

## **Modernism and the Visual Arts: Edgar Degas**

Numerous artists convey, capture and portray a sense of pleasure through their work and aim to represent things that are enjoyable or of importance to them. A number of particular artworks by Edgar Degas will be discussed and examined throughout this essay. Kleiner (2005, p. 828) aptly states that Edgar Degas was famous for depicting 'formal leisure activities', such as 'classical ballet' which was one of his favourite subjects to paint or portray. Degas uses pictorial clues, random layouts, subtle colours and superb painterly techniques to capture a viewer's attention into a space in time that tells a pleasurable story through imagery.

Born in Paris in 1834, Degas became famous for his paintings that capture the human figure in lively motion. 'The art of Degas reflects a concern for the psychology of movement and expression and the harmony of line and continuity of contour' (Pioch 2002). Degas was inspired by the painter Jean Auguste Ingres, which gave him the ideas to focus on 'balance and clarity of outline' (Pioch 2002). Degas worked with many art mediums but preferred to use pastels for most of his work as it gave soft and subtle changes in drawing techniques, smooth transitions and brilliant colour. Pastels allowed Degas to create layering effects, rework areas and improve a drawing over time into a textured art piece with flowing marks, depicting motion and the pleasure he had while watching the performing ballet dancers. The Utah Education Network (UEN n.d.) states that Degas is famous for '...his ability to paint the graceful beauty of ballet dancers.'

Degas became interested in contemporary concepts or themes in the late 1860s where he painted theatrical scenes and portraits with '...strong emphasis on the social and intellectual implications of props and setting' (Pioch 2002). Female ballet dancers became a preferred theme for Degas in the early 1870s. Sketches of live models were completed along with many large paintings which depicted room settings, rehearsals, dance performances, relaxed positions of the human body, together with many other intricate ballet gestures and poses from different angles. Unusual perspectives and complex formal structures are evident in his art. For example, figure 2 shows an aerial perspective of a ballet performance, it suggests motion and a pleasant scene that is watched by an audience. I believe it also places emphasis on mood and form with strong values of shadow, colour, texture and movement.

With many of Degas' paintings and drawings, it seems that he was passionately fascinated by the human body, particularly the female body; how it moves, the poses or gestures it can attain, how wonderfully it was created and the pleasure it could bring. Degas' art pieces of women bathing are anonymous figures showing abstracted features, forms and expressions; drawing attention to the curves, slopes and shape of the female body (The Metropolitan Museum of Art 2000–09). Degas often worked from memory and rough sketches from models who posed in his studio (The MMA 2000–09). The Metropolitan Museum of Art (2000–09) also points out that in the 1850s...

...ballet was dominated by female dancers, after men had historically been the principal performers. Attending the ballet, specifically as a subscriber, was in fashion during Degas's time. The subscribers, typically middle-aged men, were permitted behind the scenes to watch the dancers practice. These encounters often resulted in the older men seeking sexual favours from the young dancers. This behaviour is downplayed in Degas's works; however, the subscribers are often visible in the rehearsal scenes.

Figure 13, *The Dance Class*, 1874, is one of Degas' works which is thought to be a tribute to the famous ballet master Jules Perrot, rather than a depiction of Perrot's class. The painted scene has many random poses, postures and arrangements. The whole composition is centrally focused on the dancer and the other ballerina's milling around, relaxed, waiting, getting comfortable in costumes or perhaps flirting with any male subscribers who often watched them practise (The MMA 2000–09). This painting, suggests a sense of relaxed pleasure, no pressure and no formal layout, it may have been more interesting or pleasurable to watch the rehearsals than the real performance.

The MMA (2000-09) also points out that this painting reveals several other women who occupy the background space, these women are presented as the mothers of the dancers, either to protect the young dancers or introduce them to the male observers. There are many details in this painting which tell the story, finding clues and discovering intricate details all help in explaining the artwork and what Degas was experiencing or feeling at this point in time.

Figure 1, *The Blue Dancers* and figure 2, *The Star*, are good examples of how Degas portrayed stunning poses in ballet; depicting a sense of pleasure and beauty in something he enjoyed watching. It is, without a doubt, made known that drawing and

ballet was Degas' most desired subjects because his work shows enjoyable and rewarding art pieces for many viewers. According to Patricia Dake, art critics have doubted whether Degas should have been categorised as an Impressionist or not. Dake goes on to say that most of the Impressionist artists seemed dependant on outdoor scenes and natural light to inspire the conception of their artworks. In contrast to this, it is evident that Degas disliked painting direct from nature or outdoors, therefore, this explains why Degas created indoor scene paintings (Dake 2000, Suite101).

Degas' artwork appears to be much like a photograph, where a single moment in life is caught and displayed realistically. Degas' art is portrayed like a snapshot where objects or humans are seized in motion at a particular time, randomly positioned and moving off the canvas, figure 7 is an excellent example. This style forces viewers to imagine or conjure up the rest of the image themselves. His artworks are like a storyboard where images are a continuous stream of information, which facilitate in telling a narrative of experiences and history. Dake (2000) discusses the painterly and inspired technique of Degas' painting style. 'Apart from the brushstrokes, his paintings have a photographic quality to them as if he caught a brief moment in time. His figures often appear unposed and, quite truthfully, unguarded. Degas was a master at portraying casual poses, figures in mid-gesture, and vulnerability - all of which gave his paintings a realistic aspect transcendent of mere impressionism' (Dake 2000, suite101).

