

Edgar Degas

Barbara

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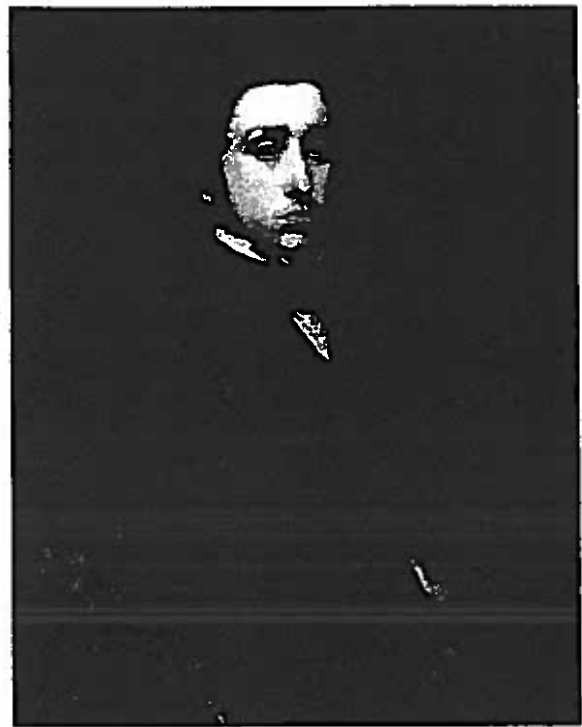
Edgar Degas^[p] (19 July 1834 – 27 September 1917), born **Hilaire-Germain-Edgar De Gas** (French pronunciation: [ilɛʁ ʒɛʁmɛnɛdɡaʁ dəˈɡa]), was a French artist famous for his work in painting, sculpture, printmaking and drawing. He is regarded as one of the founders of Impressionism although he rejected the term, and preferred to be called a realist.^[1] A superb draughtsman, he is especially identified with the subject of the dance, and over half his works depict dancers. These display his mastery in the depiction of movement, as do his racecourse subjects and female nudes. His portraits are notable for their psychological complexity and depiction of human isolation.^[2]

Early in his career, his ambition was to be a history painter, a calling for which he was well prepared by his rigorous academic training and close study of classic art. In his early thirties, he changed course, and by bringing the traditional methods of a history painter to bear on contemporary subject matter, he became a classical painter of modern life.^[3]

Early life

Degas was born in Paris, France, the eldest of five children of Célestine

Edgar Degas



Self-portrait (*Degas au porte-fusain*), 1855

Birth name	Hilaire-Germain-Edgar De Gas
Born	19 July 1834 Paris, France
Died	27 September 1917 (aged 83) Paris, France
Nationality	French
Field	Painting, Sculpture, Drawing
Movement	Impressionism
Works	<i>The Bellelli Family</i> (1858-1867) <i>Woman with Chrysanthemums</i> (1865) <i>Chanteuse de Café</i> (c.1878) <i>At the Milliner's</i> (1882)

Musson De Gas and Augustin De Gas, a banker. The family was moderately wealthy. His mother died when Degas was thirteen, after which his father and grandfather were the main influences on his early life. At age eleven, Degas (in adulthood he abandoned the more pretentious spelling of the family name)^[4] began his schooling with enrollment in the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, graduating in 1853 with a *baccalauréat* in literature.

Influenced Mary Cassatt, Jean-Louis Forain, Walter Sickert, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

Degas began to paint early in his life. By eighteen, he had turned a room in his home into an artist's studio, and in 1853 he registered as a copyist in the Louvre. His father, however, expected him to go to law school. Degas duly registered at the Faculty of Law of the University of Paris in November 1853, but made little effort at his studies there. In 1855, Degas met Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, whom he revered, and whose advice he never forgot: "Draw lines, young man, and still more lines, both from life and from memory, and you will become a good artist."^[5] In April of that same year, Degas received admission to the École des Beaux-Arts, where he studied drawing with Louis Lamothe, under whose guidance he flourished, following the style of Ingres.^[6] In July 1856, Degas traveled to Italy, where he would remain for the next three years. In 1858, while staying with his aunt's family in Naples, he made the first studies for his early masterpiece, *The Bellelli Family*. He also drew and painted copies after Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, and other artists of the Renaissance, often selecting from an altarpiece an individual head which he treated as a portrait.^[7] By 1860 Degas had made more than seven hundred^[citation needed] copies of works including Italian Renaissance and French Classical art.

