

# DEGAS



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# DEGAS

By Robert Gordon and Andrew Forge

With translations from the French by Richard Howard

Abradale Press

Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers

*To Alexandre Rosenberg*

FRONTISPIECE:

*Portrait de l'Artiste* (Self-Portrait), c. 1854–56

PROJECT DIRECTOR: *Robert Morton*

EDITOR: *Beverly Fazio*

DESIGNER: *Judith Michael*

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A conservative is one who believes in the  
existence of the truth and holds that it was  
discovered a long time ago. A revolutionary is  
one who believes in the existence of the truth and  
holds that it was discovered yesterday.

W. H. AUDEN

All the pondered arts develop insoluble problems.  
Prolonged contemplation engenders an infinity of  
difficulties, and this production of imaginary  
obstacles, of incompatible desires, of scruples and  
pentimenti, is proportional, or much more than  
proportional, to the intelligence and knowledge  
one possesses. How to choose between Raphael  
and the Venetians, to sacrifice Mozart to Wagner,  
Shakespeare to Racine? Such problems have  
nothing tragic about them for the art-lover, nor  
for the critic. For the artist, they are torments of  
consciousness, renewed whenever he considers  
what he has just done.

PAUL VALÉRY

*Degas Danse Dessin*







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## Introduction

*For Clair*

**I**n a letter written from New Orleans where he was visiting relatives in the autumn of 1872, Edgar Degas wrote to a painter friend: “Art does not reach out, it sums up.” Degas was thirty-eight. He had been painting since his teens. It was already nearly ten years since he had given up his early ambitions to paint historical compositions and had taken to modern subject matter. He had turned his back on the Salon. He was on the brink of a decade of intense independent effort, as rich in its results as any during that extraordinary epoch and as daring in its experimentalism as anything that was to come in the twentieth century. The contrast between his expressed opinions—almost always quietist, aristocratic, and antimodern—and what happened in the studio is at the heart of his enigma. He is the most mysterious of artists.

It is precisely this enigma that makes him of such compelling interest now. For of all the great innovators of the nineteenth century, it was he who was able to ask more intelligently than any other the question that has haunted all artists since the time of Romanticism and will not go away: What does it mean to *go on* in latter days?

For Degas, painting was founded upon drawing, the tradition of drawing descended from Florence, of which Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres was the greatest recent exemplar. This tradition was, of course, centered on the figure; every value and every pictorial structure it encompassed derived from and returned to the human figure. When Degas made his entrance as a young painter—he was born in 1834—High Art was on its deathbed. The society that had sustained heroic painting no longer existed. What Degas inherited was not a profession but an ideal residue, an aesthetic, a belief in the timeless grandeur of the great tradition. “What is it these so-called artists want who preach the discovery of the ‘new’?” Ingres had angrily demanded. “What is new? Everything has been done, everything has been discovered. Our task is not invention, but continuity.”

The narrative of modern art as it has been handed down to us says the opposite. It gives an unequivocal slogan: Forward! Degas’s colleagues the Impressionists, Claude Monet above all, were in no doubt as to their destiny. They responded to the crisis of High Art by turning to a lesser branch of painting, landscape. Monet was able to tell himself that he had shaken the dust of the past off his feet. He claimed that he was addressing nature and his own sensations in front of nature as if the schools of painting had not existed. Supremely confident in the originality of what he was doing, his attack was headlong. It involved a total renunciation of the drawing tradition, which is to say, of the centrality of the figure. Every value, every nuance of feeling, and every pictorial structure in his painting derived from and returned to the experience of landscape through the eye.

There is a significant polarity between these two painters, Degas and Monet. If it

*Femme Sortant du Bain*  
(After the Bath). c. 1895–1900

had not been for the historical accident that they showed together in some of the Independent exhibitions and became known under the vague heading of Impressionists, they might be seen as one of those representative opposing pairs out of which so much of the working history of painting has been constructed: Raphael–Titian, Poussin–Rubens, Ingres–Delacroix, Degas–Monet.

A certain kind of painter cannot just work. In order to work he must *tell* himself painting. The telling involves the posing of opposites, of alternatives—north and south, line and color, style and nature, and so on. The argument was never silent in Degas’s studio, and in this continual inner dialogue there is no doubt that one necessary pole was occupied by his younger contemporary, Monet.

