

The passion of the visual artist for the performing artist

"Degas and the Dance" at the Detroit Institute of Arts

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"Degas and the Dance," currently at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), is an extraordinary exhibition containing hundreds of paintings, pastels, drawings and sculpture by the artist Edgar Degas, created between 1870-1903. Considered eccentric, quite daring, bordering on the bizarre by contemporary critics, Degas aligned himself ideologically with the Impressionists, yet declined to paint in natural light, working largely from memory and from sketches of models in his studio. He called himself a Realist, but his vibrant colors, broad strokes and unusual spatial composition were quite unique, and hardly naturalistic.

In all the media in which Degas worked, he was bold and innovative. His style broke all the existing rules of "naturalistic" art. In painting, the strokes are broad and indicative, lacking in minute details, but capturing a moment, creating a mood and conveying powerfully the attitude of the subject. His pastel work utilized this soft medium to depict the fantastic colors of the theater while softening the scenes, lending an air of unreality, a dreaminess that is fitting for the dance. The sculptures, executed in wax and not cast in bronze until after Degas' death, are remarkable sketches in three dimensions that demonstrate the delicate grace and strength of the dancer's body.

The exhibition is arranged, as the curators note, not chronologically, but to make sense to a dancer. The exhibition contains galleries showing dozens of sketches and paintings of the dancers' world from backstage; rehearsing in the studios; the grand performance; and then a final gallery with remarkably unique selections of Degas' late, colorful works, completed between 1899 and 1903, when his eyesight had nearly failed.

Some critics of his day were aghast at his choice of subject matter, and Degas' work was maligned as well for being both salacious and shallow. According to the literary and artistic critic Edmond de Goncourt, writing in 1874, "Out of all the subjects in modern life he has chosen washerwomen and ballet dancers ... it is a world of pink and white, of female flesh in lawn and gauze, the most delightful pretexts for using pale, soft tints." However, this exhibition allows us to appreciate Degas' enormous dedication to revealing a more intricate fabric of these lives, and we leave with a great admiration for the depth and vitality of both the subject matter and the artist's view. These pieces, taken as a life's work spanning nearly 50 years, is far more than a "delightful pretext for pale, soft tints." In fact his use of color is quite vivid.

Degas clearly became infatuated with the strenuous movement required of the dancers. Far from what one imagines of "pink and white ... pale, soft tints," Degas painstakingly shares with his audience, as the dancers do with theirs, the arduous work required to carry off a production that gives the illusion of effortless, graceful motion. Although born into a wealthy family, Degas clearly had great respect and empathy for the effort

required to lead the life of a professional dancer.

Many of the young dancers came from lower middle class and poorer families seeking a way out of their economic circumstances. Degas chose to depict the labor of one art, the dance, to express the struggles faced by his own art and that of other visual artists of his day and perhaps, more broadly, labor in general. There is a democratic element to his choice of subject matter. And here one comes upon a significant contradiction: in his politics, Degas became an arch-reactionary, an anti-Dreyfusard and a reader of the most scurrilous, anti-Semitic rags. (This is discussed in a useful essay in Linda Nochlin's *The Politics of Vision: essays on nineteenth-century art and society*, New York, 1989.)

Before Degas embraced the theater as a legitimate subject for painting, it had been largely ignored. Daumier had drawn caricatures of theatergoers and performers for the popular press, but theater and dance were considered low entertainment. Degas chose to paint the theater, its dancers, musicians, ballet masters and audience in an intimate way and with a bold style that had never been seen in the art world before. One of his first paintings of the theatre (1870-71), establishing his unique place among the modernists, is titled "Orchestra Musicians." The unusual composition became Degas' hallmark and is repeated in numerous paintings exhibited at the DIA.

The darkened foreground of the flattened picture plane shows the large head of a musician and the scroll of his cello, as if we were sitting right behind the musicians and Degas too were among them. Our eye is directed by the silhouetted tip of a bassoon to the brightly lit tutu of the dancer facing the audience. To her right, a group of ballerinas, cut off at mid-calf by the musician's heads, seem to be waiting, or watching, not quite connected to the activity of the principal dancer. The star ballerina is lit from underneath, casting an eerie, garish shadow across her eyes. It was an audacious debut into a world that would become, according to some of the critics of his day, Degas' obsession.

An earlier work, one of the first paintings in the exhibition, is a large canvas from 1867-68 of "Mlle. Fiocré in the Ballet 'La Source.'" But where are the ballerinas? The painting shows the dancer, Mademoiselle Fiocré, seated, resting, her bare feet possibly in a pool of water from which a horse seems to drink. Another woman spreads a white cloth on the water, while a third plays the lute in the background. This is not some idyllic forest, however, as on closer inspection it is apparent that the "water" is not liquid and the background is a stage set. The colors are bold and the brush work intentionally broad and undefined, a technique not yet accepted by the art world. This painting is considered to be Degas' transitional work, still depending on an earlier tradition of stage imagery, yet creating an ambiguity between illusion and reality that may have intended to shock the Salon audience (Jill deVonyer, Richard Kendall, "Degas and the Dance" catalog. p. 50).

Between 1865 and 1870 Degas submitted several works to the Salon, the official (stuffy) art exhibitions of the art establishment of Paris, but he broke from them in 1870 along with a group of struggling modernists including Manet, Cezanne, Sisley and Pissarro. Degas solidarized himself with them artistically, participating in seven of the eight Impressionist Exhibitions between 1874 and 1886.