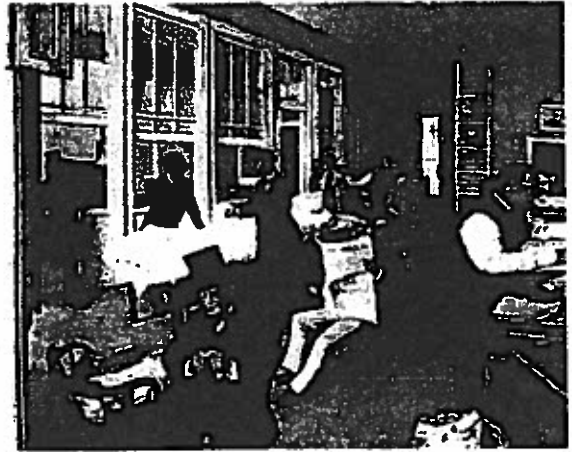
Artistic career

Although he exhibited annually in the Salon during the next five years, he submitted no more history paintings, and his *Steeplechase—The Fallen Jockey* (Salon of 1866) signaled his growing commitment to contemporary subject matter. The change in his art was influenced primarily by the example of Édouard Manet, whom Degas had met in 1864 (while both were copying the same Velázquez portrait in the Louvre, according to a story

At the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, Degas enlisted in the National Guard, where his defense of Paris left him little time for painting. During rifle training his eyesight was found to be defective, and for the rest of his life his eye problems were a constant worry to him.^[11]

not many shadows

After the war, in 1872, Degas began an extended stay in New Orleans, Louisiana, where his brother René and a number of other relatives lived. Staying in a house on Esplanade Avenue, Degas produced a number of works, many depicting family members. One of Degas' New Orleans works, depicting a scene at The Cotton Exchange at New Orleans, garnered favorable attention back in France, and was his only work purchased by a museum (that of Pau) during his lifetime.



The New Orleans Cotton Exchange, 1873

Degas returned to Paris in 1873. The following year his father died, and in the subsequent settling of the estate it was discovered that Degas' brother René had amassed enormous business debts. To preserve the family name, Degas was forced to sell his house and a collection of art he had inherited. Dependent for the first time in his life on sales of his artwork for income, he produced much of his greatest work during the decade beginning in 1874.^[12] By now thoroughly disenchanted with the Salon, Degas joined forces with a group of young artists who were intent upon organizing an independent exhibiting society. The first of their exhibitions, which were quickly dubbed Impressionist Exhibitions, was in 1874. The Impressionists subsequently held seven additional shows, the last in 1886. Degas took a leading role in organizing the exhibitions, and showed his work in all but one of them, despite his persistent conflicts with others in the group. He had little in common with Monet and the other landscape painters, whom he mocked for painting outdoors. Conservative in his social attitudes, he abhorred the scandal created by the exhibitions, as well as the publicity and advertising that his colleagues sought.^[1] He bitterly rejected the label Impressionist that the press had created and popularized, and his insistence on including non-Impressionist artists such as Jean-Louis Forain and Jean-François Raffaëlli in their exhibitions created rancor within the group, contributing to their eventual disbanding in 1886.^[13]

As his financial situation improved through sales of his own work, he was able to indulge his passion for collecting works by artists he admired: old masters such as El Greco and such

contemporaries as Manet, Pissarro, Cézanne, Gauguin, and Van Gogh. Three artists he idolized, Ingres, Delacroix, and Daumier, were especially well represented in his collection.^[14]

In the late 1880s, Degas also developed a passion for photography.^[15] He photographed many of his friends, often by lamplight, as in his double portrait of Renoir and Mallarmé. Other photographs, depicting dancers and nudes, were used for reference in some of Degas' drawings and paintings.^[16]