I write “necessary” because I believe that over the years Degas used Monet to help himself define himself. His imaginative intimacy with painting’s past was far too close for him not to have seen the opposition between himself and the younger painter in dramatic, even legendary terms: the dutiful heir in whose hands the destiny of the line is vested opposed to the carefree youngster tramping away into the wide world. The relationship has mythic dimensions. In their study of the mythology of artists’ lives, Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz point out that the opposition of style and nature, of learning and inspiration is the oldest of all plots in the telling of artists’ lives. The idea that nature could teach appears in an account of the youth of Lysippus given by his contemporary Duris of Samos and repeated by Pliny. In counterpoint to this are accounts of artist’s lineage from master to pupil: “The autodidact represents one side of the polarity . . . the other side reflects the urge to anchor the individual’s achievement in the dynastic succession.”

Typically the autodidact receives his first lesson as a revelation. “It was as if suddenly a veil had been torn asunder: I had understood, I had realized what painting could be,” Monet once said, weaving the strands of his own legend for the benefit of a visiting journalist. He was telling him about his first experience of painting in the open air in the company of Eugène Boudin.

Degas started not with an epiphany in front of nature but with permission to copy in the Cabinet des Estampes. In his own mythic recollection the equivalent to Monet’s outing into the countryside with Boudin was the moment in his youth when he held the fainting Ingres in his arms. He started and ended in love and wonder at the grandeur of past art. His search for freedom—from feeble teachers, from the banal conventions of the Salon—his drive to distinguish himself from the general drift of his generation, was less for the sake of his own autonomy than in order to set free the masters themselves. His dazzling originality was on their behalf. Again and again, aspects of his work present themselves as a transformation of some aspect of the tradition, an aspect that is so deeply understood that he is able to dismantle it, split it from its context, and, in reconstructing it, infuse it with meaning and freshness.

Clearly this is traditionalism of a completely different order from the antics of the popular painters of the Salon. For Monet, in permanent revolt against the past, the present corruption of former values was a matter of indifference; the time-serving *pompier*s who stood for established power were his opponents in a worldly sense only. For Degas they were false witnesses, not merely his opponents but spiritual enemies to be excoriated, along with every other influence in the modern world that brought publicity, sensationalism, competition, and inflated prices intrusively to bear upon the secret and distinguished activity of true painters.

Both Degas and Monet had long and productive careers that ended in near-blindness. Monet’s was propelled by a single-minded and continuous impulse; Degas’s



by introspective argument and driven this way and that by an almost unmanageable surfeit of ideas. Although Degas worked in the studio, in contrast to Monet's heroic travels, his compositions were far more various in scale, in style, in technique, and in subject matter, ranging from tightly painted oils of an entirely traditional kind to prints and pastels more daring in their condensations than anything else produced in the nineteenth century. This is to say nothing of his activity as a sculptor—nor as a poet or a photographer.

When Degas turned toward the world around him for his subjects it was in no sense a turn toward the natural. He delighted in mocking the landscape painters and their claims to probity: to paint a "sincere farm"—what could be more ridiculous? "Don't tell me about those fellows cluttering the fields with their easels," he told Etienne Moreau-Nélaton. "I'd like to have a tyrant's authority to order the police to shoot down every one of them . . . the stupid fools, crouching out there over their stupid shields of white canvas." Art is a lie, he would insist. He loved the artificiality of art. The painter Georges Jeanniot remembers a visit to the Louvre: "Did you notice," Degas asked him, stopping in front of the Medici *Venus*, "that she's off balance? She's in a position she couldn't maintain if she were alive. By this detail . . . the Greek sculptor has imparted a splendid movement to his figure, while preserving its calm attitude, the tranquility which distinguishes masterpieces." And there are numerous stories of Degas gleefully explaining the artifice in his own work. "One day when someone was praising the 'truth' of a screen in one of his pictures," according to Paul Jamot, Degas "took a calling-card, folded it twice, and said: 'That was my model.'" Another witness remembers him talking about the *Bains de Mer; Petite Fille Peignée par Sa Bonne* in the National Gallery, London, a painting obviously conceived with the open-air painters in mind. "It's very simple," Degas explained, "I spread my flannel vest on the studio floor, and sat my model down there"; and he added, in a formulation of which he was particularly fond, "The air you breathe in a picture is not the same thing as the air you breathe outside!"