Later in Degas' life he actually did take up photography as an art form and enjoyed it thoroughly. Getty discusses perhaps the reason why Degas preferred photography to painting or drawing later on in his life. Getty points out that photography was like a new pair of eyes for Degas, as his eyes were failing with old age. 'Photographs were...a powerful tool of memory to recall his loved ones' (Getty n.d.).

Interestingly, Degas' work has always sparked and captured the minds or attention of viewers to further observe his gratifying art pieces. Mary Cassatt compared the work of Degas to the 17<sup>th</sup> century painter Vermeer, declaring that Degas' work was far greater. The MMA states that Cassatt was '...probably referring to the artist's complex articulation of forms and textures, his depiction of light and reflection, and the overall mastery of his handling of paint' (The MMA 2000-09).

I believe that the work of Degas will always be an inspiration to many other artists because of his topics, painting techniques, artistic depictions and the exceptional application of art mediums. It is evident that Degas' work is sometimes spontaneous, free flowing and realistic for the purpose of telling a moment in time. It is obvious that Degas enjoyed artistic practises immensely and desired to continue with a fervent mind in order to create such artworks. Many of his works are the same style; therefore many art viewers can recognise his work almost immediately, especially with some specific illustrations such as the ballet scenes.

In conclusion, the work of Degas is just one of many artists who describe pleasurable moments through artistic measures. I believe that some artists portray their life through their art; to some extent, the work of Degas is all together the life and times of the artist. Dake states that the work of Degas captures 'grace' and 'sincerity', his work '...doesn't glorify the subject but lets us see the frailty and humanity of the person behind the figure portrayed' (Dake 2000, suite101). I believe Degas' style of quick, painterly strokes and colour is done deliberately in order to capture the moment in time, or the moment of activity. Complex forms, textures, painterly strokes, perspective, detail, shadowing, use of paint, memories, moments, socialisation, expressions and compositions all play an important part in Degas' art pieces; every one of them is a master piece, an enjoyable experience that Degas shared for a future audience.

## Photos

Every one of the following images is a story; the memory and moments of Degas. These works of art portray pleasurable moments in his life, the form of the female body and exquisite ballet scenes.



Figure1: *The Blue Dancers*, 1899, pastels, 65x65cm, Pushkin Museum of Fine Art, Moscow (Fine Prints on Demand).

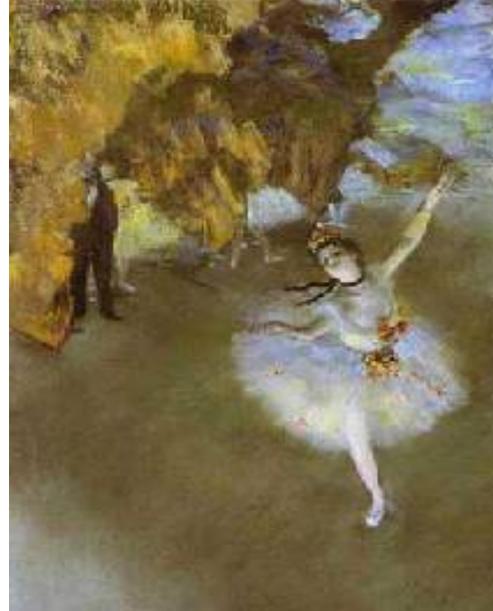


Figure 2: *The Star* (1877, pastels, 44x60cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris (Fine Prints on Demand).



Figure 3: *Ballet Scene*, C.1878-80, pastel on monotype, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France (Olga's Gallery 1999-2009).



Figure 4: *Dance Class*, 1874, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, (Olga's Gallery 1999-2009).



Figure 5: *Ballet Rehearsal on the Set*, 1874, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, (Olga's Gallery 1999-2009).



Figure 6: *After the bath, Woman drying her neck*, 1898, 65x62cm, pastel on mounted paper, Musée d'Orsay, Paris (Fine Prints on Demand).



Figure 7: *Four ballerinas on the stage*, pastels, Museu De Arte, Sao Paulo, Brazil (Fine Prints on Demand).



Figure 8: *Three Dancers in a diagonal line on the stage*, 1882, 50x63cm, pastels, private collection (Fine Art Prints on Demand).

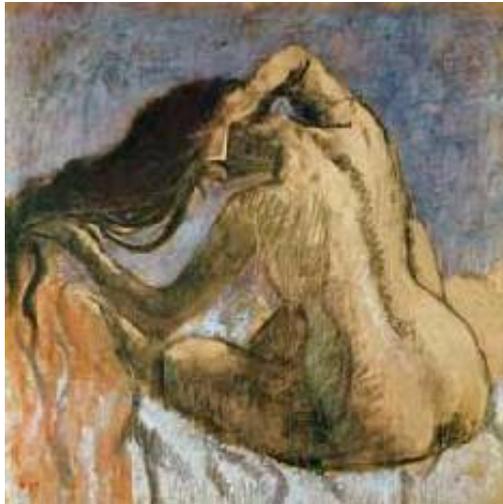


Figure 9: *Woman combing her hair*, 1905, 71x71cm, pastels, Kunsthaus Zurich, Switzerland (Fine art Prints on Demand).



Figure 10: *End of an Arabesque*, 1877, oil and pastels on canvas, 38x67cm, Musee D'Orsay, Paris (Fine Prints on Demand).



Figure 11: *Dancers in Repose*, 1884, pastels, 73x75cm, Musee D'Orsay, Paris (Fine Prints on Demand).



Figure 12: *Dancer*, pastels on paper, private collection (Fine Prints on Demand).



Figure 13: *The Dance Class*, 1874, oil on canvas 83x76cm, Bequest of Mrs. Harry Payne Bingham, 1986 (The MMA 2000-09).

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