As the years passed, Degas became isolated, due in part to his belief that a painter could have no personal life.^[17] The Dreyfus Affair controversy brought his anti-Semitic leanings to the fore and he broke with all his Jewish friends.^[18] His argumentative nature was deplored by Renoir, who said of him: "What a creature he was, that Degas! All his friends had to leave him; I was one of the last to go, but even I couldn't stay till the end."^[19]

Although he is known to have been working in pastel as late as the end of 1907, and is believed to have continued making sculpture as late as 1910, he apparently ceased working in 1912, when the impending demolition of his longtime residence on the rue Victor Massé forced a wrenching move to quarters on the boulevard de Clichy.^[20] He never married and spent the last years of his life, nearly blind, restlessly wandering the streets of Paris^[21] before dying in 1917.

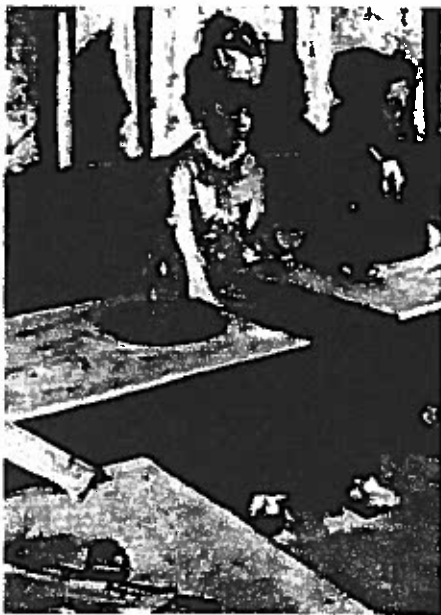
Artistic style

Degas is often identified as an Impressionist, an understandable but insufficient description. Impressionism originated in the 1860s and 1870s and grew, in part, from the realism of such painters as Courbet and Corot. The Impressionists painted the realities of the world around them using bright, "dazzling" colors, concentrating primarily on the effects of light, and hoping to infuse their scenes with immediacy.



The Dance Class (La Classe de Danse), 1873–1876, oil on canvas, by Edgar Degas

Technically, Degas differs from the Impressionists in that he "never adopted the Impressionist color fleck",^[22] and he continually belittled their practice of painting *en plein air*.^[23] "He was often as anti-impressionist as the critics who reviewed the shows", according to art historian Carol Armstrong; as Degas himself explained, "no art was ever less spontaneous than mine. What I do is the result of reflection and of the study of the great masters; of inspiration, spontaneity, temperament, I know nothing."^[24] Nonetheless, he is described more accurately as an Impressionist than as a member of any other movement. His scenes of Parisian life, his off-center compositions, his experiments with color and form, and his friendship with several key Impressionist artists—most notably Mary Cassatt and Édouard Manet—all relate him intimately to the Impressionist movement.^[25]



L'Absinthe, 1876, oil on canvas,
by Edgar Degas

By the late 1860s, Degas had shifted from his initial forays into history painting to an original observation of contemporary life. Racecourse scenes provided an opportunity to depict horses and their riders in a modern context. He began to paint women at work, milliners and laundresses. *Mlle. Fiocre in the Ballet La Source*, exhibited in the Salon of 1868, was his first major work to introduce a subject with which he would become especially identified, dancers.^[27]

In many subsequent paintings dancers were shown backstage or in rehearsal, emphasizing their status as professionals doing a job. From 1870 Degas increasingly painted ballet subjects, partly because they sold well and provided him with needed income after his brother's debts had left the family bankrupt.^[28] Degas began to paint café life as well. He urged other artists to paint "real life" instead of traditional mythological or historical

In his paintings of dancers and laundresses, he reveals their occupations not only by their dress and activities but also by their body type. His ballerinas exhibit an athletic physicality, while his laundresses are heavy and solid.^[34]

By the later 1870s Degas had mastered not only the traditional medium of oil on canvas, but pastel as well. The dry medium, which he applied in complex layers and textures, enabled him more easily to reconcile his facility for line with a growing interest in expressive color.

These changes in media engendered the paintings that Degas would produce in later life. Degas began to draw and paint women drying themselves with towels, combing their hair, and bathing (see: *After the Bath*). The strokes that model the form are scribbled more freely than before; backgrounds are simplified.