His works 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. He held it against the landscape painters—and one suspects that Monet was always their representative—that their pretensions to "sincerity" and "spontaneity" led them toward a deliberate philistinism that cut them off from the craft as well as from the culture of painting.

Degas aspired to total consciousness in his painting, as if to be able to repeat Nicolas Poussin's boast to have "neglected nothing." Intelligence must rule. But there was a side that was far from rational. His attachment to painting, to Art, was jealous and obsessive. He was like a man in love. His earliest training was founded on copying. He continued to copy insatiably until well into his middle years, long after most painters would have left the practice behind. For him to copy was not merely to learn but also to reach into and touch, to surrender to another mind and sensibility. Copying like this is tinged with overtones of magic: the rival or the loved one consumed.

As Degas grew older he became obsessed with the idea of lost secrets, of techniques and recipes that had once been passed on from studio to studio and were now, in the general decay, forgotten. This half-superstitious belief in technique was a constant motif in his work. No painter has used pencil or charcoal or the characteristics of oil paint with a greater consciousness of how the medium is shaping his thought. He

JEAN-AUGUSTE-DOMINIQUE INGRES  
*Baigneuse Valpinçon*  
 (Valpinçon Bather). 1808



experimented constantly with new materials and unwonted mixtures of traditional materials. Reviewing the different states of some of his most important prints—*La Sortie du Bain*, *Au Louvre: La Peinture* (Mary Cassatt), and others—one cannot avoid the impression that the changes from one state to another, each change resulting from a different procedure, have been made as much for their own sake as for the advancement of the image.

There was nothing antiquarian about his researches into traditional methods. Whatever procedure or idea he isolated, he put it to immediate use, bringing it actively into his current practice, and in doing so, he gave it a meaning that was very different from its original one. Ernest Rouart tells a story of Degas setting him to copy a Mantegna in the Louvre, using no colors except bright red and green. Rouart explains that these instructions were based on Degas's eccentric interpretation of something he had read in Cennino Cennini. "Of course the result was not brilliant." But this was exactly the way that Degas was thinking himself in some of the late dance pastels, and there are examples, for instance a pastel in the National Gallery of Scotland, in which the composition is developed in red and green and nothing else.

"When you can shade well," Cennini writes in his instructions on how to draw drapery on colored paper, "take a drop or two of ink . . . then find the depths of the folds, seeking the very bottom of them—always remembering, while shading, your three divisions: the first consists of shades, the second the color of the ground, and the third the lights." Cennini, pupil of Agnolo Gaddi, son of Taddeo Gaddi, pupil and son-in-law of Giotto, is describing exactly the principles by which a young painter of Degas's generation would still have been taught the *ébauche*, a preparatory study on a toned ground. This was an aspect of traditional practice that would have been under intense critical discussion in the circle around Edouard Manet. The toned ground was inimical to the landscape painter's search for chromatic luminosity. Monet and





EUGÈNE DELACROIX  
*La Mort de Sardanapale*  
 (The Death of Sardanapalus). 1827

Auguste Renoir abandoned it during the seventies. Above all they would have rejected the conceptualized attitude to form that it implied. Degas, on the other hand, cleaves to it, brings it into the foreground, wonders at it. “Paint a monochrome plane,” he told his friend Daniel Halévy, “absolutely flat and even, and you put a little color on it, a touch of this, a touch of that, and you’ll see how little it takes to produce life.” When he makes a heightened drawing of a ballet dancer in gouache or pastel, using a paper of an extraordinary color such as a deep greenish-blue, a salmon pink, or an intense apple green, it is as though to force attention onto the *ébauche* technique and to wonder at the mystery of its operation. His game is irrepressible and opaque. The dancer’s curving cheek is apple green and the wall behind her is too.

