had their friendship with Duranty in common, Degas and Zola held some quite different opinions that were exposed in the 1890s.

The Dreyfus Affair

- The Dreyfus Affair was a political scandal that shook France and divided popular opinion at the time.
- In 1894, the Jewish Captain Alfred Dreyfus was accused by the French military of treason, when ripped up classified documents were discovered in waste bins of the Germany Embassy in Paris. These were said to have been in Dreyfus' handwriting.

This, along with other shaky evidence, implicated him in having leaked French military secrets to Germany.

- Someone was leaking secrets, but not him. He was chosen as a scapegoat because he was wealthy, and Jewish, seen as un-French. Played on political climate where nationalism was in tatters since French loss to Germany in 1870.
- Dreyfus was publicly stripped of his honours, with the crowd reportedly shouting, "death to Judas, death to the Jews." He was subjected to the horrendous conditions of Devil's Island penal colony in French Guiana for five years. Devil's island had a reputation for its harsh conditions and ran for 100 years. There was much disease, particularly malaria, with a 75% death rate at one point. Dreyfus spent his sentence in solitary confinement.
- 1896 and fresh evidence from intelligence officer Georges Picquard implicated another French Military officer, Major F.W Esterhazy as the traitor. Picquard was silenced and sent to N Africa, later imprisoned. Nevertheless, these rumblings caused questions. Esterhazy was court-martialled in 1898 but acquitted.
- 1898, a document implicated Dreyfus was also found to be a forgery after another French Major, H.J Henry, admitted that he was asked to fabricate it by the French army.
- The story was dividing French society by this point, with Emile Zola's sensational *J'Accuse!* Published on the front of *L'Aurore*, January 13 1898, addressing French president Félix Faure and accusing French army of antisemitism and a major cover up. Zola was accused of libel and fled to England to escape prison, returning to France when it was safe to do so.
- Dreyfus' case was reopened in 1898, he was court martialled again, found guilty. But he was pardoned by the president a few days later, and finally exonerated in 1906, and reinstated in the army.
- This political event sparked anti-Jewish sentiment across France, and there were riots in more than twenty cities across the country. The scandal became fuel for existing political factions, and French society divided itself into *Dreyfusards*- those who supported Dreyfus and viewed the affair as a battle of individual freedom versus national control, and who sought to republicanise the army. This ran counter to the *anti-Dreyfusards*, those who saw in Dreyfus and his supporters an attempt to weaken France and discredit its army. Degas mixed in circles with people of both camps.
- One of the most prominent was Emile Zola, Degas's fellow artists and friends Monet, Pissarro, Cassatt, and Signac, were also pro-Dreyfus.
- Degas positioned himself strongly against Dreyfus. He was very nationalistic, and even attended a meeting of Action Francaise, a pro monarchist party- he sat on the sidelines in case he needed the toilet (regularly complained of bladder problems)

- His housekeeper read an antisemitic newspaper 'La Libre Parole' written by Edouard Drumond to him each day. This was a virulently anti-Jewish paper which unashamedly stoked the fire of hatred against Jewish people and contained the strapline "France for the French." Drumond was behind the nationalistic 1886 publication "la France Juive", and in 1899 founded the Ligue Nationale antisémitique de France
- Degas shocked with antisemitic remarks, including of Pauline, whose account informed the 2 issues of Mercure de France, 1919. Degas aged 65-75
- Another anecdote made when a model in Degas' studio expressed doubt that Dreyfus was guilty, Degas screamed at her "you are Jewish ... you are Jewish ..." and ordered her to put on her clothes and leave.
- His opinions resulted in the end of lifelong friendships. The Rouarts, lifelong friends to Degas, were also stridently antisemitic. Degas was friends with the Jewish but catholic converts, Halévys, including the writer Ludovic who wrote La Famille Cardinale, which Degas admired and almost illustrated. He attended dinners with the families for many years and was fond of them. Rouarts believed that Degas would never break away from the Halevys, and a rumour spread that Degas was inconsistent with his views.
- Degas reportedly dropped antisemitic remarks when at dinner with the Halevys, and then stared at the ceiling, and generally behaved in a disgraceful manner. Degas eventually did break with the family after the Dreyfus affair, and never saw Ludovic him again, but visited him after 1908 death. He did write to his son Daniel, however.
- Pissarro, who was fairly radical and aligned himself as a Dreyfusard, supporting Zola, referred to Degas as "the ferocious anti-Semite.", and believed that Degas shunned him since the Dreyfus affair. When Degas was reminded that he had once thought highly of his old friend's work he replied, "Yes, but that was before the Dreyfus affair."
- Degas was not alone in his antisemitism, and other artists who held similar views include Renoir- who said of Pissarro, "to exhibit with the Jew Pissarro means revolution.", and said of Jews, "they shouldn't be allowed to become so important in France."