La Toilette (Woman Combing Her Hair), c. 1884–1886, pastel on paper, by Edgar Degas, Pushkin Museum, Moscow

The meticulous naturalism of his youth gave way to an increasing abstraction of form. Except for his characteristically brilliant draftsmanship and obsession with the figure, the pictures created in this late period of his life bear little superficial resemblance to his early paintings. Ironically, it is these paintings, created late in his life, and after the heyday of the Impressionist movement, that most obviously use the coloristic techniques of Impressionism.^[36]

For all the stylistic evolution, certain features of Degas's work remained the same throughout his life. He always painted indoors, preferring to work in his studio, either from memory or using models.^[37] The figure remained his primary subject; his few landscapes were produced from memory or imagination. It was not unusual for him to repeat a subject many times, varying the composition or treatment. He was a deliberative artist whose works, as Andrew Forge has written, "were prepared, calculated, practiced, developed in stages. They were made up of parts. The adjustment of each part to the whole, their linear arrangement, was the occasion for infinite reflection and experiment."^[38] Degas himself explained, "In art, nothing should look like chance, not even movement".^[28]

Personality and politics

Degas, who believed that "the artist must live alone, and his private life must remain unknown",^[39] lived an outwardly uneventful life. In company he was known for his wit, which could often be cruel. He was characterized as an "old curmudgeon" by the novelist George Moore,^[39] and he deliberately cultivated his reputation as a misanthropic bachelor.^[19] Profoundly conservative in his political opinions, he opposed all social reforms and found little to admire in such technological advances as the telephone.^[39] He fired a model upon learning she was Protestant.^[39] Although Degas painted a number of Jewish subjects from 1865 to 1870, his anti-Semitism became apparent by the mid 1870s.

The Dreyfus Affair, which divided Paris from the 1890s to the early 1900s, further intensified his anti-Semitism. By the mid 1890s, he had broken off relations with all of his Jewish friends,^[18] publicly disavowed his previous friendships with Jewish artists, and refused to use models who he believed might be Jewish. He remained an outspoken anti-Semite and member of the anti-Semitic "Anti-Dreyfusards" until his death.^[41]

Reputation

During his life, public reception of Degas' work ranged from admiration to contempt. As a promising artist in the conventional mode, Degas had a number of paintings accepted in the Salon between 1865–1870. These works received praise from Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and the critic, Castagnary.^[42] He soon joined forces with the Impressionists, however, and rejected the rigid rules, judgements, and elitism of the Salon—just as the Salon and general public initially rejected the experimentalism of the Impressionists.

Degas's work was controversial, but was generally admired for its draftsmanship. His *La Petite Danseuse de Quatorze Ans*, or *Little Dancer of Fourteen Years*, which he displayed at the sixth Impressionist exhibition in 1881, was probably his most controversial piece; some critics decried what they thought its "appalling ugliness" while others saw in it a "blossoming."^[43] The suite of nudes Degas exhibited in the eighth Impressionist Exhibition in 1886 produced "the most concentrated body of critical writing on the artist during his lifetime. ... The overall reaction was positive and laudatory."^[44]

Recognized as an important artist by the end of his life, Degas is now considered "one of the founders of Impressionism."^[45] Though his work crossed many stylistic boundaries, his involvement with the other major figures of Impressionism and their exhibitions, his dynamic paintings and sketches of everyday life and activities, and his bold color experiments, served to finally tie him to the Impressionist movement as one of its greatest early artists.



Little Dancer of Fourteen Years,
sculpture by Edgar Degas

Girl at Ironing Board (1869). Great solidity of form, contrast of color, and accurate observation are combined to make an almost Japanese composition of great realism. The foreshortened neck and the squared off line of the shoulders, hunched from the effort of pressing down upon the iron, lead the eye directly to the face that undoubtedly attracted the realist in Degas. Heavy lidded, work worn, she appears here as Degas painted her, with no exaggeration or feeling of distaste, but simply as he saw her.



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Giovanna Bellelli is a sketch for the girl's head in Degas' large painting of the Bellelli family, his Italian relatives. The Bellelli family



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