The antithetical relationship between Degas and Monet was, I believe, of far more importance than mere rivalry, at least as far as Degas was concerned. His verbal attacks on open-air painting were endless. The substantial collection that he formed during the second half of his life included works by Camille Pissarro, Paul Cézanne, and Vincent van Gogh—all *plein air* painters—but nothing by Monet. He cannot have been indifferent to the quality of Monet’s work; it must have been a studied exclusion. I imagine him gaining conviction from his opposition to the younger painter and supposing that through it he was able to develop more clearly the dialectic of his own work.

The dialectic here is in the contradiction between drawing and painting: Florence : Venice, Ingres : Delacroix; in Degas’s lifetime it could be expressed as Figure : Landscape. The Florentine tradition to which he was heir was based on the power of line to divide a form from that which was formless. Thought is conveyed in convexities, the convexities of the figure. The figure animates and controls its surroundings with its forms, and also its gestures, its glances, its strides. Surroundings are always subordinate. Drawing in these terms is closer to sculpture than to

painting; it aspires to the condition of sculpture on a flat plane. The figure is its center, a paradigm of wholeness.

But landscape, in contrast, goes on and on. The landscape painter and the figure painter take opposite views of a picture's unity. To the Impressionists, to Monet in particular, the ensemble was everything: the paradigm of pictorial unity found in the oneness of a condition of light, the oneness of landscape space that spreads unframed in every direction. It was a unity that was both descriptive and decorative. Monet's last huge, all-enveloping water-lily decorations were the apotheosis of the ensemble. But "There is no ensemble," Degas is said by Julie Manet to have protested furiously during the hanging of a posthumous exhibition of pictures by her mother, Berthe Morisot. He wanted them hung on screens so that they could be looked at closely, so that there was no overall effect.

Degas's interest in vision took him in the opposite direction from an overall effect. His observation was shaped by drawing and was inevitably a kind of un-picking or unraveling of the web of appearances, not a weaving together as it was to those whose observations were shaped by the palette. Nowhere in his work does one feel Degas caught up in sensations of deep space, in spite of the fact that he is so often fascinated by the oddities of scale and juxtaposition that perspective offers his observation. His interest in these phenomena was a graphic one. They fall into the background and can be plotted like a diagram on a flat plane.

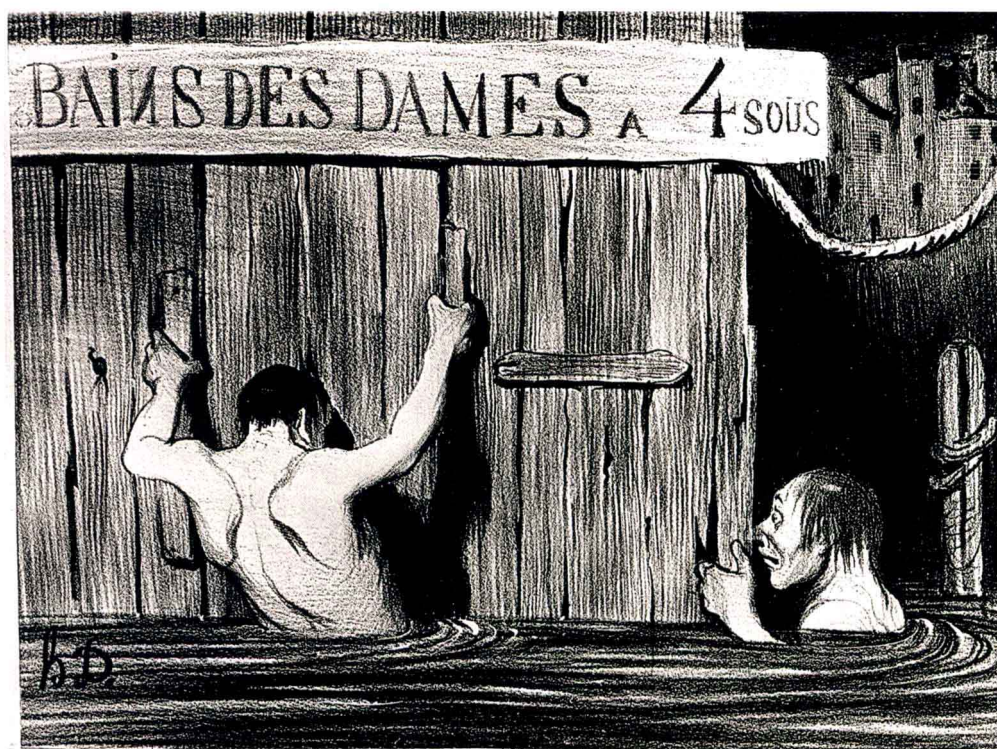
Much of Degas's most ambitious work before the mid-eighties is extremely small in scale. *Classe de Danse* (*The Dancing Class*) at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is a mere 27 cm in width, and *Portraits dans un Bureau* (*Nouvelle-Orléans*), with its thirteen portraits, is less than a meter wide. There is no use looking at painting like this from across the room; it has to be scanned in detail, as one must look at a predella to make out its story. Even after Degas had begun to work in broader techniques such as monotype or the combination of monotype and pastel, the picture is often so small that one needs to view it from very close range.