Degas' obsession with the dance allows the viewer to experience the complexity of the human form, the arrangement of these forms in space, and the emotional color of these artists' lives. There are studies of arms, legs, heads, hands as well as dancers resting, stretching, posing in any position a dancer's body can assume. It is these graceful, poignant gestures that are best captured in Degas' sculptures. His most famous, "Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen"—revealing a young teen, head tilted upward, hands gently clasped behind—captures not only the simple grace of the young, long-legged dancer, but the fatigue and air of melancholy emanating from the girl. This sculpture caused a sensation when Degas exhibited it clad in a real tutu and hair ribbon.

To Degas, the serious treatment of the theater required a dramatic shift in composition as well. It is striking that many of the paintings and pastels of rehearsals on stage emphasize the great, empty stage as much as the performers. There are several canvasses of "The Dance School"—a large room with dancers in practice tutus lit from behind by tall windows. The light is always soft, the dancers posed in various steps, but they are almost crowded into the left one-third of the picture plane. The dark, sturdy back of the violin master anchors our view on the left. The bare floor spreads before us like a painter's empty canvas, waiting for the artist to transform it.

The most visually interesting works are those of life backstage and from the artist's vantage point in the wings. Degas was not interested in depicting the elaborate sets mounted for productions at the new Opera theater. He was clearly drawn to the feelings, attitudes and difficult life that the audience never sees. In the vibrant, colorful paintings of "Ballet Dancers on the Stage" of 1883, Degas has placed himself slightly above the ballerinas, the graceful arms of six or seven intertwine, so we cannot tell whose limb belongs to whom. The central figure, surrounded by her bright yellow costume, stares to the lower left corner of the picture. There is a lot of activity in this scene, and while the dancers are presumably on stage, perhaps they are in rehearsal, since they are apparently moving in different directions. The footlights illuminate three dancers' faces from below, giving a harsh edge to the otherwise soft pastel technique.

Degas was the first visual artist to depict the seamier side of the backstage life of the ballerina. Many young ballerinas came from the poorer classes, pushed by their parents to find a gentleman among the *abonnés* (subscribers)—the privileged patrons of the opera and ballet who were permitted in the wings during performances. These men were permitted (for a substantial subscription fee) to mingle with the corps de ballet, arranging trysts and occasionally marrying one of the young girls.

Degas positions himself as the eavesdropper, or perhaps the chaperone, always within an arm's length of his subjects as they stand behind the scenery—the young dancer in pink and white, light as air, and the elderly gentleman in black coat and top hat. The composition of so many of the backstage pictures is very unusual. They are clearly influenced by the emergence of photography, capturing moments of time and motion in ways that anticipated even the capabilities of photography. With this technique Degas reveals the strange relationship between the dancers and the *abonnés*.

There are many sketches and paintings in the exhibition in which the distinctive top hats and long dark coats of these dubious fellows appear around the edges of the canvas or in the distance. There is something menacing about these tall, dark figures that Degas, perhaps unconsciously, reveals to his audience.

There is one pastel work which appears in the show catalog, but is not in

the exhibition, called "The Entrance of the Masked Dancers" (1884). This work is so seminal that it is worth commenting on here. Two young dancers in the extreme foreground are passing on either side of the artist, so close they will brush against him. They are complete opposites. The girl on our left averts her gaze, her face turned almost entirely away from us. She is a flurry of turquoise chiffon, in a hurry to exit, and preoccupied with her work. Perhaps she is rehearsing her next entrance in her mind. The girl to our right, in complementary pinks and peach colors, lifts her face as she loosens the tight black collar around her neck. The middle ground, roughly painted, lacking detail, is a mass of yellow-caped dancers (the "masked dancers"), lit by the stage lights before the reds, oranges and greens of the set. And lurking, half hidden by the scenery, the unmistakable black hat, white cravat and black coat of the *abonné* waiting in the wings.

This is an incredibly rich scene. It snatches a moment and brings to life the entirety of the unsentimental existence of the ballet theater as though Degas had captured just one, symbolic instant in time, all players in their place, passing by the eye of the unobserved artist. While there are works in the exhibition dealing with this theme, "The Entrance of the Masked Dancers" is outstanding. It is unfortunate it was not included in the exhibition.

While the exhibition's organizers have incorporated a timeline of the historic events that shaped the volatile political, social and cultural life in the second half of the nineteenth century, they say virtually nothing about Degas' views or what moved him, or his colleagues, outside of his art. The artists known as the "Independents," as the Impressionists first called themselves, were affected in complex ways by the 1871 Paris Commune. Degas, despite a friendship with Emile Zola, was a member of the National Guard and yet is said to have been sympathetic to the Communards. In 1898 the Dreyfus affair divided the French artistic community, and Degas, as noted above, became an intransigent anti-Semite. While he held reactionary political views, his art broke with tradition, was self-consciously "modern" and he was willing to turn his back on the Salon, which could have been the key to a more successful and financially rewarding career.

The curators of "Degas and the Dance" have gathered a remarkable collection of works. Degas was obviously not only an extremely talented artist, but one completely devoted to the development of his work. If the exhibition organizers are to be faulted, it is for stripping Degas from any social context which could only enable the viewers to depart with a richer, more profound appreciation for the contradictory development of Degas and the other Impressionists during one of the most explosive periods in modern history.



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