This is the opposite case from a roughly painted Monet in which, as they say, everything falls into place when you step far enough away from it. With your nose almost touching a tiny Degas—I am thinking of *Le Café-Concert—Aux Ambassadeurs*, 36 × 28 cm—you cannot avoid becoming absorbed in the marks, the scribbles, the layerings of pastel and monotype, the contrasts of definition and openness, of things named and things suspended and unnamed. You are projected into the studio and into Degas's decisions and the movements of his hand.

Of course, something like this holds true for any sketch or freely brushed painting. The onlooker has been invited into the studio ever since the high noon of Venetian painting in oil. What is specific to Degas's sketchiness is its consciousness and the sense that he too is watching it with something like one's own wonder. Un-finish is aestheticized and bracketed out from its first function, shown as a process in its own right, a kind of magic. Not even the graphic process itself can be taken for granted but has to be looked at askant.

Working from drawing to painting as Degas did involved thinking of figures and background separately. The method reinforced the division between figures and background that was inherent in his drawing. Thinking of the work in stages, he invested each stage with meaning. "All kinds of backgrounds run through my head," he wrote to Gustave Moreau when he was preparing for what was to be his youthful masterpiece, *La Famille Bellelli*. By the time he had finished working on it, he had demonstrated to himself how the room that he had placed his sitters in, its





Imp. G. Aubert & Co

BR

Chez Baugier-Rue Croissant 15

Excusez regard' donc la grosse Ffine qu'on aurait juré que c'était une veuve... ah ben en v'la un déchet!

HONORÉ DAUMIER

"Excusez Regard' donc la Grosse Ffine . . ."  
("Just Take a Look at that Fat Ffine . . ."). 1840

furnishings, and the divisions of its architecture could support and augment the figures, giving them a psychological frame as well as a physical one.

During the sixties and seventies he evolved an extraordinarily complex pictorial language out of his attention to separate aspects of his subjects, from facial expression to physical type, from gesture to deportment, from clothes and possessions to the finest points of compositional geometry. Meaning is woven into the picture at every level, incorporating a novelist's sense of social behavior, an illustrator's eye for the typical and the idiosyncratic, a dramatist's flair for situation and *mise-en-scène*. This command of signs, which stems from the basic premise of his working, the separation of one operation from another, is the aspect of his work that for obvious reasons has attracted the attention of the majority of Degas scholars.

As he grew older he began to lose interest in the illustrational. Or, to put it another way, he began to demand a more ambitious unity than the illustrational mode permitted. Many factors flow together: his failing eyesight, his experience with monotype and with sculpture, and, no doubt, his awareness of the achievements of his Impressionist colleagues. He seems to draw physically closer to his work and to engage with it more directly. Perhaps with his use of broader drawing tools such as charcoal or pastel, or perhaps through his habit of making repeated tracings, a subtle change affects his drawing. His bounding lines are felt to have two sides, to face outward as well as inward. The flatness of the background invades the figure and the hatched relief invades the background. In the late pastels of bathers, his greatest works, in which the timeless dignity of ancient sculpture is rediscovered in the terms of an altogether modern perception of individual mortality, identities flow back and forth. Walls and towels embrace the bather, whose nakedness spreads to the extremities of the picture. Degas's long, colored hatchings that cross and recross from figure to background carry our reading as does the continuity of the stone in an antique relief. Or, one might say, the continuity of landscape.